

2025/2026 J-LEAP REPORT



By Riho Wakabayashi

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Who am I?

Hajimemashite! My name is Riho Wakabayashi. I am a J-LEAP year 14 Japanese assistant teacher (AT) at Lockport Township High School in Illinois. This is my first time living in the U.S. and working as a Japanese teacher. I really enjoy teaching Japanese every day together with my lead teacher (LT), Karla Button sensei.

The one big reason I decided to apply for the J-LEAP program is my previous job. I planned and managed an English immersion camp for Japanese and American high school students living in Japan. Even though the participants were from different backgrounds and spoke different languages, they became close friends through the time they spent together. Because of this experience, I developed an interest in building friendships between Japan and the U.S. through language learning.

I am very grateful to be a part of the J-LEAP program, as it allows me to be involved in Japanese education while gaining insight into American society. During these two years, I want to learn as much as I can and grow as both a Japanese language teacher and a global citizen.

What is it like where I live and work?

I was sent to work in Illinois, located in the Midwest. While Illinois is famous for Chicago, the third largest city in the U.S., much of the state outside of the Chicagoland area is covered with cornfields. It's a unique and wonderful state, offering a variety of different experiences depending on the region.

The city of Lockport, where I work, is located about 40 minutes southwest of Chicago by car. It has many historic buildings, canals, and beautiful nature.

Lockport Township High School

Lockport Township High School (LTHS) is a very large public high school with about 4,000 students. The school has two campuses, East and Central. Every day, I drive between the two campuses to teach classes!



LTHS has a diverse student population. Many of the teachers at the school are graduates of LTHS. It is a welcoming environment where everyone can always come back. I will never forget the moment on my first day, during Teacher Institute Day, when the faculty and staff gave me a big round of applause as I was introduced as a new member of LTHS.



Japanese language program in LTHS

At LTHS, Japanese language education is offered as part of the world language program. My LT started the Japanese program about 20 years ago (and she is also a graduate of LTHS!). There are four levels of Japanese, Japanese 1, 2, 3, and AP. This year, about 120 students are enrolled in the program.

One of the big reasons why Japanese education is popular at LTHS is because of the many Japanese events and activities that Button Sensei has offered over the years, such as pen pal projects and Global Classmates, which even includes video calls with students from their partner school. Every two years, LTHS also holds an exchange program with Yamate Gakuin High School in Yokohama, Japan. Next April, Yamate students will come to the U.S., and then in July, LTHS students will go to Japan. The students who are going to Japan next summer are very excited!

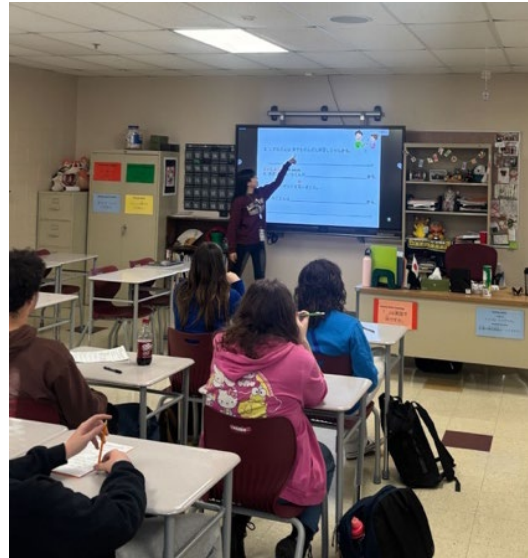
There is also a JNHS (Japanese National Honor Society) event every month. The first event held in September was a Japanese Undokai. During that time, we also made Homecoming posters in Japanese.

I am impressed every day by my LT's effort to give students many opportunities to learn not only Japanese language, but also real Japanese culture and to make meaningful connections.

Daily Japanese classes

Every day, we teach five classes. Button sensei is a veteran teacher with more than 20 years of experience in Japanese education. She is always full of energy and all Japanese students love her and her creative Japanese classes!

It has been three months since I started teaching Japanese as an AT, and I am inspired every day by the students' fast learning and strong curiosity. Seeing students enjoy the class makes me feel very happy and motivates me to keep teaching. When students react positively to our activities, I feel that being a Japanese teacher is fun.



My U.S. life

This is my first time living in the U.S., so every day is a new experience! Thanks to many people who introduce me to Illinois and American culture, every day is very enjoyable. I enjoy spending time with my host family too. We watch anime, play video games, and ride bicycles together. I feel very thankful that they welcomed me as a part of their family. My host father's delicious meals give me energy every day!



My future goals of J-LEAP

I strongly believe that one of the biggest reasons people keep learning languages is the connection formed between people. I hope each student can find their own reason or purpose for learning Japanese by connecting with someone. Even if it's a small thing, I want students to discover their favorite parts of Japan and enjoy learning Japanese.

As for my personal goal, I want to improve my Japanese teaching skills. Before the end of my J-LEAP term, I want to be able to teach classes confidently on my own and spark students' interest. I also want to learn more about American society

through my life here. I believe that learning about American values and culture will help me create the best lessons for American students.

Finally

I am thankful to everyone in the J-LEAP program, everyone at Lockport Township High School, and all the people who support me. I am extremely grateful for all the American people who are learning Japanese and interested in Japan, even though they live far from Japan. I will continue to embrace new challenges and do my best to support Japanese learners for the rest of my time here. I would be very happy if I could play even a small part in building friendship between Japan and the U.S.

Best self, best work. GO, PORTERS and J-LEAPERS!