Stepping into the role

A guide to being a school leader in rural or remote areas

Accepting a principal or school leader role in a rural or remote area is more than just a job, it's also a decision to be an active member of a community.

The benefits and attraction of rural or remote school leadership roles include a strong sense of community, the environment, and the lifestyle on offer for families. The opportunities for collaboration and to build strong relationships is not only part of the attraction of living and working in rural and regional communities but is also the key to success.

> As a regional, rural and remote school leader you are more than just an educator but an important figure in the community and people's lives. (Eacott, Niesche, Heffernan, Loughland, Gobby & Durksen 2021, p.16)

The average time it takes to settle into a school leader role is about six months, but the first three months are critical. To be successful you need to focus on understanding your school and the unique community context and creating relationships and networks.

The tips within this guide will help you address three key areas when stepping into the role as a principal or school leader within a rural and remote context:

01

Building relationships during the first few months in your role

02

Fostering an effective school culture

03

Building leadership.

Before you start

1/ If possible, reach out to the outgoing principal and seek out induction programs offered for schools in your system/sector and context.

2/ Establish a process that allows you to regularly reflect on your school's current and future goals.

3/ Learn about the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander land upon which the school resides and become familiar with local cultural protocols. Reflect critically and recognise any gaps in your intercultural awareness. Make a plan to develop your cultural responsiveness and your readiness to engage with the local community.

4/ Take the time to understand the role you play within the school and the broader community. For example, meet and establish relationships with community leaders, members of the school council and other key stakeholders. This could include Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders, leaders of local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander corporations, religious leaders, local police, allied health staff, local council and others in charge of providing services for young people in the community.

5/ Be visible, accessible, and approachable to people within the school and community from the outset to avoid potential social and personal isolation.

> Central to building and maintaining a supportive school culture is trust. Trust between and among those associated with a school takes time to build … and needs to be constantly attended to. This is especially the case in small population centres 'where everyone knows everyone else' and there can be a strong sense of 'who is an insider, who is an outsider', or who is a 'local' and who is a 'blow in'. (Halsey 2018, p.18)

Tips for success

Understand context

- Develop a rich, local contextual knowledge and commit to continual development of your cultural awareness and responsiveness.

- Schools in rural and remote settings absorb the vibrancy, complexities and uniqueness of their communities. Aim to reflect these in your school culture and strategy.

- As a new leader, you have the opportunity to grow the school's vision and values to enact positive changes. Where you need to make change, try to honour the school's history appropriately and work collaboratively to shape future directions together with the community.

- Remember that the school's role as the 'glue' within the community is amplified in rural, regional and remote areas. Changes you make may have wide-spreading implications and should have the support of the impacted community.

- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are leaders in their families and communities, work with local organisations, sit on cultural committees, or mentor youth. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students may also be required to address family obligations that are culturally based. For example, attendance at funerals, known as Sorry Business, or for ceremonial purposes. School leaders should be supportive and respectful of such commitments.

Invest in relationships

- From an early stage, develop personal and professional relationships at various levels throughout the school – including staff, students, and parents.

- Develop relationships with community leaders and show respect for local cultural protocols. It is advisable to seek advice on who to approach and doing this respectfully and appropriately. All communication should be courteous and respectful.

- Seek out key personnel in similar schools within the region, to ask questions, work together and form strong mentor-mentee relationships.

- Set boundaries to maintain a personal and professional position within relationships.

Listen and seek feedback

- Actively listen to staff, students and the community. Find out what is working, what's not working, what's frustrating and what you should stop.

- Remember to be conscious of your own personal biases. Well-informed, guided critical reflection can help you become more aware of any assumptions or unconscious biases you may have that could negatively impact the cultural safety of the school.

- You must be able to give and receive feedback to be able to communicate, build trust, negotiate, collaborate, advocate effectively, and relate to the school community.

Communicate and collaborate

- Communicate regularly with teachers and leaders about the school's vision and values and consult regularly with the community regarding any changes in approach.

- To develop a new or altered vision, collaborate with the school community, even if it requires a greater time investment.

- Consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in culturally appropriate ways – including the manner and timing of engaging – and recognise their time and intellectual property by remunerating them appropriately.

Celebrate success

- Celebrate personal, collegial, school and community milestones, regardless of size. This highlights to the community that you place value on the school's vision and the community's spirit.

- There are several significant dates and cultural and community events in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander calendar, and communities mark these in numerous ways in which the school may be involved or support. Consultation and collaboration with communities about the use of any cultural material and production of events is essential to ensure respectful and appropriate use of material and proper representation of culture and traditions.

Transitioning

- Transitioning into a new role can be a time of greater vulnerability, no matter your location.

- Understand there will be times you feel isolated and lonely – these feelings stem from new responsibilities, new expectations, new relationships and operating in a position of ambiguity.

- No matter how prepared you think you are, you can't be prepared for everything, so it's crucial to be flexible in your role and approach.

- After the first few months take time to reflect on what you do and don't know about yourself, your team, the community, and the school.

Building leadership and school culture

Fostering an effective school culture

Principals and school leaders who embrace inclusion help build a school culture that embraces the richness and diversity of the wider school community and the education systems and sectors in which they operate. They recognise and use the rich and diverse linguistic and cultural resources in the school community.

> Due to barriers associated with attraction and supply, rural principals need to establish a type of professional relationship with teachers which has an influence on retention (Haar, 2007). Retaining these quality teachers is dependent upon the principal, their leadership tactics, and their relationships with staff members (Lock, Budgen, Lunay & Oakley 2012).

Regardless of the context in which you find yourself as a school leader, to build a strong school culture you must:

- Walk the talk – authenticity is highly valued by staff members and helps to establish trust.

- Listen and be aware of your personal biases.

- Prioritise the health and wellbeing of you and your staff.

- Achieve the balance of visibility and authentic interactions and engagement.

- Motivate and inspire – model ongoing learning and development through your own professional practice and through interactions with students, staff, families, carers and the wider community.

- Identify ways to capitalise on incidental professional learning opportunities, look to embed professional learning opportunities into the day-to-day activities of the school.

- Challenge and support your team to enable effective teaching that promotes enthusiastic, independent learners.

- Work with and through others to build a professional learning community focused on continuous improvement to teaching and learning.

- Set high standards and expectations – this is good for all learners, students, staff and self.

- Remember that your primary role is instructional leadership and enabling teaching and learning within the school to have the greatest impact on student outcomes.

> The greatest impact is achieved when school leaders explicitly schedule time in their week/day to work with teachers on their teaching. Not only does this build relations but it demonstrates to all involved that school leaders value and prioritise what goes on in classrooms. (Eacott et al 2021, p.15)

- Remove barriers and obstacles to enable people to achieve the school's vision.

- Create a sense of belonging for all members of the school community, paying attention to the development of a **culturally safe** environment and a **culturally responsive** workforce.

Cultural safety

An environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for students; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning together (Williams, 1999).

Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness requires individuals to be culturally competent. This competency is having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. Culturally responsive teachers continuously support minoritised students through examination of their own assumptions about race and culture (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Building leadership

Building an effective school culture and learning environment is a shared responsibility. By using practices such as distributing leadership and delegation, you can foster a collective responsibility for building your school's culture.

Distribute leadership

- Distributed leadership is a shared and collective leadership practice that builds capacity in your staff and others and draws on the expertise at all levels within your school. It allows you to focus on building the capability of others to achieve joint ownership of decision making.

- Before putting in place a structure of distributed leadership, it is important you explore and understand staff interests, capability, and capacity.

- When providing opportunities for leadership, do this in the context of a supportive and growth-focused school culture.

Delegate

- Delegating tasks or responsibilities to your staff enables you to focus your energy on other important tasks. It also means those with the best and most appropriate skills and ambition are performing the right tasks.

- Enabling staff to participate in school decision-making and problem-solving builds capacity, helps to clarify accountabilities, develops leadership and creates a climate of trust.

- Delegate to people from across the community to avoid placing undue burden on any individual or group for work that involves shared responsibilities and outcomes. For example, it is important to partner and consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when leading work to raise intercultural awareness. However, the related workload should not be placed solely on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Encourage teamwork

- Encourage teamwork to promote community involvement and a collective approach to supporting student outcomes.

> Delivering high-impact in schools is dependent on school leaders' ability to focus the work of all on the core business of schooling – teaching and learning. (Eacott et al 2021, p.15)

Where to look for support

- Whether it is your first school leadership position or tenth, leadership in rural and remote settings can be vastly different to urban contexts. High quality induction into your leadership role or principalship will have a significant effect on the transition process – seek out the opportunities available and ensure you network with school leaders in similar schools and contexts. Principal associations are a good place to start building your networks.

- Engage with leadership programs available within your system and sector.

- Engage with research – keep up to date with current developments in pedagogy and curriculum and encourage others to so the same.

- The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) provides a range of tools and resources to support school leaders' ongoing professional growth. All tools and resources can be found on the AITSL website and are informed by *The Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles* which set out what principals and school leaders should know, understand and do to succeed in their work.

Reflective questions

Q: What excites you about the opportunity you have before you?

Q: How will you develop your understanding of the unique context in which you are working?

Q: What type of leader do you want to be in this context and what areas do you need to develop to succeed?

Q: What personal biases and assumptions do you need to be conscious of?

Q: As relationships are key to success, which relationships will you focus on building first?

Q: How will you build trust with your leadership team, staff and the wider school council and community leaders?

Where can I find out more?

AITSL's website has a range of resources available.

- School leadership in rural and remote contexts - video case studies
- *Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles*
- *Leading for impact: Australian guidelines for school leadership development*
- Resources to build leadership in Australian schools
- Leadership scenarios
- Connecting rural, regional and remote teachers to high quality professional learning - Quick guide for teachers and leaders

References

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