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### 2016 J-LEAP REPORT BY AKIKO INAGAKI

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“Ohayo Gozaimasu, Pollard sensei, Inagaki sensei!” “Ohayo, --- san”. It’s 7:30 in the morning. One by one, students begin to emerge in the classroom - some of them with sleepy faces, others with lots of energy. At 7:50am, with the bell ringing, the first period

Japanese class begins in Lakeview Middle School. “Hai Minasan, Note wo akete kudasai! (Everyone, please open the notebook!),” says Ms. Pollard, my lead teacher (LT), with a resonant voice that magically gears the atmosphere of the classroom towards studying mood. Here comes another day of a long long journey to becoming a Japanese master . . .

Hi, my name is Akiko Inagaki and I teach Japanese with Ms. Tracy Pollard at Lakeview High School and Middle School located in Battle Creek, Michigan. Michigan is located in the Midwest part of the United States, and Canada borders it on the North. It is also facing the Great Lakes and blessed with great nature. Now is a good time to enjoy the beautiful scenery when the trees change color from green to yellow and red. Speaking of nature, I often meet wild animals such as squirrels, rabbits and deer in my neighborhood, which adds a lively touch to the picturesque autumn landscape.

When I first heard that I was going to go teach in the state of Michigan, I did not even know where Michigan was in the U.S., and it came as a bit of a surprise to me that there was a school that teaches Japanese in the area. However, Michigan has the fifth largest number of Japanese learners in the United States, especially Battle Creek, which has some major Japanese companies and about 400 Japanese residents. (Battle Creek’s overall population is

approximately 53,000, so that means about 7.5% of the Battle Creek population are Japanese.) There is a Japanese commerce and industry association formed by representatives of local Japanese companies. Every Saturday, Japanese school is open to the children of those Japanese families. Also, Battle Creek has a sister city relationship with Takasaki City in Gunma prefecture and there is active interaction going on between these two cities. Some of my students in Japanese class told me that they became interested in Japan and the Japanese language because they have friends from Japan, which shows that Battle Creek is one of the U.S cities that has strong connection with Japan. (I have recently heard that some local hotels even offer miso soup and onigiri (rice balls) as a breakfast option to their customers.)

In Lakeview Middle School and High School, students can learn three foreign languages, which are Spanish, French, and Japanese. I think it is very unique to Lakeview School District that they offer Japanese instead of other major foreign languages, such as Chinese and German. Japanese is offered from 8th (the final) grade in the middle school and students can join in the class of “Japanese 1”, which is the exact same class as the one in high school, so the students who pass the class are given high school credit and can move on to Japanese 2 directly right after they enter high school. Currently, 26 students in the 8th grade are studying Japanese.



In high school, a total of 5 Japanese classes are offered (Japanese 1~ 5) and about 45 students are studying Japanese this semester. Due to the small numbers of students, currently Japanese 3, 4 and 5 are conducted in the same classroom at the same time. What makes this class unique is that it has 3 exchange students from Japan. At first, we were not sure about a good way of how to integrate those students with the Japanese class, but these days we ask them to share some of the surprises they had when they first came to American high school and also introduce the difference between Japanese high school rules and American high school rules through power point. The American students seem to be surprised by learning some of the major differences and hearing this information from Japanese high school students first hand is very new and fresh to them. They say it is very difficult and challenging to catch what the Japanese students are saying, but I believe listening to real Japanese high schoolers speak at natural Japanese speed is a really good practice for them. Japanese students can also make friends with American students who are interested in Japan and Japanese language. I feel that this class serves as a place for stimulating cultural exchange by having both of them actively interact with each other.

One of the interesting programs that the high school Japanese class participates in is called “Global Classmates.” This program pairs up one American high school with one Japanese high school, and the students from both schools communicate with each other both in English and Japanese on the provided internet forum by sharing thoughts and opinions about the given topics such as their favorite TV shows/movies or music they like. The students are thrilled

see the comments on their posts and are eager to know how to express their thoughts in Japanese. We are just preparing to pack some souvenirs to send to the partnered school and students keep bringing *omiyage* such as their favorite snacks and books they want the Japanese students to read. They seem to enjoy communicating with students from the partnered school a lot, which I feel, serves as another incentive for them to keep learning Japanese.

It has been almost two and a half months since I started teaching in Lakeview Middle/High School. Some of my work as an assistant teacher includes teaching in the classroom, grading, preparing teaching materials, modelling the dialogue, etc. As a new teacher, I am learning a lot everyday by observing the way Pollard sensei teaches and shows discipline in the class. I also learn a lot by interacting with my students. Some of the difficulties I have learned about teaching in a U.S high school is that there are students with very different academic levels and backgrounds/cultures learning together in the same classroom. I was surprised to see how closely and sensitively Pollard sensei pays attention to each and every single one of the students and she always tries to find the best way that works with each students. Another thing I have learned from her is how flexibly we can teach Japanese without sticking to the textbook all the time. Depending on how the students are doing, she changes and adjusts what she teaches for the day introducing fun activity or showing interesting videos. This was a wonderful surprise to me as someone who was only familiar with teaching while following the textbook. We are also having fun teaching the students, which I learned could generate fun and positive atmosphere for the students.

In the classroom, I try to speak only in Japanese as much as I can, and I found it very challenging to communicate with my students as a new teacher just by using Japanese. One of my goals is to establish a good relationship with my students and become a trusted teacher for them. In order to do so, as a first step, I try to greet each student with a smile when they first come in to the classroom. I want to keep trying to talk to each one of my students as much as I can so that I can understand them better and so that they feel like they can open up to me. Pollard sensei helps me a lot when I have difficulty making myself understood by them. I really appreciate all the support that I can receive from Pollard sensei, my other colleges, both schools I work at, and also the J-LEAP program staff members. I feel that I am very fortunate to be able to join this program and I would like to become a better Japanese teacher learning a lot of things during my 2 years here. My long journey has also just begun.

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