

Special Report: School Meal Program

**Nutrition Teacher/ School Dietitian at Japanese School Lunch
A Perspective from Vietnamese Dietitians
No.5 in a Series**

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Japanese school lunches are not only to provide children with nutritious meals but also serve as a living textbook. Japan places a high value on food and nutrition education in schools, and correspondingly so on the professionals who provide this teaching to

students. There is at least one nutrition teacher or school dietitian in each school kitchen, cluster of schools or joint kitchen, which prepares meals for several schools in the same area (Table 1).

Table 1. Legally required number of school dietitian/nutrition teacher.

<p>School (students over 6 years old)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School kitchen <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Schools serving lunch to more than 550 children have to have a school dietitian/nutrition teacher. ✓ Schools with fewer than 549 children: There must be a school dietitian/nutrition teacher covering 4 schools. ✓ Cities with fewer than 3 schools and each school with fewer than 549 children: There must be a school dietitian/nutrition teacher per city ● Satellite kitchens serving lunch to more than 1500 children must have a nutrition teacher; 1501 to 6000, two nutrition teachers; and more than 6000, 3 nutrition teachers.

The system of training for Japanese dietitians

Dietitian is a food and nutrition professional. In Japan, there are registered dietitian (RD) and dietitian. According to Dietitian Act published by Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare:

Registered Dietitians are licensed by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor. RD is a term that originated in the United States and now used commonly world-wide. Official name of Japan is a kanri-eiyooosi (management level dietitian) and was

introduced by the Japan Dietetic Association. The duties involve nutrition education relating to medical treatment for sick and injured persons, nutrition education to maintain and promote health that require a high level of professional knowledge and technique appropriate to patient's physical and nutritional condition, and food service management.

Dietitians are licensed by prefectural governments. Their work is providing food service management and working under the supervision of a RD when in direct patient/client nutrition care.

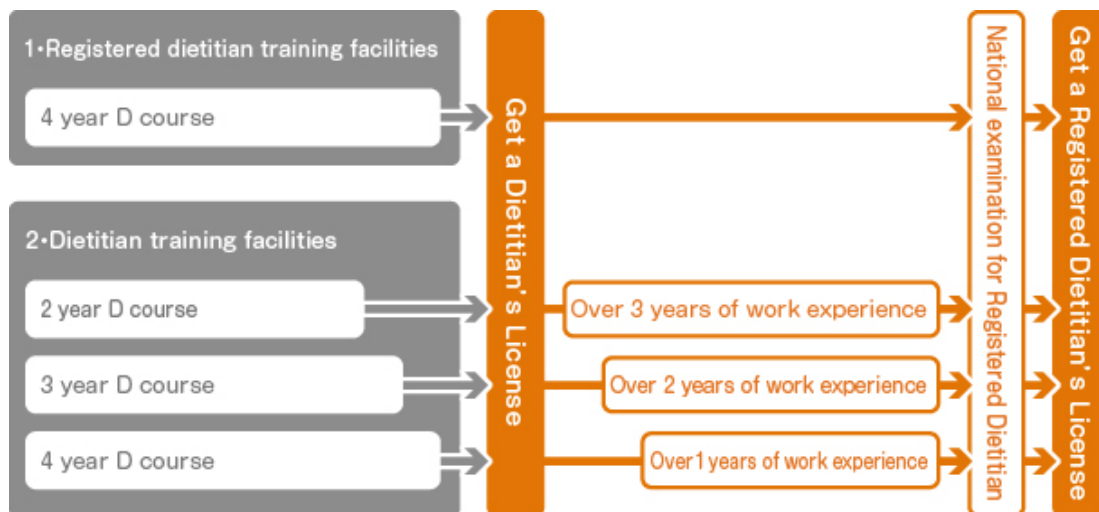


Fig 1. The licensing process for dietitian and registered dietitian (Source: Japan Dietetic Association)

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The system of training for nutrition teachers and school dietitians dates back about half a century. Before 1964, there were no job titles for the positions of dietitian and appropriate job titles were not used. At that time, the main activity of personnel involved in school lunches was food preparation. Staff mainly did cooking and planning and implementing nutrition education were done only by the request of other teacher. In 1964, the Ministry of Education introduced partial support for salaries of school dietitians at kitchens covering several schools in a given area. This was gradually expanded and eventually dietitians were placed in each school or cluster of schools.

Since the 1990s, the social environment, including the family structure, has changed considerably and nutrition-related health problems have become even more prevalent. The current Japanese life-style is not ideal for promoting health. Parents work long hours and children study at cram schools until late at night. Under such social conditions, one cannot blame them for eating take-out/ready-made foods from shops. What we can perhaps hope for is that children will make better food choices by following the example of the more appropriate items offered in the school lunch. Hopefully, it will foster better food choices by the example of the school lunch with more appropriate food choices. The knowledge and habits formed by the school lunch program can play an important role in this.

To meet this need, the school dietitian is now required to have mastered highly specialized knowledge and educational methods. A Nutrition Teacher License was established in 2005. The license is similar to that required for teachers of other subjects. There are 3 levels of personnel depending upon their academic background: graduation from a junior college, from a regular college or university, or from graduate school. A registered dietitian or dietitian can obtain the license after 3 years' experience working in a school and 8-10 lecture credits. In 2011 there were 3853 nutrition teachers but by 2021 this number has increased to 6752.

Duties of school dietitian and nutrition teacher

Job content of school dietitians and nutrition teachers are different. The same duty is providing school lunch management which include creating menus, selecting and purchasing ingredients, managing food cooking and distribution, and managing hygiene of kitchen. Each of them creates about 200 menus per year which must satisfy the dietary reference intakes, students' taste, local food culture, and traditions.

School dietitian is a person who has a license of dietitian/ registered dietitian and has the necessary knowledge or experience to carry out school lunch.

Besides managing school lunch, they support nutrition education. They do not give classes directly to children, but they may issue school lunch newsletters or support nutrition education guidance provided by other teachers.

Nutrition teacher is a person who has a dietitian/ registered dietitian license, a teacher license and has the necessary knowledge or experience to carry out school lunch. They can provide nutrition education directly to children through classes and school events and give individual consultations for children with health problems pertaining to food.

Both of them also work with other teachers, children's families, and the local community to coordinate enhanced dietary guidance.

Food and nutrition education at school by nutrition teachers/school dietitians

Education about food and health is provided in connection with the school lunch by diet and nutrition teachers/school dietitians working in tandem with teachers of other subjects. By this way, children can learn how to make healthy food choices, learn about agricultural practices, food production and distribution, and cultural traditions. For example, in a social studies class, students may calculate the distance that various foods in a school lunch on a given day have traveled from their production area to the school. Students also calculate the necessary fuel and discuss its effects on the earth's ecology. In a physical education class, students record their own changes in height and weight and learn about the nutritional contributors to their growth. In English class, English relating to the menu of the day is taught, such as the names of foods, cooking methods, table manners, nutrients, etc. Those experiences become good opportunities to learn about nutrition as well as good memories. This broad perspective on food and nutrition helps instill in children a sense of gratitude for the food they are eating and an appreciation for and interest in its origins. In addition, it is likely responsible for the remarkably low levels of food waste reported by many schools.

In conclusion, nutrition teachers/school dietitians are indispensable in providing delicious and safe lunches as well as improving food and nutrition knowledge for children. The reward of nutrition teachers and school dietitians working is to see children eat lunch with happiness and grow up every day. The work is not easy, however when they receive compliments or letters from children and teachers such as "It was delicious today", "I was able to eat vegetables that I was not good at." Or "Everyone has finished eating", they will be encouraged and rewarded for their work.