

Miracles of Kamaishi as a result of following 'Three principles of evacuation'
Students all safe thanks to disaster reduction education

Translated by SEEDS Asia

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Children are running to a higher ground while they are paying undue amount of attention to their back. Middle high school students are leading elementary school students by the hand. This is one of the rare photos of how students from Unosumai elementary school (361 students) and Kamaishi Higashi middle high school (222 students) evacuated from tsunami caused by Tohoku Region Earthquake. The photo was taken by a resident from the area. Almost all students in Kamaishi city survived from tsunami. This is what people describe as 'Miracle of Kamaishi'-but how was this miraculous evacuation was conducted? As west Japan is currently preparing for next expected big tsunami of Nankai earthquake, there are lots of things to learn from Kamaishi experience.

Principle 1: 'Don't be caught by assumption'

At Unosumai elementary school located just 1 km far from the coast, right after the earthquake, the students evacuated to the 3rd floor of the school. This is because the building itself was not damaged from the earthquake and also the school is located outside expected flooded area. The place where school is located did not suffer from tsunami occurred in Meiji-era and Showa-era. This is why the school has been categorized outside expected flooded area even though it is located close to the coast.

However, as students started to gather to the 3rd floor, they saw students from Kamaishi Higashi middle high school running out to their school ground. Kamaishi Higashi middle high school is located right next to Unosumai elementary school. Although their school broadcast was not functioning due to electricity cut, as students saw how students from Kamaishi Higashi middle high school were evacuating, they immediately remembered their past regular evacuation practices which they did together with the students from the middle high school. They immediately made their decision and ran out to the school ground.

About 600 students evacuated to a group home located on a higher ground which is 500 meter far from their schools. The place was designated as one of the official evacuation

sites, but before they got settled in, they saw that a cliff on their back was collapsing. Students felt danger in the place and they decided to evacuate to a nursing home for the elderly located on higher ground that is 500 further from where the students were at that time. About 30 seconds later, the group home was swallowed by tsunami.

Principle 2: 'Do as much as you can'

Students heard a roaring sound behind and saw white wave splash crushing to a breakwater. As soon as they reached to the nursing home, they decided to continue to run up further to a higher ground. The photo was taken right at that moment. Tsunami stopped about 100 meter in front of the nursing home. Within 10 minutes after the students started their evacuation, everything happened.

'By hair, all the elementary school students could have been swallowed by tsunami.' as commented by professor Toshitaka Katata and assistant professor Masanobu Kanai who studied how elementary schools and middle schools from Kamaishi city evacuated. As it is not hard to believe, tsunami swallowed both of the elementary school and the middle high school. A car swept by tsunami stuck into the 3rd floor of Unosumai elementary school.

Principle 3 'Take the lead in evacuation'

Kamaishi city board of education has been working on disaster risk prevention education together with professor Katata since 2005. Despite such effort, when earthquake hit Chihshima Island the year after they started the disaster risk prevention education, the rate of evacuation less than 10%. From this experience, professor Katata implemented a project which students make their evacuation plan on their way to and from school and home. They also started to increase a number of classes to learn threat of tsunami and to allocate 5 to 10 hours annually for the class. 'Three principles of evacuation' also started to be taught through. 1) Don't be caught by assumption, 2) Do as much as you can, and 3) Take the lead in evacuation. When the big tsunami hit this time, some students took the leads in evacuating from 3rd floors of the school to the school ground. Also students from the middle high school took their initiative to guide the elementary school students. Such examples are all fit into the '3 principles of evacuation'.

At one of the schools in Kamaishi city, Kamaishi elementary school, 70 percent of students were already at home when the tsunami struck. But all of the students were confirmed safe.

One student who was with his grandmother at that time. He evacuated as he helped his grandmother. Some students were at a park designated as one of the official evacuation sites. They saw immense power of tsunami and decided to evacuate to a higher ground. These are other examples of how '3 principles of evacuation' were practiced and saved people's lives.

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