

At the end of the first trimester, 2021

First of all, I would like to express my sympathies to the families of those who died or are still missing because of the landslides that occurred on the third of July and were caused by heavy rain in the Tōkai area, especially in Shizuoka Prefecture. Residents there still are striving to restore the lives that they had been living before. We can only hope that they will be able to recover soon.

Natural disasters can occur anytime and anywhere in Japan. It's impossible to prevent them from occurring, but I believe we may be able to reduce the damage they produce. While it is not always easy for us to help people in need, we should think about them. Let's pray for their recovery. And let's prepare for such natural disasters as a large-scale earthquake directly underneath the Kantō Plain and a Nankai Trough earthquake, which are expected to occur in the relatively near future.

I would like to talk about three things at the end of the first trimester of the academic year 2021.

First, even though vaccinations started in June, we are still in the midst of a fourth or, maybe fifth, surge of COVID-19. Nearly 80% of the people over 65 have been vaccinated at least once, and nearly half of them have been vaccinated twice. On the other hand, only one quarter of the rest of us have been vaccinated even once. Even with a million shots a day, it would still take almost 100 days to finish vaccinating all of us once, and 210 days to finish it twice. That would be almost 7 months. We may be able to finish it by the end of January, 2022. We have still a long way to go. Please don't do anything reckless. All of you are wise enough to help win this long-term fight against this notorious infectious disease. We have to protect ourselves medically. Avoid the "three Cs" —closed spaces with poor ventilation, crowded places with many people nearby, and close-contact settings in which close-range conversations take place—where clusters of COVID-19 cases tend to be found. It is very important for all of us—you and your families, my fellow teachers and myself—not to get infected with COVID-19. I know how uncomfortable and inconvenient this will be for you. I know it must seem unfair that you have to experience this horrible nationwide and worldwide infectious disease outbreak. Despite all the difficulties which must surely still lie ahead, I believe it will be possible to maintain the high Aoyama High School standards while creating valuable new traditions for the future, and it is my most fervent hope that we do just that.

Second, since the government has lowered the voting age, 79 of the twelfth-graders had the chance to vote in the Metropolitan Assembly Election on July 4th. And more of them will have a chance to vote in the House of Representatives election in September. I hope all of you who will have gained the right to vote will go to the polls. Voting is one of the most important rights guaranteed to us under the Constitution, and it is also a civic duty. I have a great interest in the voting rate among the young, ages 18 and 19. The House of Representatives election will be a very good chance for you to think about some of the political issues we face in our society today. I think we should all take an interest in political issues in order to try to help make our society better. It is essential for you to have critical ways of thinking, to compare campaign promises, and to learn about candidates and their political parties. It is you who can change the world.

Third, and last, with too much similarity in terms of culture and historical background, people are likely to be reluctant to accept new things, and it may take a longer time to improve their lives. While similarity may contribute to stability, it is obviously impossible for a nation today to live alone, separated from other countries economically, politically, and culturally. We need to understand other value systems, other ways of thinking, and other ways of living. We have to cooperate with one another and have mutual respect for our different cultural backgrounds. Diversity gives us a good chance to improve our society—a good chance to create new things and new values. A society without diversity would be unable to produce many things that would be helpful to it. While Japan may not yet be a country that generally values diversity, we can certainly learn from the benefits that the great cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe and in the U.S. have produced. We should be willing to accept diversity in order to improve our society.

Today I have talked about three things: first, that you should protect yourselves medically, second, that you should take an interest in political issues, and third, that you should accept diversity in order to improve our society.

One more thing—I hope all of you will be gentle and kind with one another, not ignoring your friends or speaking ill of them. Every student deserves respect. As I often tell you, diversity among students is very important. Any school without diversity would be unable to offer sufficient stimulation to students' curiosity. It is essential for you to spend your school lives in friendly rivalry with others who are better than you in certain fields. Believe in yourselves. You should both study hard and create new traditions in your extra-curricular activities, such as in the Gaien-sai.

Take good care of yourself, everyone. Enjoy your summer vacation.

Thank you very much.