NORTH TO ALASKA
Preparing for your first year of teaching

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THE ADVENTURE BEGINS...

Congratulations! Being a new teacher is a great opportunity that brings with it as many rewards as it does responsibilities. Your adventure can be compared to hiking a mountain: ...the incline may vary, there is great beauty along the way, and no matter how tired you are the view at the top makes the whole trip worth it.

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Before you begin teaching...

First, consider that your presence in the school and community means change for everyone, not just yourself. In rural Alaska people come and go, and teachers are part of that migration. You may be replacing a teacher who was an important member of the community, or you may be in a position that did not exist the previous year. The community is not expecting you to fill someone’s role in a particular way, but you may hear people’s opinions of a previous teacher.

Remember! There is nothing wrong with a community missing a teacher. Tread lightly as you start out, be polite, learn names, and actively listen to what others share with you.

You will face situations that you don’t know how to handle. When in doubt ask others how they like to do things. This will give others a chance to assist you and prevent you from feeling like you have no support.

“We do things differently in Alaska...”

A note about “help”: Do not assume that others need or want help. You may have a new or possibly better way to do something, but you risk coming across as a know-it-all. Instead, demonstrate an interest and respect for another culture. You will hear that this is Alaska and “we do things differently here.” There is much truth to that and there are many traditions that you will gradually learn about. It is always OK to greet people and let them know that you are there if they need you, but try to understand why things are done the way they are before sharing your ideas or passing judgment, this shows respect.

Freezer Space

Many animals serve as vital food sources and have narrow windows during which they can be hunted and collected. Your students may miss school for these subsistence activities. Work with the families and your administration to keep students from falling behind. Encourage families to notify the school when their children will be out for subsistence activities. Do what you can to plan ahead, but be patient and understanding.
Notes on Finding Housing

On a more specific note, you will need a place to live. First, know that you will not be living in an igloo! Many teachers stay in district provided housing while others rent in the community. Living situations vary across the state for teachers, but having roommates is very common. If you have never had roommates before, prepare yourself! Get to know them and do your best to openly discuss noise, guests, food sharing, storage space, and household chores.

You may also be sharing a post office box and utility bills. Cooperation and compromise make for harmonious living, but take time to enjoy one another by having a game night, movie night, or preparing a meal together. Inviting other teachers, coworkers, and neighbors can help you to get to know your surroundings better. Remember that not everyone has to be your friend right away, but being friendly may earn you friends.

Gathering Supplies and Transportation

Alaska is big. Yes! Even bigger than Texas.

The size of the state presents some unique challenges to getting various supplies. There are no roads connecting each village, and many of them are far from any major city. Supplies need to travel by air, boat, and sometimes even snow machine (you may know this as a snowmobile).

Food and water are essential supplies and you will quickly learn how to access those for your site.

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It helps to ask how folks get their water. Most of the villages have running water with varying degrees of turbidity. You may want to secure a filter if your site has water issues. Most of the villages have a store with limited supplies, but people tend to order their supplies from a nearby hub (a larger village) that has a grocery store. These “bush orders” will arrive to your village on a plane for you to pick up. Many food items can be acquired, but it all requires planning ahead.

Become familiar with the shipping methods available to you in your site. Some sites have multiple airfreight companies to choose from. Almost all sites have a post office as well. You will find that even though there may be more than one way to get supplies shipped in, they may vary in price or speed. It may cost $100 to ship some with the post office, but only $40 with the airlines. Many people will use online companies and find ways of getting “free shipping,” and your site will likely have a few people who are savvy about shipping methods.

How do I get a bed? Where do I buy a TV? Those can seem to be daunting challenges in a village with one road and no stores. Be calm and patient because there are solutions to this. There are companies in Anchorage that, for a fee, will go to a store to pick up your purchase and then package it for you. They will then take it to an airfreight company of your choosing and ship it to you in your village.
Transportation

Transportation is a unique and exciting topic for Alaskans. In some villages, you can drive to work on a snow machine or a 4-wheeler! Where else do you get to do that? When you arrive at your site, you will likely not have any transportation. You may have to catch a ride with a friend, or sometimes there are cabs. Unless you have a lot of stuff to carry, walking is a great way to get to know your surroundings. Some people may bike, but do not buy the nicest bike since it will likely be stored outside. With time, you may choose to buy a 4-wheeler, snow machine, or car. There are companies in Anchorage that will ship these to you used or new. If you choose to buy a used one in your village and you know little about engines, it is highly advisable to find someone who does to advise you on your purchase. Most sites do not have official mechanics, but they will often have local experts who may be able to help you.

A Note on Medical Care

Medical care is a tricky topic. If you require frequent and intense medical care, you may want to consider living in a larger community. Many of the sites have a health clinic with limited support. Some sites will have small hospitals, but travel to Anchorage for treatment is common. There are dental and vision clinics several times throughout the year.
Weather and Environment
Observe your surroundings and incorporate them into your classroom.

If you have already lived in a cold climate you may be well versed with the reality of changing weather. Either way, you must prepare yourself! Alaska has several diverse climates with statewide temperatures ranging from 40 below zero to 40 above zero in the same day. Depending on where you live and the time of year, the weather you will face will vary. In general, give yourself time to adjust to your new home before wandering too far out.

Snow, extremely low temperatures, and high wind are all possible anywhere in Alaska. Although it is best to stay indoors when the weather gets severe, it is important to have enough gear to be safe for the level of travel that you need to do; you can’t stay inside forever!

When it comes to dressing for the cold, people typically wear a moisture wicking base layer, wool socks, insulating mid layers, and an insulated and wind proof outer layer. Wool hats, face shields, goggles, mittens, and heavy boots are also very common. Your needs will differ based on your body and your activity level.

Some parts of Alaska, especially the southeast, will be very rainy. Having a good waterproof jacket, pants and boots are a must. Staying dry makes staying warm easier to manage with layering under your waterproof shell. You may have a store in your village that will often carry some things related to weather. However, it is often limited and very expensive. Do what you can to plan ahead and order what you may need.
You don’t need to buy all of your gear all at once. Fall in Alaska is the time for preparations and getting to know your climate. You may have a store in your village that will carry seasonal gear. However, it is often limited and expensive. Again, do what you can to plan ahead and order what you may need.

You will see people wearing garments made out of fur. The use of fur is common, legal, and cultural in Alaska. The fur is often one of the products of subsistence activities and can be an important part of the local economy. Be aware that there are cultural norms around the use of fur that will vary based on your location. Some of these norms indicate certain furs for specific genders or even age. It may help for you to ask around first and do your research if fur garments interest you.

As the light changes so does the weather! Each community will have its own uniqueness and migratory activities for various animals and birds in that locale. It is important to note that based on where you are, there are different uses, practices, and customs associated with animals. You will gradually learn this information, but it is one of the experiences that make Alaska such a great place to be.

The common land mammals of Alaska are caribou, moose, bear, fox and rabbit. Many are used for food and clothes, but customs will vary. The common sea mammals are whales (bowhead and beluga), spotted seals, bearded seal, and walrus. Marine mammals contain natural sources of vitamin C and vitamin D. The consumption of sea mammals is how many Native Alaskans kept from getting scurvy and/or rickets in the past.

Are you Ready?

Being a new teacher in rural Alaska is a great opportunity that brings with it as many rewards as it does responsibilities.

Prepare well, be open to new experiences, and journey on!