

2025/2026 J-LEAP REPORT

By Aina Kondo

Chalmette High School

Chalmette, LA



Hello. My name is Aina Kondo. After six years in finance, I took the leap to follow my dream—teaching Japanese through the J-LEAP program. I moved to Louisiana in mid-July and it has been five months since I started teaching Japanese with

my Lead Teacher, Sanchez-sensei at Chalmette High School.

Louisiana

Many Japanese people may not know much about Louisiana—but the name “New Orleans” might sound familiar. New Orleans is renowned for its unique culture, influenced by French, Spanish, and African-American traditions. Tourists enjoy Creole and Cajun foods such as gumbo, jambalaya, and beignets—the list goes on. The French Quarter is a must-visit place, with its historic architecture said to have inspired Disneyland!



New Orleans is also famous as the birthplace of jazz. During a recent conference, I enjoyed a live jazz performance at “Preservation Hall” with other Assistant Teachers. It was absolutely phenomenal. Music seems to follow you wherever you go in this city.

What has impressed me most is the friendliness of people—perhaps one of the characteristics of the Deep South. If you make eye contact with someone on the street, it is common to ask, “How’s it going?” People here love to talk, so if you have things to do, it’s okay to politely excuse yourself!

About a 20-minute drive from the French Quarter is where Chalmette High School is located.

It is part of St. Bernard Parish, which borders the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi river, and New Orleans. If you “go down” the Mississippi river (as the locals say), you can see fishing villages and some alligators in the water. Many locals, including my host father, enjoy fishing and hunting as hobbies. The catch that my host father brings home and cooks is delicious.

Chalmette High School

Chalmette High School was established in 1929. Today, it has approximately 2100 students from 9th through 12th grades. The student demographics are 45% White, 33% Black, 18% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 1% Other. Unlike other high schools, Chalmette High has a block schedule, where students are allowed to take only 4 classes of 90 minutes each per semester.

Chalmette High offers a variety of classes—from academic subjects to vocational subjects like culinary, ROTC and film making. Sports, band, and theater are also thriving. There are football games almost every week during the autumn season, accompanied by the enthusiastic band, cheer squad, Charmers (dance team), Majorettes and drill team. The students' theater shows are outstanding too—the actors, musicians and dancers are incredibly talented. I truly enjoyed the Fall Play and the Christmas Show!

Japanese Class and Cultural Arts Club



Foreign language is a requirement for students pursuing an academic path. They may choose Spanish, Latin, and/or Japanese. Chalmette High is currently the only high school in the state to offer Japanese, thanks to the efforts of Sanchez-sensei. This year, 30 students are enrolled in the Japanese program. 25 students take Japanese I (most of them will continue to Japanese II next semester), and 5 students take Japanese III. Japanese III is offered for the first time this year, and I am honored to be teaching Japanese III as my primary class.

With very few Japanese residents in the area, students have limited opportunities to encounter Japan firsthand. I see my role as not only supporting students in learning Japanese, but also introducing various aspects of Japan—from traditional culture to current trends. Recently, students taking Japanese classes enjoyed a hands-on cultural experience by making onigiri (rice balls) and tasting miso soup!

Chalmette High also has a Japanese Cultural Arts Club for students interested in Japanese culture. The students talk about trending music, watch anime together, and go on field trips like the Japan Festival. Based on topics selected by the club officers, I share my photos and knowledge during club meetings. Most recently, I led an origami workshop, and many students made dogs and cats successfully—cranes are planned for next year!

Daily Life

Since arriving, I have explored St. Bernard Parish as well as other parts of Louisiana and neighboring states like Mississippi and Alabama (I was lucky enough to meet Taguchi Eri-san, the JOI Coordinator in Birmingham!). It is fascinating to see the geographic and cultural differences between regions. I am looking forward to visiting many places during my stay here and learning more about this country.

Locally, I have joined the Japan Society of New Orleans and made some great friends. I also attended several events related to Japan, such as the Japan Festival of New Orleans, the Japan Quiz Bowl held at Tulane University, and a sports festival of the Japanese Weekend School of New Orleans. It is impressive how Japanese traditions, food, and arts are appreciated in this area with limited access to resources. Quite a few locals are genuinely interested in Japan, and I love sharing my knowledge about the Japanese language and culture with them.



While I enjoy travelling and meeting new people, I also treasure my time with the host family. My host family loves cooking, baking, and gardening. I enjoy helping them and watching plants grow in the garden.

Through the J-LEAP program, I hope not only to grow as a Japanese language teacher, but also to promote Japanese language and culture in Louisiana. By doing so, I aim to share the beauty of Japan and the joy of learning another culture. I also look forward to experiencing Louisiana traditions myself—I can't wait for “Mardi Gras”, the biggest festival in New Orleans which takes place in February!