

2025/2026 J-LEAP REPORT



By Aki Kinjo

'Āina Haina Elementary School

Honolulu, HI

Aloha ! My name is Aki Kinjo, and I am working as an Assistant Teacher at 'Āina Haina Elementary School, Honolulu, Hawai 'i.

Before joining J-LEAP, I worked in a Japanese language school in Brazil through the JICA Volunteer program and in public school in Thailand through the Japan Foundation's Nihongo Partners program, which greatly influenced my interest in cross-cultural communication and language learning among children. Through these experiences, I became especially passionate about Japanese language education for young learners, and that passion led me to apply for J-LEAP.

At 'Āina Haina Elementary School, I work with my Lead Teacher, Akena Sensei, who has over 30 years of teaching experience in the United States. She is very energetic and always incorporates new ideas to help students enjoy learning Japanese. I learn a great deal from her every day in class. We teach approximately 330 students from kindergarten to 5th grade, focusing on speaking, listening, and cultural understanding. The school is an IB (International Baccalaureate) school, and the Japanese language program integrates IB concepts, encouraging students to broaden and deepen their perspectives. Although students have Japanese class only once a week, the lessons are rich in content, covering communication skills as well as cultural practices such as greetings and cleaning customs.

In addition to regular classes, I support the Japanese Reading/Writing After-



School Program taught by Yoko Sensei, where students focus more on reading and writing. I will also work with the “NIJI” class, an upcoming program for kindergarteners and first graders that I will lead next semester. For this class, I am currently designing lesson plans that incorporate movement, music, and play-based learning, which I am very excited about.



Also, I assist in the Advanced Japanese class with Ooi Sensei, where we focus on more conversational skills and deepening students’ understanding of Japanese culture. Outside of language instruction, I also participate in the Sew Fun Club, with Akena Sensei where students use sewing machines to create handmade items to be donated. This activity provides a wonderful opportunity for

students to connect creativity and community service.

Life in Hawai ‘i

I live with a wonderful host family of five, and a cute dog. They are very kind, and every day is filled with learning and laughter. The children are also studying Japanese, so we often exchange language questions. They ask me about Japanese, and I ask them about English. We are creating a fun and natural learning environment for all of us. I am also invited to join their family activities, such as going to the beach, hiking, watching American football games, and enjoying movie nights and Uno games together. I feel very grateful for these experiences.

On weekends, I enjoy snorkeling, stand-up paddleboarding (SUP), and hiking Koko Head, embracing Hawai ‘i’s beautiful nature. I have also participated in local Okinawan community events, such as the Okinawan Festival and Hilo Haari (Dragon Boat) Race, where I volunteered and met people from my hometown, Nago City. These experiences have helped me feel a strong connection between Hawai ‘i and Okinawa.

Looking Ahead

It has been three months since I arrived in Hawai ‘i, and I am deeply grateful to everyone who has supported me and made each day meaningful. Looking ahead, I hope to continue challenging myself by using my strengths and experiences to support my students, my host school, and the local community in new ways.

I also hope to take an active role in Japanese classes, helping teachers with lesson planning and creating teaching materials. By observing and learning from different teachers' approaches and ways of interacting with students, I want to continue growing as an educator. I also want to always be approachable, so that students feel comfortable speaking and using real Japanese as much as possible.

Mahalo !