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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE



2013 INVITATIONAL GROUP TOUR PROGRAM FOR US EDUCATORS REPORT BY STEVEN JOHNSON

*Douglas County School District
Denver, CO*

Prior to this summer, all I knew about Japan was learnt from books and movies and a few college courses I had taken on the history of Japan. All this has changed as I was able to visit Japan this past July. It was my first opportunity to travel to Asia, and I feel fortunate that I was one of the fourteen American educators selected to travel to Japan with a group of superintendents, school principals, curriculum and World language directors through the generous support of the Japan Foundation. It was an eye opening adventure.

The itinerary included stops in Tokyo, Sendai, and Kyoto, and along the way we were privileged to visit several schools and tour various shrines, temples, and other cultural sites. We also visited a few of the many areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. We roamed the cities riding trains and the packed subways and covered great distances quickly on the speedy *Shinkansen*. Our group visited the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo as well as Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Each day was full of activity, and we packed in as much of Japan and Japanese culture as we could during our short stay. There are a few memories that stand out.

Several of these stem from our visits to schools and the chance to meet Japanese students, teachers, and administrators. As a former high school teacher and administrator, the chance to visit two high schools—one private and one public—was a great honor. All the students were diligent workers and focused on their studies in subjects any American high school student would recognize including biology, technology, Music, and Mathematics. At one high school, each and every student was required to engage in an after-school activity of their choosing. Some were playing soccer and others baseball or volleyball. A small group of girls were playing the *shamisen* as they sat on the floor. Yet another group was wearing padded black uniforms, helmets with cage-like facemasks, and they were hitting each other. It wasn't football, but *kendo*, a Japanese martial art, and they were striking one another with long sword-like sticks yelling loudly as they attacked and counter-attacked.

The elementary school we visited in one of the areas affected by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami north of Sendai. The visit there was emotional and deeply moving. We were surprised to see temporary housing on the school's grounds for local families impacted by the earthquake even though it has been more than two years since the event. It was clear that the school's principal and his teachers cherished the students in their care, and that they were dedicated to their intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. These students seemed particularly focused on their studies, with the sixth graders studying English language and the second graders learning the strokes for a single Japanese character, a character requiring 12 or 13 separate strokes of the long brushes they held in their little hands. Students and school staff were welcoming and engaged with us as we shared lunch with them. Most impressive was the special assembly where the students performed for us. The assembly started with two sixth-grade students delivering a powerful speech (one speaking in Japanese, the other in English) about their determination to rise above the challenges presented by the earthquake and devastating tsunami. They then performed a traditional Japanese dance, one depicting fishermen with their nets and their life at sea, and full of energy, shouts, and passion. None of us doubt that these students will overcome!

On a lighter note, five among our group decided to attend a baseball game on the night of July 4th. We had been told this was something we needed to experience. Besides, it was July 4th, and we thought this would be a great way to see part of Japanese culture and to celebrate America's Declaration of Independence at the same time. As we searched for the correct train that would take us to the stadium, a young woman working behind the counter at a shop was encouraged by her boss to help us find our way. This was so typical. Whenever we asked for help, we always found the local Japanese people willing to assist. When we finally made it to the boarding area, fans wearing maroon and gold shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with "Rakuten Eagles" told us we had found the right train.

The game itself was a fascinating mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The game of baseball and the presence of a former major league slugger named Andruw Jones were familiar. Unfamiliar were the baseball cheerleaders, girls selling beer served from small kegs they carried on their backs, and fans who cheered and chanted to the beat of a drum and waving large flags (though only when their own team was up to bat). The Eagles won the game, but the highlight for us was the seventh inning stretch. As the fans joined the announcer in singing a rousing song, they were also blowing up long balloons that were several feet long. The fans were joyous and we wondered what was going on. Suddenly, as the singing was coming to an end, the entire stadium let go of their balloons which then shot into the air, thousands of them, whistling as they were launched, just like fireworks. We were suddenly celebrating the Fourth of July with all the fans, even if they didn't realize it themselves.

Since returning from Japan, I have a heightened interest in the issues facing Asia and Japan in particular. These include Japan's conflict with China over the disputed islands as well as Prime Minister Abe's desire to reexamine Article 9 of Japan's constitution. And there are still questions about the education system. For example, while there is a significant emphasis on test scores for Japanese students, to what extent are Japanese schools shifting to a greater emphasis on 21st Century skills like collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking? These important skills are difficult to demonstrate on a standardized test.

It was clear in our group's conversations with both Japanese and American officials that both want to see and increase in the number of students who are studying abroad, numbers that have declined in recent years. Interestingly, I have only recently found out that a group of Japanese high school students from Hokkaido will be visiting a high school in my district at the end of October, so I will not have to wait long to continue my study of Japan. Their visit will be a great encouragement to the Japanese language students at our school and I hope to have the opportunity to follow up on some of my questions with

visitors. We will welcome them with open arms and I look forward to sharing with them my recent experience of their schools, culture, and Japanese “fireworks.” I hope their visit to the U.S. will be as memorable for them as my trip to Japan is for me.

Breeze #74



Breeze #73



Breeze #72



2013 Group Tour Report: Steven Johnson

2013 J-LEAP Report: Amiko Nishijima

2013 J-LEAP Report: Hiroko Maekawa

2013 JET-MIP Essay: Ariana Foster

2013 JET-MIP Essay: Lian Eytinge

2013 JET-MIP Essay: Rebecca Cook

2013 JET-MIP Essay: Shannon Foremaster

Breeze #71



Breeze #70

Breeze #69



Breeze #68



Breeze #67



Breeze #66



Breeze #65



Breeze #64

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5700 Wilshire blvd, Suite 100
Los Angeles, CA 90036
P. 323.761.7510

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