

2024/2025 J-LEAP REPORT



By Hirona Yamada

Harding Senior High School

St. Paul, MN

Hi, my name is Hirona Yamada, and I am a Year 13 J-LEAP assistant teacher currently placed in St. Paul, Minnesota. Before participating in J-LEAP, I was a junior high school English teacher in Japan. Teachers in Japan, as well as in the U.S., take on many roles beyond simply teaching their subject area. So, while I primarily taught English, I was also responsible for managing a homeroom, leading a committee, overseeing a club activity, providing career guidance, and more. Although I found teaching to be incredibly fun and rewarding, my colleagues and I faced various challenges as we took on these demanding roles. These experiences sparked my desire to deepen my understanding of teaching practices, school systems, and how educators can balance their responsibilities while maintaining a sustainable workload. Having taught Japanese in different countries during my university years, prior to becoming a schoolteacher in Japan, I decided to revisit that career path to explore new possibilities. Through J-LEAP, I hope to gain insights that will help me further explore these opportunities.

Discovering St. Paul, Minnesota

St. Paul is the capital city of Minnesota and forms the Twin Cities with its neighboring city, Minneapolis. When I found out I would be placed in St. Paul, Minnesota, I realized I hadn't heard of it before. Being a big movie fan, I decided to look up movies set in Minnesota and came across one called " Fargo." That's how I first learned about the Twin Cities and its snowy winters. If you've seen the movie, you might already have an idea of how the landscape is completely blanketed in white snow during winter. Since roads are often covered in snow from November to March, all roadwork is usually done during the rest of the year. Because of this, Minnesotans like to joke that they only have two seasons: Construction and Winter. Another popular story that locals love to share with newcomers is about the Halloween Blizzard of 1991. It's not just those who experienced it who enjoy recounting the event. Even people who weren't around at the time love to share stories they've heard from others. It's almost a

running joke that Minnesotans have been talking about that Halloween snowfall for over 30 years! Interestingly, our first snowfall this year was on Halloween, and as someone coming from a milder climate, I'm already bracing myself for the cold.

While St. Paul's climate and humorous tales about its winters have certainly made an impression on me, I was equally surprised by the diverse population, with many immigrant communities. For example, St. Paul has one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States, which resulted from refugee resettlements from Laos after the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Additionally, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area has the largest Somali population in the U.S., which began to grow in the early 1990s due to civil war and instability in Somalia. This growing diversity is reflected in the educational landscape of Harding High School, where the student body mirrors the broader community's multicultural mix.

Harding High School

Minnesota's first settlers were the Native American tribes of the Dakota and Ojibwe, who lived in the region long before European immigrants arrived. The first wave of European settlers began in the 1800s, with people of French and British descent, followed by larger groups of Scandinavian, German, and Irish immigrants. Today, newer groups include people from Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Latin America. The East Side of St. Paul, where Harding High School is located, has been home to various waves of immigrants. In more recent decades, it has become especially known for its rich cultural diversity, with notable populations of Hmong, Somali, and Karen communities. Harding serves a community that reflects this demographic, with 52.5% Asian, 17.6% African American, 16.5% Hispanic, 5.5% White, and 1.8% American Indian students in grades 9-12, totaling around 1,700 students. The community struggles with high levels of economic disadvantage, with 79% of students economically disadvantaged. The school also experiences lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates compared to the state and district averages. World languages offered at Harding High School include French, Spanish, Japanese, Hmong, Karen, Dakota, and Ojibwe. This unique selection of world languages reflects the diverse backgrounds of the student population.

Many students in Japanese programs are drawn to Japanese pop culture, including anime, gaming, and music. I have noticed that this interest often shows through their personal items, such as T-shirts with Japanese text, badges, and toys attached to their bags, and I liked how students here express their passions and interests through their belongings. Harding offers Japanese from levels 1 to 4, including an IB program this school year. It also has student-led groups like the Japanese National Honor Society and Japan Club. The program is planning a

trip to Japan in the summer of next year, and I can see that students are excited to learn more about the language and culture. With Japanese among the diverse language options offered, I hope the program provides an opportunity to enrich students' lives and broaden their perspectives.

Looking Back on the Past Four Months

My time in St. Paul has been providing me with valuable insights into the intersection of history, social issues, and education, and how these elements shape the learning experiences of students in the U.S. As I reflect on the differences and sometimes similarities between the school systems and teaching practices in Japan and the U.S., I am particularly struck by the diverse challenges faced by both teachers and students here, including economic disparities and the impact of immigration on education. Understanding these factors will help me gain a deeper understanding of educational practices, and I will continue to closely observe and reflect on my ongoing experience with J-LEAP.