

2025/2026 J-LEAP REPORT



By Haruka Nishida

Shaler Area High School

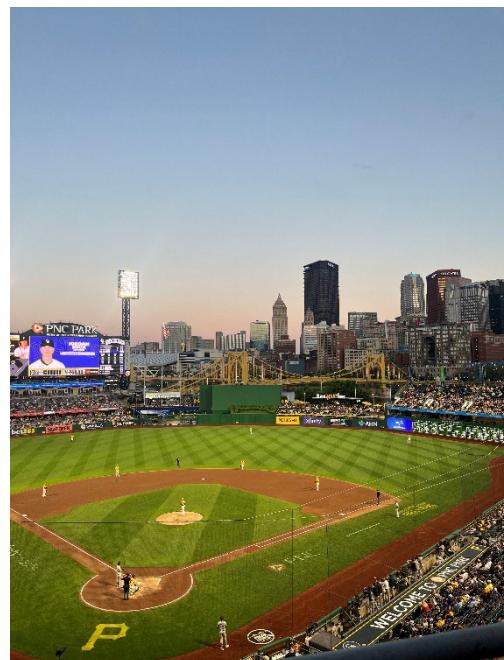
Glenshaw, PA

Hi! My name is Haruka Nishida. I work as a Japanese language assistant teacher at Shaler Area School District in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. I work at the middle school 2 days a week, and at the high school in the same district 3 days a week.

This is my first experience working as a language teacher and surprisingly I am working in the U.S as a J-LEAPER!! Before I became a Japanese language teacher, I never expected that I would work abroad, especially in the United States. After I graduated from university I started working in a construction-material manufacturing company as a saleswoman. I was a typical Japanese salary woman. After working there for 2 years, I started to feel that I want to try something new. I wanted to become a teacher when I was a child and I also liked communicating with people from different countries and learning different cultures. I decided to make a big change and become a language teacher, and so I enrolled in a Japanese language teacher training course, and then applied for J-LEAP. It has been 5 months since I moved here and am enjoying my new life so far. I would like to share about my life in the US!

About Pittsburgh

When I first heard during J-LEAP training in Japan that my assignment location would be Pittsburgh, I had no ideas about this place. "Pittsburgh? Where is that? Pennsylvania state? I did not even know the name of the state! Well, it should be fine!" So, I started my new life here with zero knowledge! I am getting to know this place now, so I want to introduce Pittsburgh a bit. Pittsburgh is famous for its unique geography, with many hills, there are three rivers having over 400 bridges. In winter we have heavy snow, but I



like it because my hometown, Osaka, does not have much snow. We have a passionate sports culture as well, like Steelers(football), Penguins (ice hockey), and Pirates (baseball). Pittsburgh also has a strong industrial history of steel, though today Pittsburgh is transforming into a tech city. I did not know that Duolingo, for example, was founded here before I moved to this city.

About Shaler Area School District



Shaler Area School District is in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, about 25 minutes from downtown. Most students here only speak English though we have many passionate students.

At Shale Area Middle school, there is a language exploring class and Japanese level 1. I go to middle school every Wednesday and Thursday to assist in a language exploring class for 7th grade students and Japanese Level 1 for 8th grade. In the language exploring class, we mainly introduce Japanese culture and simple conversation sentences. We made お正月ポスター (New Year's Poster) and 絵馬 (Ema – wish tablet) recently. 7th grade students experience all

the languages that this district offers (Spanish, French, Latin and Japanese), and then decide which language they want to study in the next academic year.

At the high school, we have 5 levels of Japanese classes with about 60 students in total. My lead teacher Balsomico-sensei has joined the J-LEAP program 4 times, so I am the 4th assistant teacher! Mr. Balsomico is an experienced and passionate teacher, and he knows how to engage students. His lesson plans work very well for team teaching. He is also great at involving me in the lesson, so I can join the class naturally. Arigatou Sensei!!

We also have a Japanese language club. We gather after school to play Japanese games, cook Japanese food, and watch Japanese movies together. One of my best memories with them is Homecoming. Shaler School District has a Homecoming event once a year. We ran a Japanese food YATAI booth this year. We made Takoyaki, Sushi, and Onigiri and we sold everything

within a few hours. Homecoming is a traditional event in this district, and it gives local people a chance to try Japanese food. Next year, I would like to organize a Japanese cultural workshop that people of all ages can join, and I hope to introduce even more aspects of Japanese culture to this community.

Daily Life

I currently live with my host family, and I am planning to move to an apartment at the end of December. I really appreciate my host family. Living in the US as a foreigner is not easy for me. When I came here, I had to do many things to settle down, such as getting a Social Security Number, driver license, buying a car, and apartment hunting. I could not have done those things without my host family and Mr. Balsomico's help. They always care about me and treat me as part of their family. I feel like I am not alone in this country, and I have support. One of my best memories with my host family is Thanksgiving. I spent time with my host family. It was my first Thanksgiving in my life. We had traditional American dinner together and played some games. Before I came here, I did not expect that I would have such special days with my host family. I really appreciate them, and I would like to continue this relationship in the future as well.



My Goal as a J-LEAPER

In this district, the number of students who take language classes in general is decreasing year by year. One of my main goals is to increase the number of students who want to study Japanese. To achieve this, I go to the Middle school and promote the Shaler Japanese Language Program so that they will take Japanese in high school. Currently, we are working on creating the promotional video with high school students from JNHS.

Shaler district is in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, so people do not have many opportunities for cultural exchange. I believe it is very important to understand and respect different cultures. For many students, Japan is just a distant country which they have only seen through social media, games, and anime. However, through Japanese class, I hope they could see Japan as something real, warm, and connected to their own lives. I also want to connect with this community and create opportunities where not only students, but also local people can experience different cultures!