

Japan, 2 years after Fukushima disaster: School in evacuated town has no new first grade students

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NAMIE, Fukushima — A local elementary school here will have no new first-grade students entering this spring after the whole town was evacuated following the outbreak of the Fukushima nuclear plant crisis in March 2011.

Namie Elementary School is the town's only remaining public elementary school. It combined the town's six elementary schools and moved classrooms to the Fukushima Prefecture city of Nihonmatsu. However, many students who would have gone to Namie Elementary School have transferred to schools in towns where they evacuated.

According to the town's board of education, there were a total of about 1,000 students in the six elementary schools in the town prior to the earthquake. However, about half of the students evacuated outside of the prefecture. Even those who remained within the prefecture had spread to 33 different municipalities as of April 2012.

The town reopened Namie elementary in August 2011, using a closed-down school in the city of Nihonmatsu to which the town moved its office functions. However, there are only 30 students remaining at Namie elementary for this school year. After 12 six-graders graduate in March, the number of remaining students will be 18 for the next school year. Although the school sent information brochures to about 100 houses within the school district with first- and second-graders and with children who would be entering elementary schools in April, no one responded.

Natsumi Fujita, 38, a mother of two children who go to a school in Nihonmatsu, said, "By the time Namie elementary reopened, the children had got used to their new school. I want the school (Namie) to survive, but it's better for the children to attend schools where many other children study with them."

On the other hand, Yaiko Konno, 35, whose two children commute to Namie elementary from a temporary housing unit in Nihonmatsu worries about the future of the school, saying "My children chose Namie elementary because they thought their friends would be back once the school reopened. The town should have contacted more parents when the school was reopening. If the school keeps losing students, it might close down."

"This is the best school for me because I know people here, but some of my friends left after the earthquake and I do feel lonely at times," said Ryo Matsumoto, 12, a sixth-grader at Namie Elementary School.

Hiroko Takeuchi, 48, a teacher at the school, is troubled by her feelings. "I can't tell students who're doing fine at their new schools to come back. At the same time, the school is needed for the town to recover," she said.

Namie Elementary School started a class last year called “Hometown Namie” that teaches about the town’s culture and traditions so that children won’t forget about their hometown. School principal Kenichi Ishii is determined to “protect the school until there are no students left to encourage those who have evacuated throughout the country.”

Meanwhile, the town is also losing its junior high school students. Only 49 students attend Namie Junior High School that reopened by combining the town’s three schools that once had about 600 students in total. The town’s board of education chief, Kiichiro Hatakeyama, said, “For the town’s recovery, we’ll work on rebuilding schools no matter how many years it might take.”

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* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130226p2a00m0na016000c.html>