2026/2027 J-LEAP Report



By Honoko Tanioka

Kauai High School

Lihue, HI

1. My Background and Journey to Kauai

Hello, everyone. My name is Honoka Tanioka. I currently work as a Japanese Language Teacher at Kauai High School in Hawaii, with an enthusiastic Lead Teacher, Maya Kai sensei.

Growing up in the natural countryside of Nara and spending my life there until graduating from university, I have traveled around the world since I was a baby, visiting 25 countries. These experiences sparked a general desire to "venture out into the wider world in the future." True to that desire, the first place I worked after graduating from university was Mongolia. I worked for three years as the only native Japanese teacher at a private combined elementary, middle, and high school in the capital. While learning a great deal in a harsh environment, driven by the chairman's words that "the foundation of nation-building starts with education," I helped send many students to Japan every year.

Looking back, "Hawaii" has always been a turning point in my life. I first came to Hawaii when I was 10 years old. Being thrilled that my English word "pizza" was understood sparked a strong interest in English and foreign languages. When I chose Hawaii as my study-abroad destination for half a year during my third year of university, I received a tremendous amount of kindness from many people. This made me feel strongly that "Someday, I want to come back here and find a way to give back to Hawaii."

It was around that time that I discovered J-LEAP and applied, thinking "This is it." Fortunately, I was blessed with a miraculous and lottery-winning kind of luck: being able to work as an AT in Hawaii, and specifically on Kauai, an island with only one Japanese teacher.

Today, I would like to share various aspects of my life as an AT on Kauai and what school is like.

2. About Kauai

When many people hear "Hawaii," what first comes to mind might be the scenery of Oahu (Honolulu), lined with high-rise buildings, shopping malls, and bustling Waikiki Beach. However, Kauai, the island where I currently live, is an entirely different world. Known as the "Garden", Kauai has few traffic lights and is filled with breathtaking, rich nature and beautiful scenery. Wrapped in a warm and gentle atmosphere throughout the island, its major charm is a comforting local environment where the warm, timeless pace of old Hawaii flows.

Looking at regional characteristics in numbers, out of a population of approximately 73,000 on Kauai, about 30% of the residents are of Asian descent, making it one of the regions with the highest proportion of Asian residents in the state of Hawaii (ranking second in the state). Looking back at history, around 1920 when the sugarcane plantation industry reached its peak, Japanese immigrants became the largest ethnic group, accounting for about 43% of the entire population of Hawaii. On Kauai as well, many Japanese immigrants crossed the ocean as sugarcane field workers and carved out a deep history through harsh environments.



Even today, after generations of migration and generational turnover, people of Japanese descent and those with Japanese roots account for about 21.5% of the total population of Hawaii (including mixed heritage) and are deeply rooted in the Kauai community. The island still strongly preserves a warm atmosphere and deep bonds with Japan, such as Bon Odori, taiko classes, temples modeled after the Shikoku 88 Sacred Sites that served as spiritual support for people back then, and Japanese festivals. This heritage can clearly be felt in daily life and educational settings.



3. Kauai High School and Our Lessons

Kauai High School is the oldest public high school and the first on the island of Kauai. The student body is exceptionally diverse: Asian students make up the largest proportion at approximately 28% (even more students have Asian roots when including mixed heritage), Hispanic/Latino students account for about 25%, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students make up about 19%, and White students account for about 19%. In addition, students of mixed heritage, African American, and Native American backgrounds are enrolled, and many children with familiar Japanese surnames can be found in the classes.

There are approximately 140 students enrolled in the Japanese classes, structured into a total of 6 classes: three classes of "Japanese 1" and three classes of "Japanese 2." Even the largest class has 27 students, creating a vibrant atmosphere, and many of them have Japanese roots.
I feel that teaching Japanese here on Kauai holds a unique and significant mission. Looking back at the

history of Kauai, Japanese immigrants played a massive role in the island's development from the pioneer era. While there are countless children with Japanese or other Japanese-related roots at the school, many of them have never been to Japan or know no Japanese at all. That is precisely why I strongly desire to deliver Japanese classes to help them deeply understand their own roots (though, of course, many students without Japanese roots who have connections to Japan also learn together happily).

In our classes, under the overarching goal of "connecting with your own life and finding your ikigai (reason for being)," we conduct lessons centered around daily communication. Initially, I was extremely perplexed by this unprecedented style of "not teaching grammar and not using textbooks." However, through daily classes and interactions with the students, I realized that there is something much more important than simply memorizing the forms of the Japanese "language." We strive to teach every day, familiar words so they can express what they want to say, exploring the connection between daily life and Japanese while working hard together every day.

Because I had neither experienced nor taught in this style before, everything is fresh and every day is a learning experience. Witnessing daily realizations in class and seeing students grow as their moments of "I did it!" increase brings me immense joy. My goal moving forward is for them to view Japanese not just as a language, but to use the Japanese class as an opportunity to learn various things and enrich their own lives.

4. Reflecting on My Days in Kauai



Three months have passed since my life on Kauai began. In the beginning, I knew no one and had no idea what was going on, but by taking on various challenges and encountering many wonderful people, my world has steadily grown much brighter. Although this is my second time living in Hawaii, Kauai is completely different from my previous location and is filled with continuous first-time experiences. Here, I danced Bon Odori for the first time, listened to traditional Japanese folk songs at a Japanese festival, and I am even planning to start playing the shamisen soon. Experiencing so many things I had never done even in Japan fills my heart with a fresh sense of excitement every day.

Lately, I have actively started challenging myself with new things. From yoga, hula, and pickleball to working out three times a week with the fitness equipment at home, fishing, and watching foreign films with my host family, I am fully enjoying every day. No matter where I go, I am filled with endless gratitude toward the people around me who warmly and kindly welcome me simply because I am Japanese.

In particular, my host family teaches me so many things in our daily life. They prepare a truly delicious and heartfelt meal every night, and being able to share the dining table together is my greatest joy. It makes me deeply appreciate how wonderful it is to share a meal with someone. During dinner, lively conversations bloom about Hawaii, Japan, school, and various other topics. Among them, a phrase recently said to me by my host family has remained deep in my heart: "People who come to Hawaii only try to take something away from it, and that is no good. You must be someone who can give something back to this Hawaiian community." Those words deeply struck me, and they made me realize anew that what I can do is teach Japanese to the children. With these words in my heart, I renewed my determination and faced my daily lessons with a fresh sense of vigor.



Furthermore, at the beginning of September, a hurricane struck Kauai. I felt true terror facing winds and rain like I had never experienced before, but we took thorough precautions together as a family, clearing things from the yard and boarding up the windows. On the night the hurricane came closest, we gathered under a single flashlight, played card games, and ate snacks through the night, calling it "hurricane rules." It was scary, but having my host family by my side allowed me to get through it feeling strong and secure.

However, the power outage lasted about four days, and school was closed for a week. The morning after the storm passed through in the middle of the night, when I stepped outside, the scene was truly tragic: trees in front of the house were uprooted, road signs were blown away, and debris of unknown origin littered the roads everywhere.

Looking back on these turbulent three months, I realize that I am here today truly thanks to so many people. Not only the people supporting me close by, but also the staff at JLEAP, the Laurasian Institution, and my family and friends watching over me from Japan—it is because of all this warm support that I can live in the present and look forward to it. Moving forward, for the sake of others, to contribute even a little to Japanese language education in America, to turn every day's classes into my own learning, and to grow even more myself, I will continue to do my absolute best and devote myself to this journey.