

2021/2022 J-LEAP REPORT

By **Mina Morichika**

Madison Country Day School

Waunakee, WI



Where I am, where I came from:

Hello. My name is Mina Morichika and I work as an assistant teacher at Madison Country Day School (hereinafter referred to as MCDS) in Waunakee, Wisconsin. MCDS is located in a beautiful place with many green trees and a river. The school campus is full of grassy lawns, flowers, and clean environments, and it's about 20 minutes away from Madison, the capital of Wisconsin. Madison is a city with a population of about

270,000 people, with many lakes and scenic views. It is often characterized by its university and capitol, and often listed as one of the best places to live in the United States.

A few years ago, I was working as a Japanese language researcher for the U.S. as one of the ¹CULCON supporting members. I came to know that Japanese language classes are facing difficulty in continuing because of the shortage of Japanese teachers in the U.S. despite the popularity of Japanese. Since then, it has been my dream for a long time to teach Japanese language and promote Japan/Japanese culture, and to get to know more about the reality of Japanese language education in the U.S. I hope that I can be a part of something meaningful and help revitalize Japanese language education in the U.S. and help it continue to grow. Also, right before I came here, I taught Japanese language in Vietnam for about 3 years. I had

¹ * The U.S.-Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON) is a binational advisory panel that serves to elevate and strengthen the vital cultural and educational foundations of the U.S.-Japan relationship, and to strengthen connections between U.S. and Japan leadership in those fields.

never thought of myself living in Vietnam, but as the Japanese proverb says, “Sumeba miyako”—home is where the heart is. I fell in love with Vietnam. Now, I’m in the northern part of America where I had never lived before, and I am not familiar with spending life in such freezing cold weather. However, I’m having a great time here so far, and I already met so many awesome people. I’m looking forward to finding more new things and new experiences, and in the end, I would love to say, “Wisconsin is where my heart is.”

School overview:

MCDS is a private school that was established in 1997. This year is the 25th Anniversary year, and I feel very lucky and special to be able to witness it. This school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, and there are 451 students in total (from Pre-K to 12th grade).

Education at MCDS is integrated within the IB mission of developing caring students who help create a peaceful world based in respect for themselves and others. Also, MCDS is the only school that offers an IB Japanese program in Wisconsin. This is a challenging educational experience for both the student and teachers, offering not only the opportunity to learn Japanese language as an additional language, but also the means of learning, appreciating, and effectively interacting in a culture different from the student’s own.

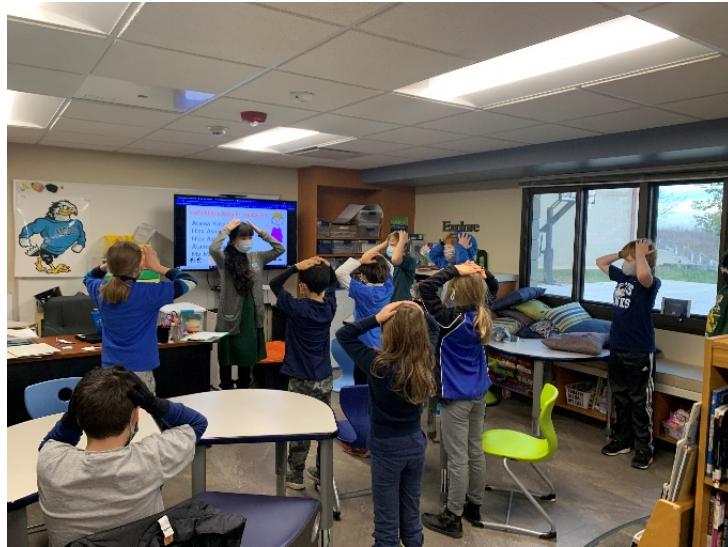
These past three months at MCDS, I had many opportunities to learn about various facets of academia including IB, the Middle Years Program (MYP), and Social Emotion Learning (SEL), etc. at school. We were visited by our MYP consultant who is providing guidance as we prepare to submit our authorization materials to the International Baccalaureate organization. I feel so grateful to be here to have an environment to learn with great teachers. In spite of being in the midst of a pandemic and knowing that the pandemic has been hard on everyone around the world, we have been able to successfully teach all the classes at school face to face.

Japanese classes:

I am enjoying this job and having a lot of meaningful experiences here. Regarding foreign language education, MCDS provides students with the opportunity to learn Spanish and Japanese. Spanish is introduced in Pre-K and is required for lower and middle school students. Most of the students usually continue to take Spanish classes when they enter high school. On the other hand, Japanese is introduced for high school students only, so some students start to take Japanese as a foreign language from 9th grade.

Currently there are 37 students enrolled in Japanese class from 9th to 12th grade.

Since I started working at this school, I was given many opportunities to work with lower and middle school students as well. I often visit their classrooms to talk about Japan, and I was also invited to the Lower School Leadership Conference 2021. During the



conference, I was able to introduce Japanese culture and spent a lot of time speaking with students. This opportunity led me to open a Japanese club for lower school students, and we started teaching many lower school students after school. Now, from 5th to 8th grade, students can take Japanese as an elective class twice a week. This class mainly focuses on introducing Japanese culture through some enjoyable activities. It is a great honor to have the experience to work not only with high school students, but also with lower and middle school students. I hope more and more students are interested in Japan/Japanese culture and expand the number of Japanese language learners at this school.

Teaching Japanese:



At the beginning of this semester, we set up a goal to speak Japanese about 90% of the time in any class level. We use body language, facial expressions, pictures (without English text), acting, and role playing to the utmost extent in order to help students understand the language.

The reasons why the students study Japanese are varied. Some students say they learn Japanese because they love Japanese pop-culture like anime and comics, etc. (I am always surprised at students who speak random Japanese phrases in an anime voice that are apparently from anime scenes.) Others say they want to go abroad to study and work in Japan in the future. The motivations of students are much higher than what I had expected. I want all of them to broaden their perspectives through learning Japanese language and culture. In particular, the IB curriculum and concept allow us to achieve this goal through creating units and lessons freely focusing on students' problem-solving skills in Japanese language. Nevertheless, it has been a big challenge for both my co-teacher Patty Sensei and me. We both have come to understand the difficulty of planning lessons, which I have learned is not that simple. We are both in a process of learning how we can collaborate together to maximize our strong points.

“Rome was not built in a day.” We need to find a way to lay another brick together each day! Actually, this is the best part about the J-LEAP, which gives us two sides of a good challenge: both struggles and excitements to get through together. I think that these lead us to each be a better person, as a person and a teacher, in every aspect. Also, another wonderful part is that J-LEAP offers extremely great training opportunities throughout the program period, and we always have strong support whenever we ask for help. I am very thankful for all the support and encouragement the program has given to us. We strongly believe that this is a great opportunity for us and our students to grow. I'm looking forward to seeing our own beautiful “Rome” at the end of the program. This is an incredible transformation journey, and where we are now is just the beginning.

Finally, I really appreciate all the people who provided me with this opportunity to be a Japanese teacher in the U.S. and helped me adjust to my new life here. I would not have been able to handle all of this if it were not for the people around me, especially my co-teacher Patty sensei and my host Kiyoko san. I will do my best to make the most of this great opportunity.