



Hello, everyone. The scenery around Agano city is looking more and more like spring. The parks, once covered in snow, have begun to turn green, and I'm sure we're all looking forward to Cherry Blossom season.

March marks the end of winter and the end of the school year, and thus is graduation season. I'm shocked to think that when I first came to Agano 5 years ago, the kids who were 2nd graders then have now entered junior high, and the 5th graders have now graduated junior high. Wow! To have not only watched but also contributed to the growth of these children truly has been an honor for me.

By the way, did you know that school grades are structured differently in America? American elementary school starts with what Japanese people know as the 3rd year of day care, and goes through 5th grade. Junior high school is 6th through 8th grade, and high school lasts four years. The lowest grade in elementary school is called kindergarten, and is not actually mandatory in all states. Also, high school grades have a special naming system (Freshman > Sophomore > Junior > Senior).

America's graduation culture is also very different to Japan's. In America, neither elementary schools nor junior high schools have graduation ceremonies nor diplomas. My personal opinion is that there are two reasons for this. First, American mandatory education runs until you're at least 16 years old, so everyone has to go to high school. Also, unlike Japan, nearly everyone simply goes to the nearest elementary, junior high and high school to their home. For example, in my hometown of Plainwell, Michigan, there are three elementary schools, but all those kids go to the same junior high and high school. The kids gain some new classmates between elementary and junior high school, but between junior high and high school you're not parting ways with any friends, you're not going far away from home, and not much of your school life will change substantially, so it doesn't really feel like you're "graduating" from anything in particular. Graduations and diplomas are only from high school and university.



graduates all throw their caps into the air.

I got a little nostalgic for my graduation while writing this. Do you all remember your classmates? Do you still meet or talk with them on occasion? Nowadays, with the advent of social media, staying in touch with your old friends has become easier than ever. I use various social media platforms to keep in touch with my old friends, myself. Being someone who has drifted far away from his birthplace, I'm very grateful for the existence of social media.

Until next time, - Jeff

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