



*Picture: The author (center), Gayle Emma Nelson, with students from one of her 8 classes. Gayle is doing a 3-year missionary program in Japan through the ELCA.*

Today is the last day of the school year here at Luther High School in Kumamoto, Japan, where I teach. The school year is quite different here than it is in the US. Even the last day is different. Let me explain.

The last day of the school year is not filled with parties but rather there is a "Big Cleaning" of the school followed by an assembly in the gymnasium where everyone sits on the floor in orderly rows. The assembly begins with chapel service after which many people are recognized for different reasons and teachers and staff who are leaving are thanked. The assembly lasts for about two hours. After this, students go to a long homeroom and then are allowed to leave.

The "Big Cleaning" is because there are no custodians to clean the school. The students and teachers do that job. Each day there is a 15-minute time frame in which students go to their assigned areas and clean. Teachers supervise and clean alongside the students. Before all extended breaks, there is a "Big Cleaning" - (50-minute cleaning session) and again when we reopen.

Classes will begin again in two weeks – not two months like most schools in the US do. Most of the days during that two weeks, teachers will still be at the school getting ready for the new year to begin on 2 April. There is no "teacher's week" or even three or four days to get ready for students to come back after a long two-month break. There is one day of teacher meetings and then the students come back the next day.

Each month, there is at least one national holiday. For instance, in September there is "Respect for the Aged Day" – a holiday that just so happened to fall on my birthday last year. Very appropriate, I thought! 😊 In May, we are lucky enough to have two holidays in a row: Constitution Day and Green Day.

Summer break begins on 23 July and ends on 24 August. Many teachers will still be at school during this time. Winter break begins on 29 December and ends when we return on 7 January 2019. There is a "Thanksgiving Week" but it is a week in which students bring food to give to the local orphanages. These are not days off.

"Normal" school hours are between 8:00 am – 5:00 pm. But it is rare that any of us get here as late as 8:00 am or leave as early as 5:00 pm. Teachers and students are frequently at school until after 6:00 pm and sometimes later. It is not infrequent for many of us teachers to be at the school for 12 – 14 hours in a day.

So, there you have it - a very brief and condensed outline of what a school year in Japan is like. At the end of the day, I am exhausted. It's not the kind of exhaustion, though, where I fall into bed as soon as I get home and sleep until it's time to get up and do it all over again the next day. It's a satisfied exhaustion; one in which I don't dread having to get up the next day but instead look forward to the time I get to spend with my students the next day. The students I have been fortunate enough to have had this year have been the best! There is not one of them who I will not miss. Some I will teach again next year - most I will not. With any luck, I will see them in the hallways and we will have time, as we are hurrying to our next destination, to chat for a minute or two. I hope that in some small way, I have made an impression in their lives. I hope that they have been able to see Jesus as "some Greeks" requested of Philip in John's gospel, through things I have done and said for that is why I have come to this place. What I do know for sure is that they have made a huge impact on my life that I will never forget.