Copies of this rescript were distributed to every school in Japan and hung alongside the Emperor's portrait, where all made obeisance to them. In such awe were they held that on occasion teachers and principals risked their lives to rescue them from burning buildings. All moral and civic instruction after 1890 was based on the principles --largely Confucian-- set forth here. Issuance of the rescript at that time reflected a powerful reaction to the Westernizing tendencies of the early Meiji Period, yet there can be no doubt that this type of thinking was already strongly prevalent and only reinforced by the indoctrination of the new public schools. This rescript was the work of many hands, as were most of Emperor Meiji's pronouncements, but principally those of Inoue Kowashi, a Kumamoto Samurai known for his Chinese learning and later minister of education.

[This commentary is from a book titled Japanese Education, by a scholar named Kikuchi. It is found in Tsunoda and Debary, Sources of Japanese Tradition, p. 139.]

We have here two versions of the Rescript: one, in ornate vocabulary, that captures the style (and the incomprehensibility) of the original. The second is in more standard modern English, to make the content clearer.

Imperial Rescript on Education

Know ye, Our subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and
moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the law; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The way set forth here is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may all attain to the same virtue.

I, the Emperor, think that my ancestors and their religion founded my nation a very long time ago. With its development a profound and steady morality was established. The fact that my subjects show their loyalty to me and show filial love to their parents in their millions of hearts all in unison, thus accumulating virtue generation after generation is indeed the pride of my nation, and is a profound idea and the basis of our education.

You, my subjects form full personalities by showing filial love to your parents, by making good terms with your brothers and sisters, by being intimate with your friends, by making couples who love each other, by trusting your friends, by reflecting upon yourselves, by conveying a spirit of philanthropy to other people and by studying to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

Thus, please obey always the constitution and other laws of my nation in your profession in order to spread the common good in my nation. If an emergency may happen, please do your best for Our nation in order to support the eternal fate and future of my nation. In this way, you are my good and faithful subjects, and you come to appreciate good social customs inherited from your ancestors. The way of doing this is a good lesson inherited from my ancestors and religion which you subjects should observe well together with your offspring.

These ideas hold true for both the present and the past, and may be propagated in this nation as well as in the other countries. I would like to understand all of this with you, Our subjects, and hope sincerely that all the mentioned virtues will be carried out in harmony by all of you subjects.

October 30, 1890 (23rd year of the Meiji Era)