

# 2024/2025 J-LEAP REPORT



**By Hirona Yamada**

*North High School/Memorial High School  
Eau Claire, WI*

Hi, my name is Hirona Yamada, and I am a Year 13 J-LEAP assistant teacher currently placed in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Before joining J-LEAP, I spent seven years as a public junior high school English teacher in Japan, gaining a wide range of experiences. Over time, I developed a strong desire to deepen my understanding of effective teaching practices, school systems, and ways to create an engaging learning environment while maintaining a sustainable workload. This led me to seek new opportunities for professional growth, and I decided to expand my experience by teaching in a different educational and cultural setting. Through J-LEAP, I hope to gain valuable insights into diverse educational approaches and apply what I learned to enhance my future teaching, ultimately contributing to the broader field of education.

## **Life in Eau Claire**

Eau Claire is located in western Wisconsin, with a population of approximately 69,000, making it the eighth-largest city in the state. It is about a three-hour drive from Madison, the state capital, and roughly a four-hour drive from Milwaukee, the largest city in Wisconsin. The city has a charming small-town atmosphere, surrounded by farmland, forests, and creeks. Winters in



Eau Claire bring heavy snow and shorter daylight hours, which can feel a bit gloomy. Schools can be closed due to severe weather, such as snowstorms or temperatures below zero degrees Fahrenheit (around  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). However, when the town is blanketed in snow, the serene beauty of the landscape makes it all the more rewarding. During the coldest part of winter, I find it

enjoyable to visit the lakes when they're frozen, where I can watch people skiing, skating, and ice fishing. Now that spring has arrived, I enjoy walking along the creeks, taking in the natural surroundings, and spending peaceful, relaxing time outdoors.

### Working at North High School and Memorial High School



My lead teacher, Nagai-sensei, is an energetic and passionate educator. She came to Wisconsin through a program similar to J-LEAP, initially as a short-term assistant, and has been teaching Japanese ever since. The Eau Claire School District has two high schools offering Japanese programs, and she works at both North and Memorial High Schools. At North, she teaches three Japanese classes and an advisory session in the morning and then teaches three more Japanese classes in the afternoon at Memorial. We drive between the two schools during 4th

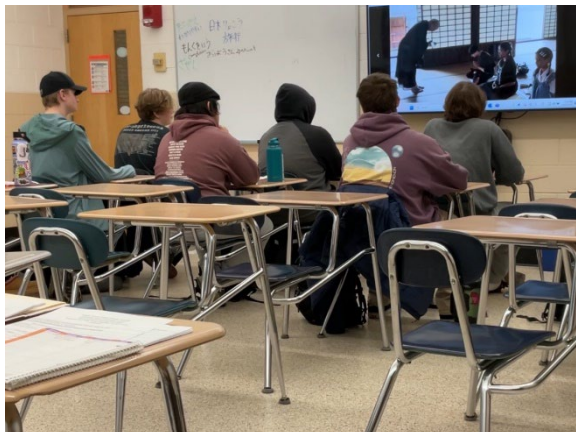
period, quickly grab lunch, and prepare for the next lesson, which is 5th period. Yes, it is indeed a busy schedule, but what surprised me is there are other teachers in the district who follow similar schedules, working at multiple schools.

Nagai-sensei's Japanese program is unique in several ways. One key aspect is that for many of her students, the ultimate goal is to participate in the Japan trip during their senior year. This is a 20-day immersive experience where students stay with host families, meet their Japanese pen pals, visit local schools, and explore Japanese culture firsthand. The trip itself is truly one-of-a-kind, designed by Nagai-sensei



through many years of building connections. She structures her lessons to ensure students are

well-prepared for this trip, helping them get the most out of this trip. In every lesson, she integrates various aspects of Japanese culture and makes the language practical and relevant. Her emphasis on routines, consistency, practice and setting clear goals is very effective in helping students build their language skills and cultural understanding. I was very impressed by the program's well-organized curriculum and her dedication to it.



Currently, I assist Nagai-sensei with the Japanese 3 and 4 combined class by leading some activities for the Japanese 4 students. Additionally, I visit elementary schools to promote Japanese culture. Elementary school students make for an enthusiastic audience, and they often overwhelm me with questions and excitement to learn about Japan. Recently, I took members of the Japanese National Honor Society on some of these

visits. The children were fascinated to see high school students speaking Japanese and writing kanji. One pleasant surprise during these visits was meeting a boy who was deeply into origami. He follows a YouTube origami creator and is genuinely passionate about this traditional Japanese art form. Seeing this kind of genuine curiosity makes me realize how fascinating Japanese culture is and brings me joy in sharing it with people from different backgrounds.

### **My Goals**

Through J-LEAP, my goal is to grow as a school teacher by gaining a broader perspective. From my first day of school in the U.S., I was struck by the many differences between high school education in Japan and the United States. I quickly realized that to fully understand the role of Japanese language education within American schools, I needed to look beyond just the Japanese program and consider the school system as a whole. Since Japanese class is just one part of a student's day, alongside other subjects, activities, friendships and more. I felt it was important to learn about the broader educational environment.

To deepen my understanding, I made a point of visiting schools beyond my placement. So far, I have observed classrooms in over twenty schools across six states and spoken with many educators about their experiences. These visits have given me valuable insights. I appreciate this opportunity to gain new perspectives that will help me grow as a teacher and contribute to my future teaching.