

## MARCH, 2014: BREEZE ISSUE #77

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



### 2013 J-LEAP REPORT BY TAKU OKAMOTO

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Redmond, WA*

It is said that time flies when you're having fun. My days here at Redmond High School (RHS) and Redmond Middle School (RMS) have passed very quickly. It has been nearly eight months since I stepped into the field of Japanese language education. I mentioned in my speech at the welcome banquet at the Japan Foundation Los Angeles during the J-LEAP orientation last August that it has been my dream for a long time to teach Japanese language and culture in the United States. Now I am actually living my dream every single day.

My name is Taku Okamoto and I am currently an assistant teacher at RHS and RMS in the Lake Washington School District in the state of Washington. Both schools are public schools and are located about 15 miles northeast of Seattle. I co-teach at both schools with Sam Kuyper sensei and our team teaching is really going well.

To my surprise, on the first day of class, I discovered that each student had their own laptop issued to them from the school district. Our district has implemented one-to-one computing for all secondary students, and a web-based learning management system for teachers and students called Haiku. By utilizing this system, students can go online, download handouts or materials and do their homework in a virtual environment. In fact, every single classroom in the school is equipped with a smart board, and students as well as teachers can go online immediately and easily access learning resources from external websites. Does anything "click" when you hear the word "Redmond?" With high-tech companies such as Microsoft based here, it is no wonder that high-tech learning environments emerge.

A typical day starts at 7:30 in RHS and ends at 2:20 in RMS. Kuyper sensei and I have a total of five classes, 54 minutes long every day, except for 40 minute classes on Wednesdays and 50 minute classes on Thursdays. First period is Japanese 1 and there are 21 newcomers to the world of Japanese language at RHS. Second period has 15 "survivors" who are striving in Japanese 3 to overcome the big wall of Japanese language learning. Third period has 16 advanced learners (11 in Japanese 4 and 5 in AP Japanese) who are voyaging across the ocean of Japanese. Fourth period has 32 youngsters in Jap

2 who are flapping their wings hard to fly higher. After lunch time, Kuyper sensei and I go to RMS for another Japanese 1 class for sixth period. That class has 29 vigorous 8th graders, who we end the day with.

We have some routine class activities every week. On Monday, we do Radio Taiso (radio calisthenics) to the music on NHK to warm up, build morale and create a sense of group unity (known as 和/wa in Japanese), just like schools and some companies in Japan. On Wednesday, we have kanji day during the 40 minute classes. Students take a short Kanji quiz for what they learned during the previous week. After the quiz, students learn new Kanji for the next week. Friday is “Fun Friday,” which means we watch movies. Class starts with a review of the week’s lessons, and after that, the classroom turns into a Japanese movie theatre. During the movie, students have to complete a worksheet answering questions about the movie they are watching.

Outside of class, I assist in running the Japanese club meetings that are held every other Thursday. We watch Japanese films such as Ghibli animation films and play Japanese cultural games. Every fall, the Redmond High School Association Student Body puts on a “roundup event” to help clubs fundraise. At the end of homecoming week, each club sells some kind of food item as a fundraising project. This year I helped by making “yakisoba-pan (yakisoba sandwich)” for the Japanese club to sell and it was a big hit! Of course learning doesn’t stop in the classroom. In order to continue to improve my teaching abilities, I became a member of the local teacher’s associations and have attended conferences. One of the associations that I have joined is the Washington Association of Teachers of Japanese (WATJ). This is one of the largest groups for Japanese language teachers in the United States and they are committed to promoting and improving the teaching of Japanese language and culture, as well as, providing teachers with a variety of opportunities for professional growth. WATJ also puts on Japanese language immersions camps for both middle and high school students and since I teach at both the middle and high school levels, I will participate and help organize both camps this year. In fact, the high school immersion camp will be held at Redmond High School.

Since coming here I’ve realized how quickly time passes. We still have many goals that we want to accomplish in the coming year, but I’m proud of the work that I have accomplished with my lead teacher. I have been given the opportunity to experience life as a teacher in an American school and I am looking forward to the challenges that the next school year will bring.

Now back to work.....

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