



Two hours after the tsunami



**3.7km** Distance from the sea to the school

**1.1m** Height of the school above sea level

**108** Total number of children attending the school (there were reportedly 77-8 students in the school yard)

**74** Number of children lost (70 confirmed dead, 4missing) as of March 2020

**10** Number of teachers lost (out of 11 who were in the yard)

**51 minutes**

Time from the earthquake to the tsunami reaching the school (2:46-3:37 p.m.)



**8.6m**

Height of the tsunami when it struck the school (9.7 meters above sea level)

**9 degrees**

Gradient of the hill behind the school where shiitake mushroom cultivation experience classes were held in March each year

**1 minute**

The time spent evacuating from the tsunami: the group headed toward the river, not up the hill

**150m**

The distance traveled by the children at the head of the group as it evacuated

### Okawa Elementary School

1873 Opened as Kamaya Elementary School, Monou-gun

1985 Became Okawa Elementary School upon merger of Okawa Daiichi and Okawa Daini Elementary Schools; current school building constructed

March 11, 2011 School inundated by tsunami in the Great East Japan Earthquake disaster

March 31, 2018 School officially closed

School gate



Naturally became a place of commemoration after the disaster.

Assembly hall (multipurpose room)



Classroom



Courtyard



Connecting corridor



Gymnasium



Outdoor stage



The concrete acoustic shell was destroyed. The title of the school song, mirai o hiraku (creating the future), is written on the wall.

There was a town  
There was a community  
There was life  
There were children  
Who learned and played here

## Welcome to Okawa Elementary School

This is the place where so many lives were taken by the tsunami. It is a place engulfed in sorrow, in regret, in terror. But it is also a place that we hope many people will visit and come to know better.

Imagine children, running near the Okawa River and around the school that they love. If you look hard and listen carefully, you'll see them, you'll hear them.

Showing people what we have lost gets more difficult as time goes by, but it's as important as ever to do so. It's the starting point for everything else : commemorating those who died, establishing what happened, and preventing more disasters. If we keep telling this story, the memories we have and the lives we lost will shine on.

Let us come together to share what happened on that day, before it, and after it, as well as what lies ahead.



大川伝承の会  
facebook.com/ookawadensyo/

小さな命の意味を考える会  
311chiisanainochi.org



# March 11, 2011 2:46 to 3:37 p.m.

**2:46 p.m. Intensity 6 earthquake.** It lasts for around 3 minutes and is more intense than any quake experienced before.

**2:49 Classes evacuate to the school yard.** Coming out of the school buildings, some teachers say, "a tsunami is coming; move to high ground," and some children make their way up the hill. But the decision is taken to line up in the yard first.

**2:52 A major tsunami warning is issued:** a warning of unprecedented urgency. The school bus service radios its drivers to have the children board the buses and evacuate. The buses wait ready to depart.

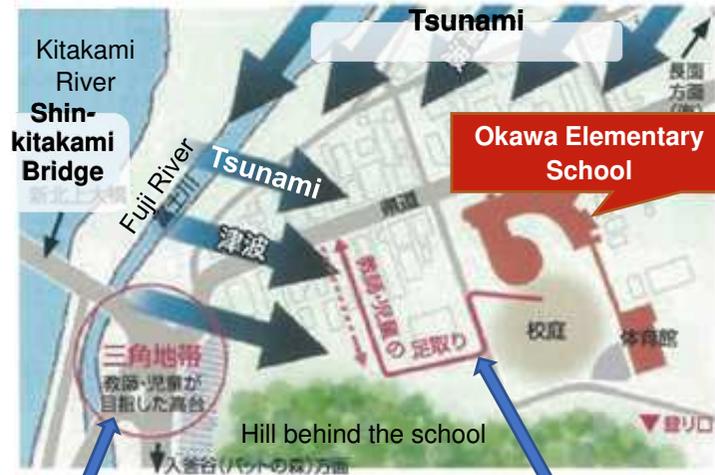
**Approx. 3:00** Local residents, parents picking their children up from school, and children themselves suggest moving to higher ground.

**3:25** A municipal loudspeaker vehicle passes by, broadcasting advice to move to higher ground.

**3:32** The Fuji River bursts its banks.

**3:36 The school group begins to move.** They do not move uphill but toward the triangle zone (near the bridge).

**3:37** The Kitakami River bursts its banks, and **the tsunami reaches the school.** Subsequently, the tsunami waters that flowed across the land also reach the school, and currents swirl around the school yard.



**Triangle zone**  
The higher ground which the teachers/children set out to reach

**The path taken by the teachers/children**

As it surged inland, the tsunami enveloped houses, cars, soil, and tens of thousands of pines and other trees along the coast. This debris was caught on major bridges, blocking the tsunami's path and causing the water to surge over. Because the water had been held back to its limits by the collected debris, the strength and height of the surge increased. Subsequently, the tsunami that had flowed up through the land also reached the school. Around one quarter of all bridges were washed away, and embankments were also destroyed. All clocks at the school stopped at 3:37 p.m.



**Loudspeaker vehicle, disaster radio:** "A tsunami is coming; move to high ground"

**Radio** **Teachers** **Local residents**

**Parents** who had come to pick their children up: "A tsunami is coming; get away"

**School bus service:** The bus service radioed its drivers to tell them to evacuate.

**Children:** "We need to get further uphill"

**The teachers and children started to move approximately one minute before the tsunami arrived. They went along a narrow path behind houses, toward the river.**

Teachers and pupils began to move following the direction to head to the "triangle zone." This was when the Fuji River had already burst its banks and the tsunami was imminent. When a local resident who left home at 3:35 p.m. drove past the school on the prefectural road, the children were not on the road. The total distance from the school traveled by the children at the head of the group was around 150 meters.

**There was enough information to enable evacuation.** At around 3:00 p.m. at the latest, there was information suggesting that a tsunami could be on its way.

**Preparations also need to be reviewed.** The Miyagi prefectural authorities had repeatedly directed schools to review their disaster procedures, based on expert predictions that there was a 99% or more probability of a major earthquake and tsunami occurring within a 30-year period from 2003. Some schools that conducted such a review were spared from the tsunami. Okawa Elementary School had a tsunami manual too, but it did not specify an evacuation point. The tsunami scenario was envisaged, but life-saving measures were not put into place. Manuals must be written not simply to satisfy the authorities, but so that decisions and action can be taken in an actual emergency.

What is truly frightening is not the tsunami itself, but losing sight of what is most important to us all. That was what happened in the school yard on the day of the tsunami and in the preparations made beforehand. It is a possibility that lies within each and every one of us, too. Thinking about what happened that day in the school yard is part of being true to the lives of the children, the teachers, and those in the future.

**English**

311chiisanainochi.org/?page\_id=3379



**Hill beside the school yard** This area was used in classes even by the lower grades of the school.

**Bat Forest** The entire school planted Japanese ash here.



**Hill behind the gymnasium** Shiitake mushroom cultivation experience classes were run here.