

Getting the School Year Started in Rural Alaska: Some tips from an experienced “bush” principal.

Although this is not a comprehensive list, it is hoped that the following suggestions will help you get off to a good start. First impressions are very important and your first few days in the community and school may set the tone for possibly the rest of the year. These are written for someone new to the principalship in mind as well as new to the “bush.”

1. Get to know staff over the summer months or as soon as possible via phone or email.
2. Obtain a copy of your school’s Student/Parent Handbook and become very familiar with it before the first day with staff and students as you will have to recite it like the gospel.
3. Obtain a copy of your district’s Board Policy Manual, Procedures Manual, and negotiated agreements. Familiarize yourself with them.
4. Obtain a copy of the district’s scope and sequence standards, QSI or whatever model of curriculum is being used to become familiar with the contents. You will need to be the expert once the staff asks questions in the summer or upon arrival on site.
5. Arrive early on site before certified staff.
6. Introduce yourself to classified staff on an informal basis.
7. Wander the village and get to know folks. Try to identify the movers and shakers in the village including the student body.
8. Phone or visit with the Local Advisory Education Committee, CSC or whatever it is called in the community on an informal basis before the first formal meeting. Get an idea of their expectations.
9. Identify as to whether you have a Regional School Board member in your village. If so, get to know that person.
10. Familiarize yourself with the school physical plant.
11. Check to see what, if any, summer maintenance occurred.
12. Meet with the district office staff so as to develop relationships that will pay dividends over your tenure with that district.
13. Go through summer mail and check in school supply boxes.
14. Review certified staff housing assignments to ensure workability.
15. Peruse elementary class schedules.
16. Peruse high school class schedules to ensure students (specifically seniors) will graduate. You may need to pull and review senior transcripts to see where students are credit wise.
17. Tweak above schedules as needed.
18. Make sure copies of student handbook are on site for disbursement to students on day one.
19. Plan for first staff meeting and set agenda. Include all sorts of housekeeping items, but don’t forget to discuss what goals for the year are important to you.
20. Set up staff workroom and office so that things work for your style. Be sure to have some sort of staff mailboxes.
21. Check out the local area network to ensure that things are in working order and plug in new staff members names for email.
22. Plan out teacher work days or in-service days for the first few days of the teacher contract.
23. Upon arrival of staff, meet them and show them their housing units.

24. Plan a beginning of the year ice-breaker (staff dinner, etc.) or activity where staff can get to know each other informally. This can be the start of building relationships along with providing a positive start to the year.
25. Meet with certified staff and go over handbooks and policies so they are familiar with them.
26. Go over schedules with certified staff and work out any kinks.
27. Take care of some of the beginning of the year sign-off paperwork such as the evaluation process, Title IX, abuse reporting, etc.
28. Inform classified staff as to when their first day of work is and what their schedule looks like.
29. Plan for the start of the year school-wide assembly for the student body.
30. Go over student progress with staff to ensure proper placement of students, imperative with QSI model though it was probably completed in spring.
31. Tidy up the school for day one.
32. Establish/review chain of command.
33. Fill added duty contracts for the entire school year if possible.
34. Set and publicize vision for school.
35. Complete initial start of the year paperwork (such as ASAA eligibility lists) and ensure payroll forms are in order; dues/fees are paid, etc.

This is not a complete list but there are some items to help a person get started. Some of the topics are broader than others. Many relate to developing a knowledge base from which to work and expand. Others involve getting to know people that will be involved in the education process, from students, parents, villagers, staff, and elders. The key concept here is that the new administrator will wear many hats and will need to be FLEXIBLE! The list is all predicated on the fact that the person has some of the inherent skills necessary to succeed in administration such as leadership skills, communication skills, ability to build and maintain rapport, be hard working/energetic, have a sense of humor, be a multi-tasker, problem solver/mediator, have a knowledge of curriculum and delivery styles, vision and planning abilities.