

2021 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
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Junior High School / Highest Award

Now is the time to step forward

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“What do you specifically want to do to make this school better?” That was the question asked by a teacher in charge at a student council election. I could not properly answer what kinds of activities I wanted to do if I was to become president. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, I wondered if it was fine to just do nothing and accept how school events were being voluntarily canceled one after another as well as how student council activities were being shifted online. There must be activities that we could do now as a result of this particular situation. This could be our chance to find out what they can be.

Many of the activities of this school’s student council so far have been almost the same as previous years. I felt that most of the students were not interested in the reason why they were doing these activities. We might have actually been engaging in various fundraisings, PET bottle caps collections and other activities just out of habit. Moreover, most of the donation money came from our parents’ pockets, so you could consider it far from independent charity work.

Many of the student council’s activities are supposed to be based on the principles of SDGs. However, we are rarely aware of this and I got the feeling that we are conducting our activities somewhat irrelevant to these goals.

I wanted to first learn how the student council’s activities were related to world situations and then look for long-term projects which we can carry out on our own.

I thought we would be able to make use of the student council newsletters as one of the ways to share information with other students. The student council at Nishibukuro Junior High School publishes a newsletter about once a month, and each of the seven members are responsible for an article.

We devised ways to draw more of the students’ attention to the newsletters by filling the empty spaces with quizzes about the school and spot the difference puzzles. We also asked the teachers to make color copies of them which would be put up in classrooms.

Each member went on to study about the SDGs and wrote in the newsletter in their own words what they had found out. We also exchanged ideas about what kinds of activities we would propose in the future at the board meeting. One of the ideas suggested was, “We could also try checking our lockers to see if there are any unnecessary things”.

I opened a drawer of my desk at home and found six erasers and seven pens unused because I got them as souvenirs or because they were not easy to use. The drawer was not overfilled with them, but I did not feel like using them either. I was going to throw them away anyway.

I checked what plastic erasers were made of and found that about 50 percent of them are made from polyvinyl chloride, which is derived from petroleum. I would say an eraser weighs about 14 grams, so six of them would weigh 42 grams. A pen weighing 11 grams each would be 77 grams with seven of them. In total, 119 grams of plastic would go to waste. If all the approximately 9.51 million elementary and junior high school students across the country wasted the same amount of writing utensils, 1141 tons of plastic would be unused after production and discarded. The number of writing equipment I had is not the national average, but if all of the students think twice before tossing out at least their unused materials, that will save substantial resources.

Looking into this issue at a library, I found an expression, “Let’s consume ethically.” The word ethical means moral principles which human beings should maintain. I also found that it relates to achieving the Goal 12 of the SDGs, which is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns through “Responsible Consumption & Production”.

We junior high school students are not yet producers, however, we can responsibly get things when we need to use something and consume responsibly until we are done using them. Even minors should be able to become wise consumers.

As I am preparing for high school entrance exams, I cannot help but choose easy to use erasers and mechanical pencils. Even so, I thought I should use up the writing supplies left unused in my drawer and properly dispose them even for purposes other than my studies.

I also found several notebooks featuring characters I loved when I was in elementary school in another drawer. All of them were gifts and too good to use, so I tucked them carefully in the drawer. However, I can no longer take these notebooks to school. I still wanted to store them carefully, but the edges of the white notebook pages were gradually turning yellow. Nonetheless, I could not bring myself to use them by scribbling something on them as a notepad or a calculation sheet. Then, my mother suggested, “I’m sending a birthday gift to your cousin in Aomori. Why don’t we send these notebooks together for her to use?” I was

glad that I could give my beloved little cousin the notebooks, but at the same time, I thought I should have used them carefully when I could.

We often hear the word decluttering. It may be refreshing throwing away everything you do not need and seeing things around you become tidy. However, this is just a transfer of discarded resources from one place to another from a global perspective. It is better to responsibly figure out ways to use them up if possible.

I have seen a project to donate unused school supplies and clothes for children in developing countries before. Effectively using things is indeed great, but I wondered if it was best to collect unused items from across the nation and use a lot of energy to transport them to far away countries.

I wonder if the large amount of stationery and clothes on ships were first produced in developing countries after spending a lot of resources and effort. We are sending these things back using extra energy after having satisfied our excessive materialistic desires. I wonder if this is real support.

I gave it some thought while looking at where we stand. We are not in a social position as students to produce anything yet, so we cannot engage in activities that rely on other people's pockets. Alternatively, we have plenty of time to learn and put our heads together to find some good ideas. We can get impartial information regardless of social status or interests. When I grow up and be on the side of producing things, I want to be a person who can make the right judgments about global environmental and ethical situations and act. I want all the students of Nishibukuro Junior High School to be like that.

Because of the current situation which does not allow us to actively interact with people outside the school, we will take all the time we have now while accumulating knowledge and developing a desired consciousness.

We will spread information using our own words in the newsletters and have each of the students think about what they can do. With our own abilities, we will look to consume things in a way which we can continue as a routine. We will gradually build up these routines. I am beginning to think that if all the students work together to realize this concept, our school will become much better.

We are trying to take small steps forward towards ethical activities. We are not wearing the shoes which our parents bought for us. It is a step forward in our own bare feet.