

Part II The Japanese government's response to COVID-19

Chapter 3

Participation of experts and initial behavioral change policies (The “Three Cs” and nationwide school closure)

At 2 p.m. on February 7, in the No. 7 joint meeting room on the sixth floor of the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, a group of infectious disease experts including Takaji Wakita, director of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, who would later chair the government's panel of experts, and Shigeru Omi, president of the Japan Community Health Care Organization who would later be vice chair of the expert panel, gathered together to mainly discuss how to respond to the novel coronavirus infections among the passengers and crew of the Diamond Princess. Many of the members of the health ministry advisory board gathered at this time were experts who dealt with the new-type influenza epidemic in Japan in 2009, and it was this group of experts who went on to play an important role in the nation's response to COVID-19, proposing in quick succession several behavioral change policies at the initial stage such as the importance of thorough a cluster-based approach and avoiding the “Three Cs” (closed spaces, crowded places, close-contact settings). On the other hand, remarks by members of the expert panel, such as the message that Japan was in a “critical juncture,” had a great influence on the development of public crisis awareness and also on the government's decision on initial behavioral change policies. In this chapter, we will clarify the facts about the background to the establishment of the Expert Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control, the formation of the “Three Cs,” and the government's initial behavioral change policy decisions influenced by the “critical juncture” remark.

1. Background to launching the panel of experts

1.1. Establishment of the government's COVID-19 control headquarters

Starting with the confirmation of the first COVID-19 infection case in Japan on January 15, and on January 28 for someone who had never been to Wuhan, there was a growing concern in this country over COVID-19 infections spreading. Under these circumstances, the government decided to establish by Cabinet decision its COVID-19 response headquarters in the Cabinet on January 30.

The headquarters comprised the prime minister, chief Cabinet secretary and all Cabinet ministers. The response to COVID-19, which had been conducted through the prime minister's liaison conference and the relevant ministerial conference, would be systematically unified under the direction of Prime Minister Abe, and each ministry and

agency would be able to cooperate more fully to work on dealing with the novel coronavirus infection.

1.2. Launch of a COVID-19 response advisory board

An advisory board was assembled by the health ministry in early February 2020 for the purpose of obtaining a wide range of technical knowledge from experts in response to the Diamond Princess situation. Organizationally speaking, it was established as an advisory body to the health ministry's COVID-19 response headquarters,¹ which was set up as a command tower for the ministry's operation to deal with the novel coronavirus. Members of the advisory board were selected mainly from the Infectious Diseases Subcommittee of the health ministry's Health Science Council, such as Takaji Wakita and Nobuhiko Okabe, director of the Kawasaki City Institute for Public Health, as well as experts who had dealt with the novel influenza epidemic in 2009. This selection was made by staff in the Tuberculosis and Infectious Diseases Control Division in consultation with Tokuaki Shobayashi, who was in charge of dealing with the new-type influenza as chief of the ministry's office on countermeasures against the epidemic.

1.3. Launch of the expert panel

At a meeting of Komeito's headquarters on dealing with the novel coronavirus on February 14, 2020, the junior partner in the ruling coalition urged the government to set up a panel of experts under either Prime Minister Abe or Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Katsunobu Kato to analyze the current situation of COVID-19 infections and weigh the countermeasures. In response to this request, the government decided to set up the Expert Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control (the expert panel) under its novel coronavirus response headquarters, at the ninth meeting of the headquarters held the same day. The panel of experts was established by transferring the advisory board, set up under the health ministry's COVID-19 headquarters, to the government's headquarters. It was launched with 12 members, with Wakita appointed as chair and Omi as vice chair. The expert panel was set up for the purpose of analyzing the novel coronavirus disease and making recommendations for behavioral change policies, and would, in fact, play an important role in government policy making, but it had no clear legal basis as an organization.

After its launch, the expert panel continued to express various opinions and suggestions to the government's headquarters and elsewhere until it was abolished on June 24. However, since the experts needed to analyze and examine a great deal of information in a short period of time under circumstances that were changing on a daily basis, it was impossible to conclude discussions in just a few hours of official meetings. Therefore, under the leadership of Wakita and Omi, members met separately from their

official meetings two to three times a week, mainly in the evening when each member's work was over, for an informal meeting referred to as the “study group,”² holding in-depth practical discussions. A member of the expert panel recalled that discussions at the study sessions were sometimes fierce, close to yelling, and that they often extended into the middle of the night.

2. Process for formulating the “Three Cs”

2.1. Analysis of environment with high risk of infection

In mid-February, the number of infected people in Japan gradually increased due to nosocomial infections at hospitals in Wakayama Prefecture, and cases with unknown infection routes were found in various parts of Japan. There was concern about the chain of community-acquired infections (infections outside hospitals in the general public). Meanwhile, at the 11th meeting of the government's COVID-19 headquarters held on February 18, Prime Minister Abe asked the experts for their opinions on holding large-scale events where people would be in close proximity. At the second meeting of the expert panel held on February 19, the members discussed the pros and cons of holding large-scale events.

Pointing out that “it is not large-scale events that are at high risk, but close face-to-face social gatherings of 10 to 20 people that are the essence of the problem,” the expert panel noted that there was a high risk of infection in spaces where people gathered in closed spaces, such as cruise ships and traditional “yakatabune” wooden tour boats, and suggested that it was necessary when holding events to respond according to the actual conditions of the area. They also suggested that the public should be informed of where the risk of infection was high.

Based on the above recommendations by the expert panel, the health ministry issued a “Message to the public regarding holding events” on February 20.³ In the message, the ministry identified the conditions with a high risk of infection, noting that “for example, it is said that staying indoors for a certain period of time in a situation in close range of other people increases the risk of infection,” and requested organizers of events and so on to reconsider the necessity of holding their event from the viewpoint of preventing the spread of infection. On the other hand, it also said, “At this point in time, the government does not make a uniform request to refrain from holding events.” Thus, as of February 20, the government did not explicitly request that events be refrained from.

2.2. Formulating the “Three Cs” concept

On February 21, with the cumulative number of infected people in Japan

(excluding those aboard the Diamond Princess) exceeding 100 and many cases being confirmed in Hokkaido at the same time, there was a greater need to implement policies that would change people's behavior to prevent the spread of infection.

Under these circumstances, members of the expert panel were discussing daily in preparation for their meeting on February 24 in the belief that the fight against COVID-19 was on the verge of a critical moment. Following these discussions, recommendations were compiled at the third meeting of the experts held on February 24 on the basic policy measures for COVID-19 that should be stipulated by the government.

The expert panel stated that the purpose of the proposed policies was not to contain the epidemic but to put the infections under control at an early stage, and made the following recommendations.

- **Closed spaces are a risk factor and ventilation is important**
- **There is a risk when 1) people are in arm's reach; 2) you stay for a long time; and 3) the space is crowded.**
- **There is a risk of spreading infection in an environment where face-to-face close contact (within arm's reach) continues for a certain period of time, such as a conversation, and is exchanged with many people.**
- **We are most concerned about the continuous occurrence of infections from one person to many in various places.**

The above recommendations presented at the expert panel were announced on February 24 as "Opinion for realizing the basic policy for COVID-19," with the experts holding a news conference to directly communicate to people the results of their expert analysis.

The high-risk environment cited in these views included the elements of "closed, crowded and close-contact" that would later become widespread among the public as the "Three Cs." So, the basis of the Three Cs concept was formulated precisely at the time of these recommendations.

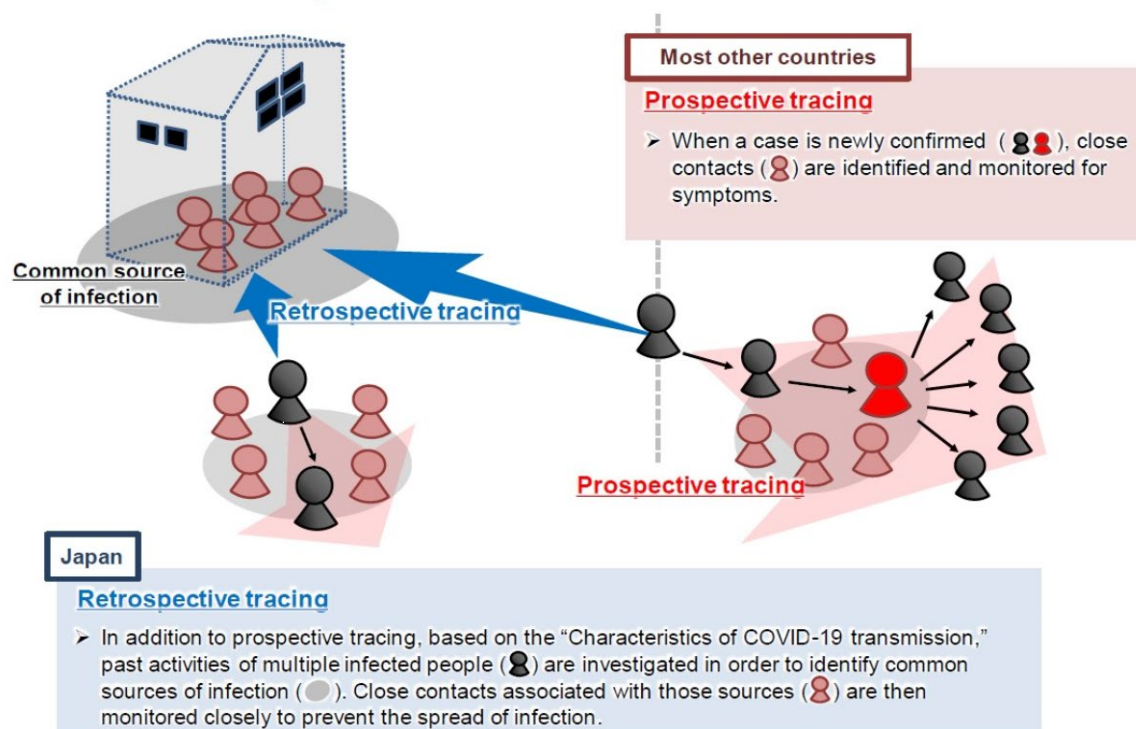
2.3. Establishment of cluster taskforce

In mid-February, a behavioral history survey of infected persons had already been conducted in each country, but given the cumulative number of infected persons known at the time, the number of cases that should have been discovered from the close contacts of infected persons could not be confirmed, leaving officials unable to fully explain the situation of infections in Wuhan, where COVID-19 infection was spreading. Around this time, some experts said that there might be "clusters," groups that infect a

great number of people with the virus, although many infected people did not infect anyone. The view came to be held that it might be possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through a thorough implementation of the cluster-based approach.

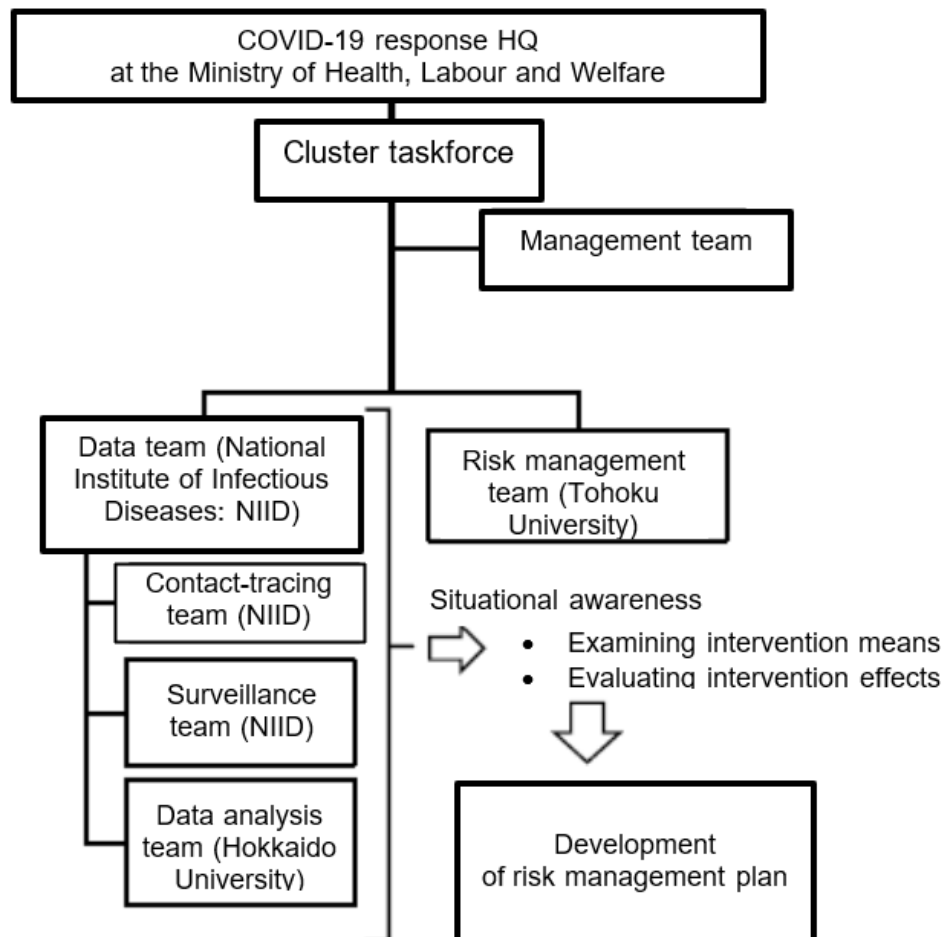
Elsewhere, public health centers in Japan conducted active epidemiological investigations in accordance with the epidemiological survey implementation guidelines for the novel coronavirus (nCoV)⁴ issued by the National Institute of Infectious Diseases on January 17. In addition to surveying people who had come into contact with infected people after the onset of their symptoms in other countries (prospective survey), the survey in Japan was also conducted on people who came into contact with the patients before the onset of the disease (retrospective survey).^{5,6}

Comparison of contact tracing in Japan and in other countries



However, the retrospective survey unique to Japan required a great deal of manpower and know-how, and the health ministry assisted in active epidemiological surveys including in response to requests from prefectures. In order to analyze the results in detail, it was recognized that it was necessary to increase the manpower of people conducting the surveys.

Cluster Taskforce at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan



- A dedicated room was set up within the health ministry to study and implement countermeasures.
- Cooperating bodies: National Institute of Infectious Diseases, National Institute of Public Health, National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Hokkaido University, Tohoku University, Niigata University, International University of Health and Welfare, etc. (About 30 people in total)

Source: Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry website

Against this background, the health ministry decided to set up a cluster taskforce with key members from Tohoku University, staff from the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, graduates of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP), Professor Hitoshi Oshitani of Tohoku University Graduate School, and Professor Hiroshi Nishiura of Hokkaido University Graduate School,⁷ as well as other Hokkaido University staff. The cluster taskforce was established on February 25 under the ministry's COVID-19 headquarters. The taskforce

thus established analyzed the epidemiological characteristics of COVID-19 and sources of infection based on epidemiological surveys, providing the basic materials necessary for discussions by the expert panel, thereby functioning as something of a back office.

An example of activities by the cluster taskforce was the discovery and confirmation of clusters in Hokkaido. On the day of its launch on February 25, members of the taskforce were immediately dispatched to Hokkaido, where the infection had already spread. Two days later, on February 27, it became clear that there were very widespread sporadic cases (cases for which the source of infection was unknown) not only in Sapporo, but in various parts of Hokkaido. This indicated that there were large clusters or large cluster chains in the Sapporo metropolitan area.⁸

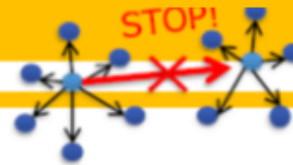
2.4. Birth of the “Three Cs”

For several days after its inauguration, Professor Nishiura's team took the lead in analyzing 110 cases of domestic infections, and came to recognize the characteristic of COVID-19 that “80%” of infected cases did not infect others.

Through analysis of epidemiological surveys by public health nurses and the cluster taskforce, it also emerged that a major factor causing the outbreak of clusters was a situation in which a large number of people gathered in a closed environment and engaged in close-range conversations. Similarly, it was pointed out that examples of conspicuous clusters tended to involve activities that increase the volume of people's ventilation (such as workout at sports gyms, etc.), activities in which people speak or sing in loud voices (live music clubs or karaoke) and environments where one person came into contact with an unspecified number of people (restaurant/bar business involving service to customers), and so on.

Based on these analysis results, the health ministry published a document entitled “Preventing outbreaks of COVID-19” on March 1.

Preventing Outbreaks of COVID-19



To prevent the spread of infection:

In Japan, there are cases of sporadic small-scale outbreaks of multiple patients. At this stage, the spread of the infection can be prevented by following up the infection route with a focus on close contacts.

What is important now to minimize the future spread of infection in the country is to **prevent a small patient population (cluster) spawning the next cluster.**

<Characteristics of the infection route>

* A "small patient cluster" is a group of patients on the scale of several to dozens, whose infection route can be traced.

◆ 80% of those who have been found to be infected in Japan have not infected other people.

◆ On the other hand, there have been reports of **multiple infections by one infected person at sports gyms, tour boats, buffet-style dinners, mahjong clubs, ski guesthouses, and closed temporary tents.**

In this way, the common points of outbreaks are, in particular, **"poor ventilation," "spaces where people spend a lot of time," and "places where an unspecified number of people are likely to come into contact."**

What You Are Being Asked

1. **Avoid gathering in groups in poorly ventilated spaces where people are closely gathered.**
2. People holding events should consider the necessity of holding the event regardless of the event's scale because there is a high risk of infection in poorly ventilated spaces or an environment where people talk at close range. In that case, please devise a method of conducting the event, such as **not creating spaces with poor ventilation** wherever possible.

These findings may change with future epidemiological information and research, but summarize what we consider to be the best at this time.

In collaboration with local governments where clusters have occurred, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry is engaged in supporting each region and has established a Cluster taskforce of domestic infectious disease experts in order to detect clusters at an early stage, dispatch expert teams, collect and analyze data, and consider countermeasures.

Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, March 1, 2020 version

Source: Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry website "Prevent outbreaks of COVID-19"

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Based on the above analysis by the cluster taskforce, it was also proposed in the sixth meeting of the expert panel held on March 9 that the basic strategy for preventing the spread of infection should have the three pillars of 1) early detection and early response to clusters; 2) early patient diagnosis, enhancement of intensive care for seriously ill patients, and securing a medical care provision system; and 3) behavioral change by citizens. In addition, the expert panel released its “view on COVID-19 countermeasures” on the same day, highlighting common factors for places where outbreaks had been confirmed so far as the simultaneous overlapping of the following three conditions, and requested people to avoid places and situations that meet the three conditions.

- **Closed spaces with poor ventilation**
- **Crowded places with large numbers of people in proximity**
- **Close-range (within arm's reach) conversation and speech**

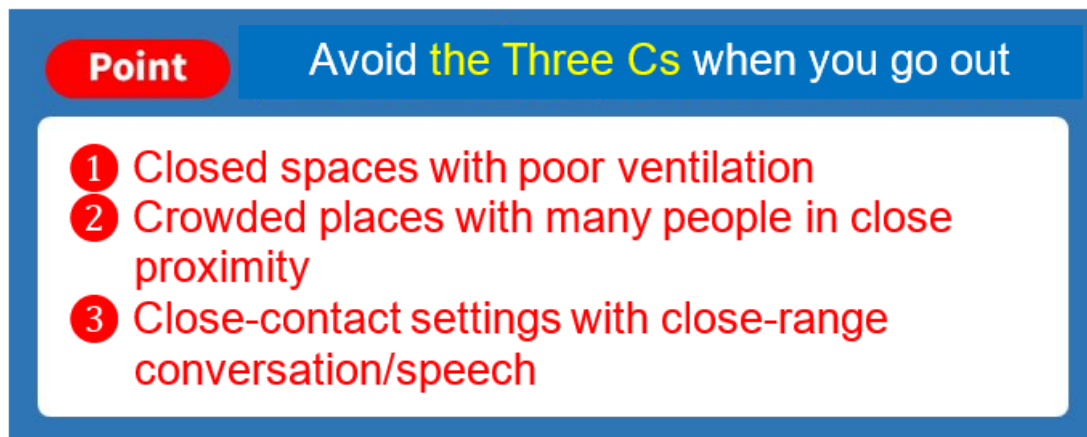
Looking at the three conditions with a high risk of infection that the above March 9 meeting of the expert panel recommended the public should avoid, it can be said that the idea of “Three Cs” now widely known by the public was established then.

However, the expert panel itself did not use the expression “Three Cs,” and although “closed” and “crowded” were specified in the above recommendations, the expression “close-contact” was not specified. A member of staff at the Prime Minister's Office who received an explanation of the expert panel's ideas proposed the third C, consolidating the phrase “Three Cs.”⁹

Based on the idea of the Three Cs formulated in this way, the Prime Minister's Office (disaster/crisis management) Twitter account posted a message on March 18, “Avoid the Three Cs when you go out,” with the expressions “closed, crowded, close-range” and “Three Cs” starting to be used from around this time.

In addition, on March 25, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike held up a signboard at a press conference stating “NO!! Three Cs: Avoid the Three Cs in your behavior,” emphasizing the importance of avoiding closed, crowded, and close-contact settings as a countermeasure to infection. Such remarks by Governor Koike were widely reported on TV, and expressions such as the “Three Cs” and “Triple C” spread more widely to the public.

In addition, Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister in charge of the COVID-19 response, introduced the concept of “Three Cs” in an article contributed to the Wall Street Journal on July 7. Also, on July 18, the WHO introduced the concept of “3Cs” (Crowded places, Close contact settings, Confined and enclosed spaces)” on its Facebook page. In this way, the Three Cs concept proposed by the expert panel was widely spread not only in Japan, but throughout the world.



Source: Prime Minister's Office (disaster/crisis management) Twitter account (March 18, 2020)

3. Policy decisions influenced by the remarks of experts

3.1. Information dissemination by the expert panel itself

Until the expert panel held its own news conference on February 24, each of their recommendations was explained to the public via the government such as the health ministry. However, there was a growing opinion among members of the panel that it was their professional responsibility to directly explain to the public their thoughts and what kind of analysis they had performed as experts, and the expert panel held a news conference on February 24 at the same time as issuing its “view on realizing basic policy for COVID-19.”¹⁰

At this news conference, Omi stated, “We’re at a crucial juncture in the battle against the novel coronavirus, its precisely make-or-break time.”¹¹ Regarding developments leading up to the new conference, a member of the expert panel noted that the news conference held by government bodies such as the health ministry lacked medical explanations, and because it was difficult for the analysis results and recommendations of the expert panel to get across accurately to the public, the opinion grew among members of the panel that the medical perspective and scientific background should be explained directly to the public.¹²

Another member of the panel remembers that the experts wanted to convey epidemiologically correct information and were concerned that measures would be delayed if information was not disseminated to the public in a timely manner.¹³

Yet another member revealed that the true meaning of the statement “critical juncture” was not in whether the number of infected people would increase rapidly or fall

to zero, but in the sense of whether the number of infected people would increase rapidly or maintain the status quo.¹⁴ This “critical juncture” statement had a great influence on fostering a sense of crisis among the public. In this regard, one of the Prime Minister's Office staffers recalls that although the government was busy dealing with the Diamond Princess up until around the panel's news conference on February 24 and as such, had not given much serious consideration to the expert panel, “the press conference was a turning point in the role of the panel of experts.”¹⁵ A senior health ministry official said that there was a sense of crisis behind the expert panel's news conference that COVID-19 infection would spread explosively if things were left as they stood, admitting that it influenced the government's policy decision.¹⁶

3.2. Government moves regarding self-restraint on large-scale events and school closures in response to the experts' remarks

On February 25, the day after the first news conference was held by the panel of experts, the government's headquarters, in its 13th meeting, formulated its “basic policy for COVID-19 countermeasures,” and announced that 1) regarding the holding of events, the government does not make a uniform request at the moment for self-restraint across the country, but it wants organizers to reconsider the necessity of holding the events; and 2) regarding the presentation of infection control policies at schools and the appropriate implementation of temporary school closures and so on, prefectures and other local authorities would make the requests to parties that run the schools.

However, at a meeting held after the 13th meeting of the government's COVID-19 headquarters, Prime Minister Abe suddenly proposed requesting people to refrain from organizing events. This proposal, which immediately overturned the basic policy set by the government earlier the same day, was the idea of the office of the prime minister, which took the remarks by the experts at the above-mentioned news conference seriously. However, the nearly 50 attendees at the meeting who heard the prime minister's initiative were perplexed by the sudden change in policy, and significant confusion followed.

At a subsequent (14th) meeting of the government headquarters held on February 26, Prime Minister Abe requested national sports and cultural events be canceled, postponed, or reduced in scale over the following two weeks. Although the prime minister's request marked a change in the government's policy in one day, the public already had a sense of crisis and voluntarily begun to refrain from organizing events, and the request was accepted by the public without any great confusion which had been worried about.

And although the basic policy stipulated that decisions to temporarily close schools would be left up to each local government, Prime Minister Abe, at the 15th meeting of the government's COVID-19 headquarters on February 27, abruptly declared that he would request the simultaneous closure of all elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools and special education schools nationwide. This idea of requesting

a nationwide closure of schools was conceived by Takaya Imai, special adviser to the prime minister, and it can be said that the decision to call for the school closures was made as he took the experts' "critical juncture" remarks on February 24 seriously.

This sudden announcement of the request for nationwide closure of schools was an unusual decision at the initiative of the Prime Minister's Office that even the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, which has jurisdiction over the issue, was informed of only just before it was announced. Just like in the call for self-restraint on public events, the decision caused great surprise and confusion among the parties concerned.

In this way, the experts' news conference on February 24 not only had a great impact on fostering public awareness of the crisis, but also influenced the government's decision on initial-phase policies for citizens' behavioral change such as refraining from events and closing schools en masse. A member of the expert panel, in giving a frank opinion on the government's policy, said he believed the experts' sense of crisis expressed in their news conference affected the Prime Minister's Office. "But I'm not sure if it affected the office for the better or worse. On the good side, I think it was a good influence that our sense of crisis as experts was transmitted to the Prime Minister's Office, but at the same time, the office may have had an idea of wanting to do something that we weren't putting out. I feel like that was the thinking behind the move by the Prime Minister's Office," he said, adding that the experts did not think a request should be made to close all schools nationwide.¹⁷

In the following sections, we will focus on the nationwide closure of schools to examine the process leading up the unusual decision-making by the Prime Minister's Office in response to the remarks by the expert panel.

3.3. Legal framework for school closure

As a prerequisite legal framework for the temporary closure of schools,¹⁸ Article 20 of the School Health and Safety Law (Law No. 56 of 1958, including subsequent amendments) states, "School founders are required to prevent infectious diseases. When it is necessary, all or part of the school may be temporarily closed," stipulating that schools can be temporarily closed with a view to preventing infectious diseases. In this way, the decision to close a public school is to be made by the party that founded the school, and the prime minister, the education ministry, or the heads of local governments has no legal authority to request a uniform closure of schools nationwide.

Therefore, the request by Prime Minister Abe to close all schools nationwide means that it was a de facto request without legal grounds, but schools were closed as a result of decisions by the board of education in each prefecture/municipality.

3.4. Moves by the education ministry leading to the request for uniform school closure

3.4.1. Administrative notification issued by the education ministry

Since the end of January, the education ministry had compiled a number of policies regarding measures such as suspending students’ attendance and the temporary closure of schools in the event an infection breaks out at school, sending out the following notification.

TITLE	SUMMARY
What to do if COVID-19 infection occurs among pupils (February 18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the prefecture deems it is necessary to close the school in view of public health measures, request the temporary closure of all or part of the school. • If the infection has already spread in the area and there are a large number of affected people in the school, it is possible to make the necessary temporary closures from the viewpoint of taking measures for school management.
What to do if COVID-19 infection occurs among pupils (Report Two) (February 25)	With the aim of controlling infection in the entire area, consult with the prefectural hygiene departments and other chief departments in the early stages of a COVID-19 epidemic in the area, and as a public health measure, temporary proactive closures, including schools with no infected pupils, can also be considered by setting end-of-school-year holidays flexibly, etc.

As shown in the administrative communication dated February 18, the education ministry anticipated from the outset the possibility of closing classes and schools in case a COVID-19 infection breaks out at school – just like such measures are taken against seasonal influenza. In addition, as shown in the administrative communication dated February 25, the ministry made it clear that a school might be closed from the viewpoint of public health measures for the purpose of preventing infection even if there were no infected teachers or students.

At a regular news conference on February 25, education minister Koichi Hagiuda reiterated the ministry’s policy that the authority to decide on temporary closure lies with the school's founders and the education ministry does not have the authority to make that decision, adding, “It is possible to make a proactive temporary closure, including schools that are free of infection, in order to prevent the spread of infections in the whole area.”

The education ministry thought that the implementation of preventive closures of schools where no infection had occurred would not be requested by the ministry, but

would be done at the discretion of each local government. Many of the education ministry officials, including Hagiuda, did not think the need would arise for a uniform closure of schools across the country. In recalling the situation at the time, a senior education ministry official said he had no problem with the expert panel's view on February 24 that the epidemic could considerably calm down if classes or schools were closed, and believed that it was possible that schools could be closed at the discretion of each local government, but he did not think it would become necessary to close all schools nationwide.¹⁹

3.4.2. Education ministry's own preliminary examination

As mentioned in Section 3.4.1., the education ministry believed that the decision to close schools would be made by each region – until Prime Minister Abe issued his request to close schools nationwide – and did not foresee the possibility or the necessity of uniformly closing all schools across the country.

On the other hand, however, given that it was not entirely impossible that the infection would spread and schools would have to be closed all over the country, senior education ministry officials, including sections chiefs for elementary and secondary schools in the Education Bureau and section chiefs from related bureaus, began around mid-February to sift through issues and points of discussion involved in a simultaneous closure of schools. However, such discussions were not based on any judgment by the ministry that there will be a need to close all schools at once, but were held from the perspective of risk analysis.

This study identified the potential issues of simultaneous school closures as follows: 1) Since many families have both parents working and others have single mothers, some parents may become unable to work since they have to take care of their children in case the schools are closed; 2) school lunches will no longer be provided in case of school closures, so in the case of families who cannot prepare meals, some children will not be able to eat lunch; (3) financial compensation would be required for parents who had to take time off from work due to school closures. Regarding the response for children and students in families where both parents work, participants in the study shared the opinion that the education ministry would need to discuss the matter with the health ministry, which had jurisdiction over the care of schoolchildren outside of school hours.

3.5. Request by local government for simultaneous closure of schools in the area

In Hokkaido, where COVID-19 cases were confirmed from early on, individual measures such as school closures had already been taken from the end of February for

schools where infections had been found in children and teaching staff.²⁰ These measures were decided in accordance with the education ministry's administrative communication described in Section 3.4.1.

At the February 25 meeting of the Hokkaido infectious disease crisis management headquarters, Yoshihiro Sato, the education superintendent for the prefecture, reported on the status of school closures. Based on this, Governor Naomichi Suzuki stated that given that he had received many anxious comments from parents and his belief that it was important for teachers and pupils to have a correct understanding of COVID-19, "I think it is necessary to consider measures including school closures," asking Sato to consider closing all the schools in Hokkaido.

The following day, Governor Suzuki held an extraordinary news conference announcing his request to the boards of education in each municipality in Hokkaido to close all elementary and junior high schools for seven days from February 27 to March 4. Suzuki said, "I too believe that the coming one or two weeks will decide the outcome. I think it is an extremely important period to prevent the spread of infection. And in line with advice from the boards of education and experts at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, finally it is I, as the governor of Hokkaido, who has decided unilaterally on these seven days," intimating that the request for an all-out school closure in Hokkaido was a political call.

As a result of Governor Suzuki's request for simultaneous closure, the board of education in each municipality in Hokkaido decided to close public elementary and junior high schools at the same time, and it was decided to temporarily close about 1,600 schools including private elementary and junior high schools from February 27 (some from the 28th) to March 4.²¹

Regarding the simultaneous closure of schools in Hokkaido, the education ministry had communicated to Hokkaido that it was desirable to temporarily close all or a part of schools, and exchanges such as communication at the administrative level were made. Governor Suzuki told education minister Hagiuda that he planned to close schools in Hokkaido.²²

3.6. The government's request for simultaneous school closure

At 11:08 a.m. on February 27, when many schools in Hokkaido decided to close based on the mechanism envisioned by the education minister, Vice Education Minister Makoto Fujiwara, who was visiting the Prime Minister's Office, was suddenly told by Prime Minister Abe that he was thinking of closing all schools nationwide. According to a senior staffer in the Cabinet Secretariat, Fujiwara responded immediately at the time, saying, "I think we should do it."²³

According to a senior education ministry official, education minister Hagiuda, who received the message from the vice minister, seemed stunned by the abrupt situation,

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

saying, “Not all families have a mother at home” and “It’s different from private schools.”²⁴ Since the education ministry itself also heard the news out of the blue, the bureau in charge was all abuzz, but immediately started sorting out the issues. As mentioned in Section 3.4.2., the issues related to a simultaneous closure of all schools had already been roughly identified in advance, so based on the considerations of that time, the ministry arranged to immediately summarize its view on simultaneous closure.

Then, at 1:29 p.m. on the same day, Hagiuda and Fujiwara visited the Prime Minister’s Office, and told Prime Minister Abe that the education ministry did not think it was necessary to close schools all at once; that there were multiple matters that needed to be considered in order to issue such a request; and that a certain period of preparation was required to avoid confusion among people involved in school education. According to a senior staffer in the Cabinet Secretariat, Hagiuda was cautious toward the simultaneous closure of schools, and asked the prime minister questions about the timeframe of closures and other matters, saying, “Are you really sure you want to do it? How far are you going to go?”²⁵

Hagiuda and Fujiwara raised a variety of issues, but the main topics were protecting children in families in which both parents work, securing lunch for the children, and the need to expand after-school care of schoolchildren, which had already been strained. They told the prime minister of the need for economic measures for parents possibly forced to take time off from work. “There are issues that can be completed by the education ministry alone, and issues that cannot be solved without consulting with other ministries and agencies,” Hagiuda told Abe.²⁶ He said that this time of year was filled with memory-making events at school that were especially important for students in their final year, and that priority should be given to only closing schools where an infection had occurred.²⁷ In response to their appeal, Abe said that he would still like to do it and that the government would take full responsibility, and Hagiuda and Fujiwara took leave of the Prime Minister’s Office.

In this way, the education ministry maintained that it was not necessary to close schools all at once, but nevertheless, the Prime Minister’s Office proceeded with adjustments to implement the nationwide school closure.²⁸

Then, at the 15th meeting of the government’s COVID-19 headquarters held from 6:21 p.m. on February 27, Prime Minister Abe said, “We request that all elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, and special needs schools nationwide be temporarily closed until spring break from March 2 next week.”

According to a senior Cabinet Secretariat staffer, education minister Hagiuda was of the understanding at the time of Abe’s announcement that the simultaneous closure of schools meant bringing the spring vacation forward and he appeared to be under the impression that the period from March 20 to April 7, which was the original spring vacation period, could be used for reopening schools and holding classes, and when the prime minister said on camera, “We’ll be keeping them closed,” Hagiuda interrogated him, “What do you mean? Aren’t you just bringing the spring vacation forward?”²⁹

In this way, the request for simultaneous school closure announced by Prime Minister Abe was communicated to the education ministry, the competent ministry, on the morning of the day of the announcement. The policy decision was made at the initiative of the Prime Minister's Office, without clearly addressing the issues raised by the education ministry. Furthermore, the meaning of a simultaneous closure of schools was not sufficiently cleared even within the government; witness the fact that education minister Hagiuda did not understand its exact meaning.

Prime Minister Abe thus made a sudden request to close schools simultaneously, prompting local governments across the country to make large numbers of inquiries to the education ministry. The following day, on February 28, the education ministry issued its "COVID-19 measures for the simultaneous temporary closure of elementary, junior high, high schools and special needs schools, etc." and officially requested to parties that run the schools that the schools be temporarily closed.

At the Lower House Budget Committee held on the same day, Toru Miyamoto of the Japanese Communist Party said, "Despite its serious social impact, the prime minister has not explained any concrete measures about it. I think, therefore, that people are more worried," and although he asked why the prime minister had not consulted with the expert panel and the specific reason for requesting a uniform nationwide closure, Prime Minister Abe repeatedly replied that it was a political decision. Abe held a news conference on February 29, two days after the request for the simultaneous closure, and explained the purpose of the measure.

3.7. Reactions of interested parties to the simultaneous school closure request

Regarding the government's request for simultaneous school closures, a senior education ministry official said that having already implemented regional-based school closures in Hokkaido and other areas, it was difficult to oppose the nationwide closure from an educational point of view because he thought that follow-up steps to make up for the loss of education opportunities, such as shortening subsequent vacation period, were somehow possible.³⁰ Although there were many matters to be dealt with and considered when schools were closed all at once, including the problem of after-school care of schoolchildren, those matters were under the jurisdiction of other ministries and agencies, and since they were told that the Prime Minister's Office would handle them, it was difficult for the ministry to raise objections based on those issues, the official said.³¹

There was no prior consultation with the expert panel about the need for a uniform nationwide closure of schools, as a member of the panel said he first learned of the decision in a media report.³² "I thought it was a waste. They created an expert panel, so they could have used us as a kind of cushion by talking to us. We were against it," he said, adding, "We were against it because, of course, we'd talked about it as a topic in our study session, but the consensus there was that there wasn't much sense in closing schools at that point. But then, all of a sudden, that's what they were doing. We were never asked

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

by them about it at the expert panel, and never voluntarily suggested what should be done about schools.” Although the member also said, “the prime minister was overstepping his rights in doing this because the revised special measures act hadn’t been enacted yet,” he did evaluate the decision to a certain extent in that the prime minister may have thought schools needed to be closed simultaneously out of concern for children.³³

Another member of the expert panel said the school closure was epidemiologically meaningless because “judging from evidence, this virus was hardly a source of infection for children.” At the same time, he said, “In Japan, schools are kind of a unit of society, and there are various school events including the PTA, so I think the psychological impact of the school closure was huge.”³⁴

The government's decision to request a simultaneous closure of schools matched neither the expectations of the education ministry, the competent ministry, nor the views of the expert panel that such a measure lacked epidemiological legitimacy. Feeling a sense of crisis due to the “critical juncture” remarks made by the experts, however, the Prime Minister’s Office took the initiative in closing schools throughout the country without sufficient coordination with the education ministry or fully listening to the opinion of experts.

As a result, this decision to close all schools resulted in confusion in the educational field, including issues such as school lunches and the need to expand after-school care. On the other hand, however, many parents worried about the infection of children welcomed Prime Minister Abe's decision, and in an NHK opinion poll³⁵ conducted from March 6 to 8, 69% of respondents answered that the request for temporary school closure was “unavoidable,” giving a certain degree of positive evaluation of the decision.

Regarding the significance of the simultaneous closure of schools implemented in Japan, education minister Hagiuda said, “I’ve not yet reached a conclusion at this point as to whether this call was absolutely right or wrong. But as a consequence, infections did not spread in schools or schools did not become the center of infections in each region. I think the purpose of requesting school closures was pretty much achieved, and this served as a catalyst to change people’s awareness drastically. There were plenty of people not wearing masks at the time, but masks became a must with the simultaneous closure. Many countries positively evaluated Japan's approach to the infection, and took the same measures as Japan’s, so to exaggerate things somewhat, I do believe that Japan may have taken the lead in preventing the spread of infection worldwide.”³⁶

Prime Minister Abe also looked back on the time when he made the decision on an extremely difficult behavior-changing policy at the initiative of the Prime Minister’s Office, saying, “It was a difficult decision to close the schools all at once. It meant putting a stop to the functioning of society. There were two reasons at the time. To prevent panic occurring in schools. And then another thing, which you could not say out loud, but there was a risk of infected children infecting their grandparents.”³⁷

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Notes

1. The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry's COVID-19 response headquarters was established on January 28, when an ordinance was approved designating COVID-19 as a designated infectious disease under the Infectious Diseases Control Law.
2. The government did not provide a meeting room for the study sessions held by members of the expert panel, and discussions were held in meeting rooms prepared by the members themselves with boxed meals.
3. In addition, on February 21, the day after the health ministry issued its "Message to the public regarding holding events," the Tokyo Metropolitan Government also held its 9th meeting of its COVID-19 response headquarters. Regarding events sponsored by the metropolitan government, it was decided that large-scale indoor events, or those providing meals, scheduled to be held within three weeks from the same day, should be postponed or cancelled as a general rule, and outdoor events providing meals should also be postponed or cancelled in principle.
4. National Institute of Infectious Diseases, "Proactive epidemiological survey implementation guidelines for novel coronavirus (nCoV) (Provisional Version)," January 17, 2020
5. In Japan to date, sources of infection have been mainly investigated by public health centers for tuberculosis patients. The "retrospective survey" conducted for COVID-19 was based on survey methods used as an epidemiological survey for tuberculosis patients.
6. Since the National Institute of Infectious Diseases issued the proactive epidemiological survey implementation guidelines on January 17, 2020, they have been revised several times, a description of the retrospective survey being added to the guidelines on February 27.
7. Professor at Kyoto University Graduate School since August 2020
8. The results of the survey and analysis by the cluster taskforce dispatched to Hokkaido were shared with the health ministry and the Hokkaido Prefectural Government.
9. Interview with a Prime Minister's Office staffer
10. This news conference was held with the prior permission of Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Katsunobu Kato. Although the health ministry was reluctant to allow the experts to give opinions in the name of the expert panel, its views were finally released in the name of the panel with Kato's consent.
11. Also, in the expert panel's view on realizing basic policy for COVID-19 dated February 24, 2020, it was written, "The nation is at a critical juncture over the next one to two weeks as to whether the infections would rapidly expand or put under control."
12. Interview with a member of the expert panel
13. Interview with a member of the expert panel
14. Iryo Ishin, "My opinion: Asking member Nobuhiko Okabe who changed from opposing to supporting the state of emergency declaration (in Japanese), Vol.3, July 13, 2020
15. Interview with a Prime Minister's Office staffer
16. Interview with a senior health ministry official
17. Interview with a member of the expert panel
18. At the time when Prime Minister Abe requested a uniform closure of schools nationwide, the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases had not yet been amended. Therefore, this section will not touch on the request for restrictions on the use of schools, etc. based on that law.
19. Interview with a senior education ministry official
20. For example, at Nakafurano Elementary School, where two students were found to be infected with COVID-19 on February 21, measures were taken to close the elementary school from the same day to March 3.
21. In addition to Hokkaido, Ichikawa, Chiba Prefecture, and Osaka and Sakai in Osaka Prefecture decided to close all schools prior to Prime Minister Abe's request for simultaneous closure.
22. Interview with a senior education ministry official
23. Interview with senior Cabinet Secretariat staffer
24. Interview with a senior education ministry official
25. Interview with senior Prime Minister's Office staffer
26. Interview with education minister Koichi Hagiuda, September 24, 2020

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

27. Interview with education minister Hagiuda, September 24, 2020
28. The health ministry requested the education ministry that teachers help with after-school care because it was expected that the staff numbers would be insufficient if schools all closed all at once. The education ministry decided that teachers would provide support for after-school care.
29. Interview with a senior Prime Minister's Office staffer
30. Interview with a senior education ministry official
31. Interview with a senior education ministry official
32. Interview with a member of the expert panel
33. Interview with a member of the expert panel
34. Interview with a member of the expert panel
35. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/kaisetsu-blog/700/423155.html>
36. Interview with education minister Hagiuda, September 24, 2020
37. Interview with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, September 11, 2020