1.

The current school system has become an apparatus utilized for the reproduction and perennial preservation of social class differences and inequality in Japan. The phrase “equality of opportunity,” though paraded in connection to the meritocratic system of appraisal (biased in favor of middle class values and decorum) employed within school, is an absolute lie; much of an individual’s educational attainment, and through this their job opportunities and other important aspects of their lives, remain determined by socioeconomic factors beyond their control. In addition to the brazen inequality entrenched in the school system, in recent years it has been pointed out that the surplus of private schools in all levels of education in Japan is perpetuating, if not exacerbating, economic inequality in relation to educational opportunities and qualification for admission into high-ranking universities. This is because many affluent parents transferred their children to private schools in order to escape a series of educational policies called “yutori kyouiku” which the Japanese government implemented in public schools, thus clearing the way for the academic dominance of the private sector over the public sector in pre-university education. Since in Japan the level of university one can enter is dependent almost entirely on the level of high school one attends, this phenomenon, referred to by some as “bright flight,” has created an economic barrier making it harder for those who cannot afford to enter high level private high schools to get admitted to respected institutions of higher learning. School is currently not giving everyone a “fair” chance for success.

Then what kind of school system will effectively ensure a “fair” chance at success for all students regardless of socioeconomic background? What kind of system can be installed in order to maximize “fairness” to the greatest extent possible? What I propose is a system in which the educational system is controlled centrally to create a level playing field for all entities.

First, the private sector of pre-university education must be abolished, and all schools from primary to upper secondary must be run by the government in an undifferentiated, homogenous manner. The schools that students attend will be determined by the region in which they live, much like the current American model of education, but the main difference will be that the schools will not be funded by regional tax and all school funds and educational funds will be allocated fairly by the central government to schools based on their capacity and need. This will help diminish between-school differences and will alter the current situation in Japan where one’s high-school is the determining factor in one’s ultimate educational attainment. Because all schools will be funded publicly, all students will receive a qualitatively fair education within school. A qualitatively fair education between all schools will render socioeconomic factors irrelevant to educational opportunities preceding university (Further equalization would mean abolishing shadow education, but the installation of extracurricular courses for those who wish to take them in public schools seems enough to compensate for any potential inequality caused by a privately run shadow education sector). A publicly run educational system from elementary to high school would also get rid of any selection processes prior to university, terminating between-school stratification and ability grouping/tracking. Students of all levels and classes will coexist in the same school, stimulating each other and creating a school culture that will widen the possible options of students after graduation. Tracking and ability grouping between schools creates high schools stratified from high level schools where students are pretty much secured a path to highly competitive universities and low-level schools where admission into high-level universities is unimaginable. In schools like these with a distinct school culture deriving from students with similar academic abilities or socioeconomic backgrounds, post-graduation options for students are limited. However, with a centralized educational system without ability grouping or tracking in place, such limitations stemming from school culture can be overcome. Additionally, affirmative action policies that allocate greater sums to underperforming schools, regions or demographics could be carried out simultaneously, compensating for socioeconomic disparities between regions that manifest in the hidden curriculums of schools. This will be conducive to overcoming economic inequality and social inequality (expectations, aspirations, attitudes) that are rooted in regional differences and family life (cultural capital).

The budget for running such a large and collective public educational sector would be collected by introducing a “school tax” whose amount changes depending on one’s income and highest educational attainment. Educational attainment, by working as a signal for an individual’s value as a laborer, ties in closely with one’s income. Therefore, if an individual has high educational attainment and a high income, it can be naturally deduced that she is benefitting from her educational background. By taxing those benefitting from their educational background, the benefits of high educational attainment will diminish, curbing the currently strong incentives to gain high educational attainment. Following the reasoning of “signaling theory” in economics, by diminishing the benefits of high educational attainment, more and more rational individuals will opt out of pursuing high educational attainment. This will in turn affect companies’ faith in the signaling function of educational background and educational attainment will play a lesser role in the assessment of potential employees and their qualities. In the long term, I believe this trend will result in the separation of academic achievement and high paying jobs, paving the way to an individualistic, truly meritocratic system of employment. Once this happens, incentives to move on to higher education and top rank universities will be curtailed even further. The educational establishment will cease to be an institution for the reproduction of social inequality and the promulgation of capitalistic values and will begin to fulfill its originally intended function: the education of the future generation for the enrichment of human life.

2.