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# sustainable japan

## Raising international preschools in Tokyo and beyond

### Education

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Kenn Gale first arrived in Japan 12 years ago, contracted to help open an international preschool. After working across Southeast Asia, he thought Japan might be a temporary stop. Instead, it became home. He met his wife and started a family. Settling down produced a strong pull to become more engaged in the local community. Now, as a leader in early childhood education and the father of three young children, Gale approaches his role as the president of the Tokyo Association of International Preschools with a strong sense of commitment to building stronger solidarity among other hard-working professionals who dedicate their lives and careers to early childhood education.

TAIP's story began in the early 2000s, recalled inaugural President Steven Parr, "when two preschool directors approached me with the idea of creating an organization specifically for preschools in Tokyo. I thought the idea was great. A committee was constituted and the organization was born."

Over two decades later, current president Ken Gale has served as president of TAIP since 2022. Over the past three years, he has helped guide the organization toward a path of innovation and closer connections. He balances building on TAIP's history while also responding to the current realities of the declining birthrate and its impact on early childhood education. His focus is on deepening



Educator Dave Cudworth discusses the benefits of outdoor learning. TAIP

ing TAIP's strengths, refining its operations and ensuring that the organization continues to provide essential value to schools, educators and the broader community it serves.

His path to TAIP leadership began when the former president recommended him for the role. Gale was drawn to the association's collaborative spirit, the genuine camaraderie among its members and the opportunity to learn from and contribute to a network larger than any single school.

### Widening reach

One of Gale's main priorities as president has been ensuring that TAIP brings value to each of its membership categories. The association began as a network of schools within Tokyo. Over the past two decades, it has expanded to include over 60 member schools. Institutional members are the schools based in Tokyo, and they remain the majority of the organization. Satellite members are schools in other parts of Japan, and associate members are businesses and organizations that support the international early childhood education community. Satellite and associate members add diversity and allow the organization to widen its reach.

Gale began his TAIP journey as part of a satellite school. That perspective gave him an appreciation for the challenges of schools outside the city center and reinforced his belief that TAIP's value should not be determined by geography or size. He feels strongly that institutional, satellite and associate members should all have the opportunity to benefit from TAIP's network, resources and professional development.

Gale aims to continue broadening membership across all membership types. He sees word of mouth as TAIP's most powerful growth tool; schools join and stay because they see real value and results.

### Professional development

Professional development has always been one of TAIP's most valuable contributions to its members, and Gale has worked hard



Merete Kropp of Komazawa Park International School addresses educators. TAIP

to strengthen this side of TAIP. Before the pandemic, TAIP's main event was the annual October conference, which featured international speakers that TAIP flew in and drew several hundred attendees. The pandemic forced this gathering to change its form. The organization also embraced online learning, for better or worse. This has presented new opportunities and has provided members with more convenient channels to meet and exchange information.

Under Gale's leadership, TAIP embraced Zoom as a platform for workshops and seminars, with some sessions drawing over 200 participants. The switch to online meetings has allowed the association to continue hosting excellent speakers from around the world and deliver the same content at a significantly lower cost. Because most teachers who work with younger learners have a genuine passion for their field, there has been enthusiastic support and participation.

For the coming term, Gale envisions a hybrid model that combines the irreplaceable and human value of in-person conferences with the accessibility and efficiency of online seminars. TAIP can continue to serve teachers and leaders in a way that is both flexible and impactful by offering more and more year-round professional development

opportunities

### Communication, transparency

Another key theme of Gale's presidency has been communication. TAIP already provides leadership-level seminars and open discussions through monthly directors' calls. It also provides classroom-level support through professional development workshops. While these forums run like a well-oiled machine, Gale recognizes that the organization can always do more to improve transparency and clarity.

During Gale's term, TAIP has worked to strengthen messaging around what members can expect, what their dues support and how board-level decisions are made. He aims to continue increasing transparency while also raising TAIP's external profile, and said it can enhance its reputation and cement its role as a central hub for early childhood education in Japan by spotlighting member schools and promoting the work of the association more broadly.

### Support amid challenges

International preschools in Japan face an increasingly complex and competitive landscape. The declining birth rate is leading to smaller student populations even as more

international schools open up and scholarships make them more accessible. Navigating these changes requires adaptability and shared knowledge.

Gale believes TAIP plays a critical role in supporting schools through these challenges. By facilitating information sharing, offering leadership-level business support and providing professional development for educators, TAIP seeks to be part of the solution. In many cases, schools, especially smaller ones or those without extensive internal infrastructure, rely on TAIP for guidance on everything from compliance questions to basic operational challenges. Gale sees strengthening this support system as one of the association's most important responsibilities.

### Fostering collaboration

Under Gale's leadership, TAIP has continued to emphasize the importance of collaboration across schools. The monthly directors' calls provide time and space for leaders to discuss challenges across the organization. He recalled instances where new leaders were brought in from other countries and had no guidance to help them understand the exact scope of their role and the extent of their authority. There are also teacher-focused workshops that aim to address challenges in the classroom. These sessions build professional skills and help foster a sense of solidarity in what can be an underappreciated profession.

Looking ahead, Gale wants to encourage even more communication by modernizing digital systems, making resources more accessible and creating more opportunities for associate members to contribute.

### Refinement and goals

Gale sees TAIP as having a strong mission and community but acknowledges that operational systems can be improved. During his presidency, the board has begun fine-tuning back-end logistics, with plans to modernize the website, registration processes and communication tools. There is also discussion



TAIP President Kenn Gale TAIP

about formalizing TAIP's status as a non-profit, a step that could strengthen its credibility but isn't necessary to its day-to-day operations.

He is particularly focused on ensuring that associate members, who contribute resources and sponsorship, see clear returns on their investments. For TAIP to grow sustainably, these members must see the impact their investments have on early childhood education and clear improvements within the organization.

As president, Ken Gale has guided TAIP through a transformative period marked by adaptation, resilience and renewed growth. He views TAIP as an essential resource for schools and educators navigating the unique challenges of early childhood education in Japan. Looking ahead, he hopes to strengthen what TAIP already does well while fine-tuning its systems to meet the demands of the next generation. He sees TAIP as an organization that will continue to be inclusive, resilient and ever more connected — one that continues to raise the quality of international preschool education in Tokyo and beyond.



## Osaka Expo Times Gallery



Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac with Maja Gojkovic, president of Vojvodina, Serbia's northern autonomous province, during a promotional event at the Serbian Pavilion. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



Artists perform during Cote d'Ivoire's "national day" at Osaka's Expo 2025. EMBASSY OF COTE D'IVOIRE



Kyoto Ambassador Hoshino Tsuji pays tribute to sprint legend Usain Bolt, whose statue is on display at the Jamaica Pavilion. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA



An artistic view of the Farnese Atlas and an aircraft of pioneer aviator Arturo Ferrarin, masterpieces that are part of the visitor experience at the Italy Pavilion. GENERAL COMMISSIONERS OFFICE FOR ITALY AT EXPO 2025

## Yamagata film festival to gather documentaries from around world

### ESG/SDGs

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Yamagata Prefecture, lying roughly 300 kilometers north of Tokyo on the Sea of Japan side of the Tohoku region, is blessed with abundant nature in diverse terrain, including mountains, basins, plains and rivers. In addition to its agricultural products such as cherries and edamame and its 225 hot springs and ski resorts, Yamagata is known as a mecca of documentary films.

In the city of Yamagata, the prefectural capital, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) is held every two years, gathering fans from all over the world.

This year, it will be held from Oct. 9 to 16 at various venues throughout the city, including Yamagata Central Public Hall, Yamagata Citizens' Hall, the Forum Yamagata movie theater and Yamagata Creative City Center Q1. The nonprofit festival's chairperson, Itaru Kato, and YIDFF Tokyo Office Director Haruka Hama spoke about the appeal of this film festival.

The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival began in 1989 as part of the 100th anniversary celebrations of the city's establishment. Unlike most anniversary events, what makes this festival truly remarkable is that it has continued for 36

years, consistently attracting about 22,000 visitors from around the world.

Kato said that even before the film festival began, there was already a vibrant community of people who organized independent screenings. "In urban areas, there are many movie theaters where you can watch the films you like as well as the latest releases, but in rural areas, there were few movie theaters, and it was not possible to see popular films right away," he said. In response, citizens invested in establishing Forum Yamagata. This initiative has since expanded across the Tohoku region, forming the Forum Cinema Network.

"The city is relatively small, so the entire town is enveloped in the atmosphere of the film festival during the festival week," Kato said. Foreigners become a common sight around the city, and lively discussions about films among fans and industry professionals can be heard in every shop. "The fact that the townspeople have also come to enjoy this atmosphere is one of the reasons why the film festival has continued for so long," he said.

One feature of the festival that has become famous is its temporary Komian Club, a social hub that operates in the Japanese-style restaurant Sanjusangendo at the Washington Hotel Yamagata Nanokamachi. The charge is ¥500 (\$3.50), which includes one drink and snacks. "Why do people come all the way to Yamagata? It is because they want to enjoy conversations with other visitors after watching movies," Kato said.

"In addition to the Q&A sessions for directors and the audience at the venues, one of the attractions of this film festival is that there are many opportunities to meet people outside theaters, such as running into a director of a film that left a strong impression on you at the Komian Club or elsewhere in town," Hama said.

A new civic hall that is scheduled to open in 2029 will also become one of the venues for the festival and a place for people to gather and interact.

Hama said serendipitous encounters



The previous award ceremony. YAMAGATA INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

with new films are a major joy of the festival, especially in an age when people tend to seek out only the information they want. This year's YIDFF International Competition received 1,318 entries from 129 countries. Fifteen of them will be screened during the festival, competing for five awards. Hama noted that screenings will also be held in Tokyo the year after the festival, and that many award-winning films from past competitions can be rented.

A program named New Asian Currents will feature about 20 Asian documentaries. This year's special programs include Unscripted: The Art of Direct Cinema, on experimental documentary methods developed in the U.S. in the 1960s, and Palestine — Memory of the Land, focusing on personal histories relating to the current issues in the region.

The program Yamagata and Film includes records of the first festival. While some of these have been previously released, this new collection also brings together and digitizes parts that have never been made public.

"Amid various circumstances — including some countries being at war or having political situations that make visits impossible — I hope that this film festival will continue to function as a safety net where people from various countries can gather and talk," said Hama.



2023 sayonara party. YAMAGATA INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

## Sustainable Japan Network

