Notes From the Current Teacher at Decatur School

What is Decatur Island like?

Decatur is roughly four square miles with only 50 full time residents (the island is primarily second homes). Although considered “remote” due to it not being served by a ferry, it is still easily accessible from Anacortes, WA via a private water taxi or private boat or airplane. Residents include retired people, realtors, crabbers, caretakers, contractors, artists, and telecommuters. The only public access is the county boat ramp on the east side of the island, although some properties are part of a homeowners association with a community dock.

The USPS mail comes six days a week by boat, and UPS comes by air a couple of times a week. There is one small store on the island (opening soon!) and there is an option to have gas delivered (although many carry it in small 5-gallon containers by hand). Cars and large items can be barged to the island.

Social events tend to revolve around the school including weekly community lunches, student performances, and potlucks. In the spring and summer traditions like a weekly Saturday market, a 4th of July parade, and an annual sheep roundup/shearing bring many visitors. Recreational opportunities include fishing, crabbing, and shrimping.

How is this teaching position alike and different from a traditional classroom?

Requirements of assessment and curriculum still guide curriculum choices, but the teacher has great flexibility on how to meet district goals. The principal will make site visits a few times a year, but phone contact is weekly on the average. The teacher can choose to bring students to the larger school on Lopez for events, school photos, the library, or just to enjoy the “treat” of school lunch and maybe a ride on the school bus.

Although multi-tasking is a common practice for any teacher, Decatur School demands great flexibility in order to teach a wide range of ages and abilities.
simultaneously. Problem-based learning and multi-disciplinary units of study across the grades is encouraged. Students receive a great, individualized education.

This position is a unique “dream come true” for the right candidate. It is truly a rare opportunity, and both full-time and part-time residents love to get to know and brag about “their” island teacher. It’s part “Little House on the Prairie” but brought into the modern world. Relationships with students and families are uniquely close, especially in planning and undertaking field trips. Likewise, the children on the island receive special attention by residents as they are always wanting to hear what is happening in school.

This school setting and environment lends itself to service learning opportunities, newspapers, plays, science projects, as well as tapping into local talents. In the past we have invited retired lawyers to speak about the legal system, geologists to walk the beaches with us, and artists to provide workshops. Many times the school invites local folks to share in the learning and to become “students” for these projects.

One misconception, however, is that it is an “easy” job. The teacher needs to be able to teach all grades and content areas from the young, struggling reader to the highly capable middle school student. In addition to math, science, ELA, and Social Studies, the teacher needs to teach PE, Art, Technology, etc.

Another challenge is working alone. The Decatur School teacher answers the phone, handles visitors, and works with the part-time custodian on things like community use of the school for a weekend event, etc.
What is the school facility like?

The school is one classroom with a small office, a small “science nook” and two bathrooms. With the recent passage of a technology bond, an interactive projector has been installed and fiber optic internet will soon replace DSL.

Outdoors there is a small covered play area, outdoor storage sheds, and a playground (soon to be upgraded). The school is centrally located on the island and the beach is an easy walking distance. Outdoor environmental educational opportunities are endless. In addition to exploring nature, other private facilities have allowed school usage including a small nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, hiking trails, etc.

What are the greatest challenges in moving to Decatur?

Residents quickly learn to be resourceful and flexible. If you do not have an ingredient for cooking, you can’t easily run out to the store and buy it (although with our new tiny store opening soon, there is a chance...). Winters bring quiet and windy days, although the rain shadow means less rain than Seattle. Residents must be willing to work a little harder to bring in groceries and supplies and pack out garbage and recycling, but many community members are ready to help you learn the ropes. At any rate, a little “adventurous spirit” will make the new lifestyle a joy. And rubber boots are almost winter requirement. 😊

Residents keep a car at Skyline Marina in Anacortes. It is about a 30 minute boat ride to Decatur from Skyline either by water taxi (Paraclete Charters) or private boat. From Skyline Marina, just about any store, medical office, etc. is a short drive away. Most days the water taxi will make two trips to/from the island.

Where will the teacher live?

Just like anywhere, there are possibilities of renting homes, especially in the off-season. There are also two or three realtors on the island who can help with the possibilities of buying a home.

Is this really just a one-year position?

After eleven years of teaching on Decatur, the current teacher is taking a one-year leave-of-absence to explore a new challenge. It is very likely the teacher will not return, but nothing is determined to date.

What about curriculum?

The teacher has access to curriculum materials that the district uses, but often they are not suitable to the unique one-room school setting. The teacher has the
opportunity to create and locate materials, working with the principal in making these choices. The flexibility and freedom is one of the perks of the job.

And professional development?

The Decatur teacher joins Lopez teachers for meetings at various times throughout the year. In addition, there are always opportunities to attend conferences, do online webinars, etc. Due to the isolated nature of the position, it is important to stay connected with other educators and keep up with changes.

What calendar and school hours does Decatur School follow?

In general, Decatur School follows the schedule and hours of Lopez School. Sometimes the schedule will vary when it comes to things like conference week, etc. Again, decisions are made with the principal.