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2014 J-LEAP REPORT BY HIROMI NAGAI

*Thomas Jefferson High School
Cedar Rapids, IA*

Hello. My name is Hiromi Nagai. I have been working as a Japanese assistant teacher in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which is the second largest city in the state located in the Midwestern part of the country, sometimes referred to as “America’s Heartland.”

The Cedar Rapids community school district has three high schools with Japanese programs and one without. Two of the programs at John F. Kennedy high school and George Washington high school have been in existence for over ten years and the program at Thomas Jefferson high school was established six years ago. I mainly assist in teaching at Jefferson high school with Ms. Rachel Henkelmann and I also visit Kennedy high school, taught by Mr. Dan Carolin, and Washington high school, taught by Ms. Julie Cain, to

help out for a week each every month. They have a great working relationship and established their own curriculum, which is four years starting in ninth grade, and culminates in a 4th year Advanced Placement class. All three teachers have their own teaching methods and I learn a lot from them every day. They are very cheerful and always make students have a lot of fun in class. I am very fortunate to have these opportunities to work with great teachers and to see different classes and teaching methods.

While co-teaching with Ms. Henkelmann at Jefferson high school, we hope to increase the students' ability to speak and use Japanese in class. Our biggest goal is to help make the student's feel comfortable speaking Japanese. Because of the location, opportunities to interact with Japanese native speakers are particularly rare in Cedar Rapids. We have implemented daily speaking time between the students and teachers and Ms. Henkelmann speaks Japanese as much as possible and I only speak it with students in class, even if they don't understand what I say. This is really one of the most challenging parts of my roles at the moment. It may also be very challenging for the students as well, but we believe that becoming familiar with Japanese is an essential part of their learning experience and as a result they are slowly improving their speaking and listening skills. Our other goal is to get more students to enroll in Japanese class. Ms. Henkelman and I are thinking of visiting middle schools in the district to give cultural presentations so they are aware of Japan and the Japanese language.

My main roles as an assistant teacher in class are to assist the teachers by walking around the classroom to help out the students, answering any questions they may have, bringing authentic Japanese to class, modeling Japanese speaking and creating class materials and activities. I try to introduce a variety of grammar, vocabulary, kanji and cultural topics to create mixed lessons. Luckily all of the teachers are very open-minded and always welcome new ideas. They let me try new activities in class such as listening and speaking practice, and kanji quiz competitions using electronic devices.

Five months have passed since I came here. As a Japanese native speaker, my challenge is to add more value to the classes and I'm still in the middle of finding out what I can do to be effective and how I can motivate my students to study Japanese by finding ways to improve team-teaching with Ms. Henkelmann, Mr. Carolin and Ms. Cain. Though I will do my best to make the most of this great opportunity.

Lastly I would like to thank all the people who provided me with this wonderful opportunity and have supported as I adjust to my new life in Cedar Rapids. I would not be able to handle this experience if it were not for the people around me, especially the Japanese teachers, Ms. Henkelmann, Mr. Carolin and Ms. Cain, and my lovely host family Laurie and Ellen. I truly appreciate the experiences that J-LEAP provides.

Thank you.

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

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