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2013 J-LEAP REPORT BY TOMOKO MINATO

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“Every child in the state of Maine deserves equal access to educational opportunities” – This is a statement made by the Department of Education (DOE) in the State of Maine, where I was sent just 2 months ago. When I first read the notification by the Japan Foundation regarding the city and school I was assigned to, my first thought was, “Where is Maine, anyway?” and my second thought was “What is RSU#2, anyway?”

So, here I would like to share with you what I have learned about Maine’s educational system, as well as Japanese classes at my school, through my two-month experience in this beautiful and huge state of Maine.

Maine is located in the northernmost part of New England and is the easternmost state in the United States. It is known for its beautiful scenery (it is breathtaking, indeed!) - its jagged coastline, its rolling mountains, its heavily forested interior, and picturesque waterways—as well as its seafood cuisine, especially lobsters and clams. At first I was surprised that people in Maine are so nice and kind, helping each other, and it is very safe and secure. No wonder, with respect to crime rates, Maine is often considered the safest state in the U.S.

Public school systems in Maine are divided into several types of administrative units. Some school districts were required to combine into Regional School Units (RSU’s). So RSU#2 is one of them and is made up of schools in the towns of Dresden, Farmingdale, Hallowell, Monmouth and Richmond. According to the statement by the DOE, RSU#2 has been challenging itself to provide their students with great educational opportunities equally throughout the RSU#2 (They also hold the distinction of being “The best learning community in Maine”). Originally each town’s school had many remarkable and outstanding features such as extracurricular activities, college course offerings, business partnerships, great music programs, overseas trips and other activities. RSU#2 has been working to provide its students with these activities equally and the foreign language program from K-12 is one of these important elements.

Up until this year RSU#2 offered three foreign language courses (Spanish, French, and Japanese) from K-12, but only in two towns. This year they have worked to expand the K-12 foreign language program to all towns in the RSU#2. This area of Maine does not have any big cities, rather it is a rural and remote place, but kids are able to study foreign languages. It is a truly wonderful thing and rare, even in Japan, because I've never heard of a kindergarten or elementary school that offers a foreign language program, especially in the public school system. I was so impressed by this.

In this district we have two Japanese teachers who are my great mentors, Mr. Naoto Kobayashi and Mrs. Sachiko Clough. However there are eleven schools in this widespread district, so apparently it is not very easy to cover and provide the same education to all the schools with very few teachers and this is one of the biggest challenges for all foreign language teaches. During this school year, there are a total of 45 Japanese classes.

My role is to assist the Japanese teachers in their classes, and my first mission was to figure out my schedule and memorize all the students' names. At first, it sounded like mission impossible. So far, I have mostly gone to high school Japanese classes for levels 1-5 in high school, and 6th 7th and 8th grade classes in Hall-Dale Middle School in Farmingdale with Kobayashi sensei. In elementary school, Sachiko sensei values not only introducing Japanese culture and cultural differences, but also choosing familiar topics for American kids and linking those topics with their real life experiences. In middle school and high school, they learn basic Japanese reading and writing, as well as greetings and easy conversations through many topics and tasks. Some classes have three different levels of students and sometimes it is difficult to develop activities for all of them.

Through the past two months I have fully realized how hard it is to manage a classroom. Before I came here, I prepared for the differences between Japan and American school systems, classroom environments and so on. However I found it was more than I could imagine. Everything was so new to me; I was puzzled as to what to do here at first. Since I decided to become a Japanese teacher, my own goal has been to have my students enjoy learning a foreign language, and to have them know the happiness of communicating with foreign friends in a fun way. Now I feel like it takes an entire lifetime to develop my teaching style. However, students here have huge potential and a strong understanding of foreign culture from an early age. I think they can have more opportunities to connect with others from around the world, and it is possible for them to demonstrate their influence. I believe I will find some guidance in reaching my goals and be able to bring this knowledge back with me to Japan.

Lastly, I would like to thank the people involved with J-LEAP including the Japan Foundation and the Laurasian Institute for giving me such a great opportunity. I would also like to thank my supervisors, Kobayashi sensei, Sachiko sensei, all the teachers here, all the staff at RSU#2, my great host family Debby and Gordon, for giving me great advice and for supporting me every day, and the great students in RSU#2 for amazing me all the time. Arigatougozaimasu!

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