2026/2027 J-LEAP Report



By Kyoka Tsuchiya

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Hello! My name is Kyoka, an assistant Japanese teacher at Mears Middle School in Alaska. Before coming to the US, I focused on intercultural competence for my bachelor's degree and volunteered and interned in various educational settings in and out of Japan. This has led me to develop a passion for connecting children from different countries and backgrounds, and for connecting them to the world through language and culture. Since most of my experience was teaching English or teaching about the world to students in Asia, especially those in Japan, the J-LEAP program, which offered the opportunity to experience it in the opposite way, attracted my interest, with the expectation of gaining new perspectives and findings through this experience.

【Anchorage, Alaska】

When I first heard that I was going to Alaska, I knew the name, where it is on the map, and that it is snowy and cold. However, I had never imagined how lively and warm this place would be. Arriving in July was perfect. While winter is the longest season in Alaska, people here love its summer. With longer daylight, bright sunshine, and comfortable weather, people enjoy hiking, biking, and fishing from early morning until 10 pm. Growing up in the beautiful countryside of Nagano, Japan, I feel so happy to be surrounded by the different yet beautiful nature of Alaska. Since arriving, the season has changed from summer to fall, and now we are entering winter. Every day, the sky, trees, flowers, and mountains show a beautiful scene that takes my breath away.

Furthermore, everyone I met has welcomed me with open arms. I am not sure whether it comes from surviving the tough winter together or the diversity of people with rich indigenous cultures and migration history but being able to join the community smoothly and the strong sense of connection between people have been some of my favorite things about living here.

【School and Japanese Immersion Program】

I am working at Mears Middle School in Anchorage. Anchorage School District offers immersion programs in seven languages, and Japanese has the longest history, starting in 1989. It is a K-12 program, and 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade students come to our school. Immersion middle school students will have one Japanese class and one social studies class in Japanese every day. I teach all students with my lead teacher, Chambers-sensei. As a teacher, a 45-minute class is short, and it goes by in a second. However,

we all know how some classes feel so long when we are in middle school. Chambers-sensei's experience, knowledge, and skills in attracting students' attention and keeping them engaged have been a valuable learning resource for me. In addition, the way she builds relationships with each student so that they can trust and rely on her has been inspiring. I cannot appreciate her enough for letting me try new ideas and learn from failures. While all classes have been magical and memorable, I can confidently say that inviting current JOI coordinator Uchida-san to our classroom was a great collaboration, which our students loved.



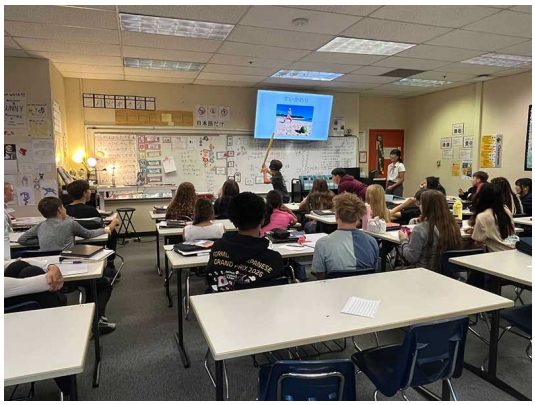
When immersion students are in elementary school, half of their days will be in Japanese, and they are still young enough to simply enjoy their time with their immersion classmates they grew up with. However, once they come to middle school, things can be challenging. Students who take the Japanese immersion program make up only about 15% of all the students in school. Each student will expand their interests and realize a lot of their peers are not taking the immersion program. This can lead them to feel less motivated to continue the Japanese immersion program. On the other hand, they themselves do not notice, but because they have been learning Japanese for more than 6 years, their Japanese skills are astonishing. It is a very special thing to have a different language that they feel comfortable using at that age. Thus, I learned that doing everything as possible, such as making the Japanese learning process fun, letting them see their growth, and creating a safe space that they feel is "home", so that they would continue until high school, is one of the most important things to do as an immersion middle school teacher.

I am very grateful for being able to interact with amazing students, being in this unique environment, and working with the lead teacher I truly look up to every single day.

【My Life】

It has only been three months, but I have already made countless memories thanks to the people here. My host family has helped me a lot in feeling less lonely during the transition. Small moments like having dinner together or playing volleyball with my host sister have been the elements that made my days so much better. Also, I have been enjoying exploring nature, visiting festivals, and joining a race with friends and other families. Anchorage has a wide range of international food restaurants of great quality, so if you ever visit Alaska, please take advantage of that! While Anchorage is not a big city, I never get bored with the rich culture and nature it offers.

I was lucky to visit Fairbanks and stay there for a few days before school started, and it is one of my favorite memories. I am looking forward to traveling to different parts of Alaska other than Anchorage in the next two years as well.



【My Goals as a J-LEAPer】

While there are various targets and challenges, I would like to focus on in the short term, when I think about the full two years joining J-LEAP, there are two big goals.

First is to gain confidence as a Japanese teacher. Confidence can only be built through experience, skills, and knowledge. Maximizing this unique opportunity of being a part of Japanese immersion education and working at a middle school will help me be a better educator not only in “teaching Japanese”, but also simply as a “teacher”.

My second goal is to empower students as much as possible. Every student in front of me has infinite possibilities for their future, and I feel so lucky to be in front of them every day. However, I also feel a big responsibility since who they meet and what experiences they have will have a long-lasting effect. I believe teaching Japanese and creating opportunities for them to experience Japanese culture is not just about handing down the content, but it can also be the process of supporting their social-emotional needs. By making myself and/or the Japanese language a safe space for them, and a door to the world, I hope I can encourage their curiosity and confidence to the fullest.

I love the Japanese word “ご縁 (goen)”. Although there is no perfect translation for what this word means in English, it is a word that is closely linked to fate and connections. Every ご縁 that I have had until today here in Anchorage has been a blessing. (I have even been able to work together with J-LEAP Year7 assistant teacher Muchima-san and lead teacher Imai-sensei in Anchorage!) I would like to continue cherishing every single one of the ご縁 and give all my love and effort to the people and community here.