



Going Bush: Tips and Tricks for Teachers



Catherine Jeffery reveals some of the benefits of teaching in a rural or remote location and gives some suggestions on how to do so successfully . . .

Teaching is one of the most rewarding professions upon which someone can embark. However, both physically and mentally, it is also one of the most demanding. Teachers who teach in rural and remote locations may also potentially experience unique challenges due to the location of their schools.

When you move to a small country town you may find it challenging to forgo the sense of anonymity that can usually come with teaching and living in an urban setting. Virtually overnight you may become a very recognisable face in the community. You may potentially feel that you are suddenly under close scrutiny, particularly in community places such as the local clubs and shops. More than often this scrutiny is imagined and very quickly you will blend into the community.

On a positive note, there will be a number of opportunities for you to make new friends. At any school, teachers fulfil a variety of roles outside the classroom. This is very common in rural and remote locations. You may be asked to lend a hand in a variety of local events such as fund raisers, sporting carnivals and festivals. This is a fantastic opportunity to develop many positive relationships with a variety of people in the community, however, be mindful not to take on too much. It is really important not to overcommit yourself. You will need to keep the demands of your teaching workload in mind, and, at all times, keep a healthy balance.

Some rural and remote schools have very small student numbers. This can potentially mean that you may find yourself as the only teacher who teaches your subject. As a result, it may be challenging to find opportunities to collaborate and consult with others in your KLA.

A way to feel an increased sense of connectedness, as well as keep up to date with curriculum developments and new resources, is to be proactive in using social media to network with other teachers. Join subject associations and use Facebook and Twitter to expand your network and ask for assistance from colleagues.

In rural and remote communities access to goods and services can be limited due to geographic location. To overcome this, it is vital that you plan ahead. Schedule necessary appointments to coincide with visits to larger cities. For example if you are attending TPL in regional centres, such as Dubbo or Tamworth, it is the perfect opportunity to book that physio appointment to check out your dickie knee.

In some more remote schools, there are specific provisions to take leave to ensure that you maintain your health and wellbeing. A suggestion is to take a long weekend mid-term to head to the coast for a swim or to treat yourself to a concert.

It is vitally important that you introduce yourself to the local businesses and make a conscious effort to consistently support them. It may be tempting to purchase products online and you most certainly won't be able to secure everything that you need with the local traders. However, be mindful that these local businesses are the ones who are usually the people who are the first to step up to support your school and students. For example, they are more than often the first port of call when teachers are after donations for prizes for school raffles and fund raisers.



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In rural and remote communities, the “bush telegraph” is alive and well. It is very important to be extra careful when using individual students’ names when you are recalling school stories in a social setting, even among other teachers. There is a strong possibility that someone within ear shot will either know the student personally or is a member of their family. You don’t want to be accused of violating confidentiality or, even worse, gossiping.

It can be extremely beneficial to develop, albeit tactfully, an understanding of the local context of the town, including individuals and families. This can help you to become aware of, and understand, the social politics and dynamics of the town. Such an understanding can also identify opportunities to bring local perspectives into the curriculum and classroom activities. This will prove to have significant educational benefits; not only does it bring relevance to your lessons, it also fosters and deepens the relationships between the school and the local community.

In a rural and remote community you will see your students and their parents consistently outside of school, it is part and parcel of living in a small community. Once again balance is the key. Of course teachers do have a right to a private life but it is advisable to always have your obligations under the NSW Department of Education’s Code of Conduct in mind. ¹

Article 24:7 states:

As an employee:

- i. You must not purchase alcohol for, or give alcohol to, any student or person under the age of 18 years
- ii. You must not encourage or condone the use of alcohol by school students or young people under the age of 18 during educational or community activities unless prescribed by the curriculum

This can be particularly challenging in social settings. For example, if you are a member of the local footy club where students may play in the junior divisions, underage drinking can potentially become a contentious issue for teachers.

Another point of consideration is the friendships you may form with your students’ parents. This has the potential to blur the lines between professional and private interactions. It is vital that you establish some boundaries, quickly shut down “shop talk”, and if someone wants to discuss a school matter at the local pub, or the supermarket, politely but firmly ask them to make an appointment to see you at school. This will ensure that you aren’t seen as “playing favourites” with one student or that you are “on duty” 24/7.

There are numerous benefits of teaching in a rural or remote location. There is a strong sense of community where all key stakeholders feel that they are authentic partners in the education of their young people. As a teacher you will become an important part of not only the school but also the town. You will form lifelong friendships, have a lot of fun and have the opportunity to make a real difference to your students.



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References

- 1 NSW Department of Education (2017), *Code of Conduct*, Sydney, p 38

Catherine is the Head Teacher of Teaching and Learning at Inverell High School. She established Aboriginal Studies in year 9 in 2007 and it is now one of the most popular subjects in years 9 to 12. Catherine also works with the NSW Department of Education Curriculum Innovations team and the Australian Human Rights Commission developing teaching resources for Stage 5 and 6 Aboriginal Studies and Stage 3,4,5 and 6 History.