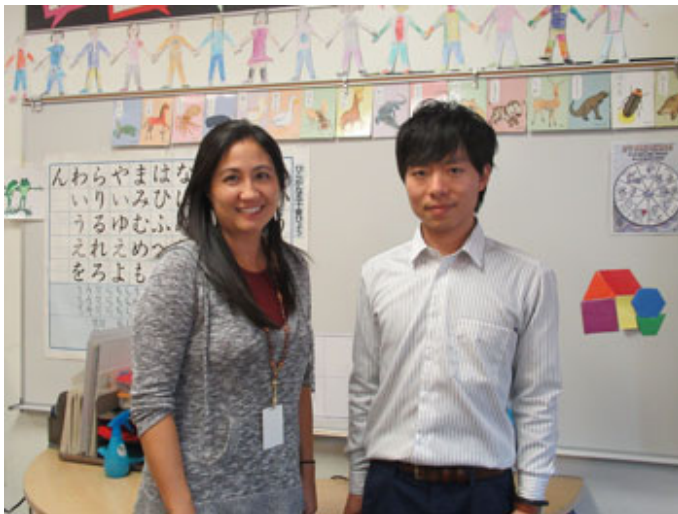


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2017 J-LEAP REPORT BY MITSUHIRO KONO

*Sand Lake Elementary School
Anchorage, AK*

Hi I am Mitsuhiro Kono and I work as a Japanese assistant teacher at Sand Lake Elementary, which is located in Anchorage, Alaska.

Life in Alaska

Alaska is the biggest state in the U.S., however not so many people live here. The population of Alaska is estimated to be about 750,000 and this is less than that of my hometown, Fukui prefecture (about 800,000). Alaska is the third least populous state in the U.S. and approximately half of Alaska's residents live in Anchorage.

The first time I heard that my work place would be Anchorage, I had no idea. Even I had never thought about living in Alaska in my life so I imagined myself living on glaciers, which I ended up finding out was totally wrong. Actually, Anchorage is rich in nature and such a nice place to live. Soon after I came here, I noticed people here live with ethnic and cultural diversity. When we walk around downtown, we see variety of people who have different cultural background walking around and living in harmony. So, for outsiders like me, living in the city is so comfortable.

Our school: Sand Lake Elementary

Sand Lake Elementary is located south west of Anchorage. As you can see from the name, the school faces a small lake named Sand Lake. Sand Lake Elementary is the only elementary school that offers Japanese immersion program in Alaska. And the school has about 330 student participants in the program through kindergarten to sixth grades. The immersion program continues at Mears Middle School and Dimond High School. Our school has “Tomo No Kai”, a group that supports Japanese immersion education and they help us with annual events.

In our Immersion program, we have two teachers for each grade, which are English and Japanese teachers. We divide students into two classes and we teach separately. Students switch classes during certain times, and in each class they are allowed to use only the language that the teacher speaks. I teach first-graders with my Lead Teacher, Christy-sensei. She is a cheerful and energetic teacher and she always gives me motivation. Whenever I see her at school, and I am tired or depressed, I am encouraged by her to work. She is a very experienced teacher as well, so I have learned a lot from her although I have been here just for two months. Thanks to her help, every day I feel my teaching skills are getting better and better and I come to have more confidence in myself.

Because we are class room teachers, we teach not only Japanese but also other subjects, such as science and social studies. It's challenging to teach such subjects using only Japanese to students who have a limited Japanese vocabulary, but we devise a way of teaching so that students can learn that is also fun. Indeed, most students try to listen to us very carefully in order to understand directions and explanations we give. And I am so impressed with their ability to absorb knowledge very fast. Although it has been only a month since I started teaching the students here, I feel the connection with them, which I really enjoy about being a classroom teacher.



The school has several activities and one of the activities is Taiko Drumming Club. Upper third grade students can join the club and they practice performing after school once a week. The club has some classes for beginners to intermediates, kids to adults. And the adult class is open to the community, which I also join. They sometimes perform in events and the performance is so powerful. Other than Taiko club, in September we have running club after school. We organize the event so that students can keep fit and they run around the school. I joined the activity and enjoyed interacting with older students who I usually don't have a chance to talk to at school.

Outside of school

Currently I live with a host family. They have two children and they go to Sand Lake Elementary and join the immersion program as well. So I sometimes help them with their Japanese homework and play Japanese games such as Karuta with them. Our house faces a canal which connects to small lake so we enjoy lake activity a lot in the summer season. The family often takes me out and we do many things together. In August, we went fishing at a port town, Valdez. We caught plenty of silver salmon and we made smoked salmon and soaked salmon egg. In September, we went to Denali National Park which I had been looking forward to visiting. After all, I enjoy Alaskan life and I am happy to be here from my heart.

My life in Anchorage has just begun. And I am sure I can spend meaningful time here for the next two years. I will try to take in every experience that I can get!

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