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



2015 J-LEAP REPORT BY KASUMI TAGO

Edina High School

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Hello, my name is Kasumi Tago. I am an assistant teacher of Japanese at both Edina and Southwest High Schools and I would like to introduce some things about Minnesota, the high schools I work at, some events I took part in, and my future goals in the teaching

department.

First of all, let me tell you about Minnesota. It is located in the Midwestern part of the United States and shares a border with Canada to the north. Recently, most of the leaves have fallen, and I can feel the winter coming. It has gotten cold and I have to wear my coat more often. Although I dislike the cold, I like the fact that Minnesota is said to have 10,000 lakes, including many beautiful scenic areas. In regards to both its natural beauty, and its people, Minnesota is a nice place to live. In Japan, we try to avoid eye contact in the streets, but here in Minnesota, people freely talk with each other, regardless of whether or not they know each other. Everyone is smiling and bursting with kindness, and I believe that is Minnesota.

Continuing on, I would like to introduce Edina and Southwest High Schools, which are very interesting places to work. I remember the first time I went to Southwest. The principal and assistant principals were all dressed up as characters from “Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory” and gave me a very warm welcome. At Edina High School, there are about 2000 students. Edina High School is very academically oriented and it also has a lot of extracurricular activities such as hockey, tennis, basketball, badminton, and many others

At Southwest High School, there are about 1700 students. Southwest works closely with the University of Minnesota and is the only school in Minnesota that offers a high level Japanese course as a part of the IB diploma program. The Japanese program at Southwest is the only program in the state to offer the opportunity for students to take the Advanced Placement (AP) test in addition to the IB test. The school also offers Japanese as a part of the University of Minnesota's College in the Schools (CIS) program. Students in CIS are able to study in their classrooms using the same curriculum as undergraduate students at the University. Students who successfully complete the year-long CIS course receive 5 undergraduate credits at the University of Minnesota in addition to 3 high school credits.

While the Japanese programs at both schools are great, teachers at both schools are also kind and sometimes greet each other in Japanese. At Southwest High School, teachers have different "daily uniforms," for example: Monday is "Plaid Day," so we teachers all wear plaid. With this "uniform," I feel more included in the group.

I normally help teach Japanese 1&2 combined and also Japanese 3 with Tomita-sensei at Edina High School and I also help teach Japanese 2&3 combined with French-sensei at Southwest. For Japanese 1, I make most of the materials, quizzes, and unit tests. This makes me think about what I can do to make it easier for students to learn every day. At American high schools, students take the same classes every day for the whole year, so students get exposure to Japanese every day, which helps them learn more quickly.



Next, I would like to tell you about my experiences teaching at two high schools. I am able to see two different environments, compare different teaching methods, and take part in events at both schools. I took part in many different events during the three months I have been teaching, such as visits from the Japanese consulate, high school students from Japan, and a cooking class. When the Consulate-General of Japan in Chicago came to Southwest High School, students in Japanese class performed the *soranbushi* dance and *taiko* drums, made presentations about their trips to Japan, and so on. In addition, the principal suggested that I demonstrate tea ceremony at the auditorium so I could show the teachers, staff, parents, and students what it looked like. That was a great opportunity for me to communicate with them. There were also Japanese university students and high school students visiting. I think it was a good way for Japanese and American students to communicate with each other. A while after the Japanese students visited us, we cooked *takoyaki* and *okonomiyaki* in class. We did things we normally would not do and cooperated with each other. It worked to strengthen our bonds and helped us to communicate more easily. Additionally, I participated in a field day at another middle school and joined a Japanese language camp called "*mori no ike*," hosted by Concordia Language Villages located in Northern Minnesota, as a staff member.

In the Edina Japanese class, I was pleasantly surprised by the motivation of every student. They asked me to make a Japanese club and to take time after school to teach Japanese for J-Quiz (an Upper Midwest High School Japanese Language Competition). In preparation for J-Quiz, students come in after school for help. They practice writing coherent sentences in Japanese, speaking Japanese, and learning *kanji*. We are also planning a trip to Japan next year. Because Japanese high school students visited our school, the students want to experience visiting a Japanese school. As the trip planning continues, the students grow more and more excited every day.

The reason I believe the Japanese program is special here is because there are no special classes for children who have attention deficit disorder, ADD. They are all mainstreamed into regular education classes, so teachers have to take measures to engage all students so everyone has a chance to participate in class. My students with ADD tell me things like, "I am comfortable going to Japanese class, because you give me the attention I need" and "Japanese is super fun." I try my hardest to ensure that every student feels comfortable. Although the current Japanese classes lack a substantial amount of students, next year I hope the Japanese programs will have increasing gains in popularity and student numbers.

I really appreciate that I was given the opportunity to teach Japanese in America. I have met a lot of people and have fun every day. I will continue to help with the many events at school, and I wish to help the Japanese exchange students who I rarely get to see. There are so many things that I can do, so I will take advantage of every chance I get.

Breeze #98



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Japanese Language Education Update 25

2015 J-LEAP Report: Kasumi Tago

2015 J-LEAP Report: Tamaki Yoshitome

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Angela Li

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Taylor-Anne Kim

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Bridget Keeney

Breeze #97

Breeze #96



Breeze #95



Breeze #94



Breeze #93



Breeze #92



Breeze #91



Breeze #90



Breeze #89



Breeze #88



Breeze #87



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