On the first day of her first job teaching music at an outer suburban high school, Rachel Valentine was thrown into the deep end.

“I walked into the classroom and they were literally swinging from those exposed rafters on the ceiling,” she says. It was a tough situation for a new teacher. But the excitable boys and girls simply needed the law laid down, which the young graduate did with aplomb. “I said ‘right, you need to get outside and line up,’” she says. Before long, those students enjoyed her classes and more chose to study music.

That was the first in a long line of teaching challenges that have led Valentine to her new position as deputy principal at St Aloysius College, in North Melbourne, where she is keen to enhance its strong reputation.

One of five children, Valentine grew up in Blackburn and attended St Thomas the Apostle Primary School and Blackburn High School, long known for its music program. Valentine took up the piano in grade 3 and at high school she also sang, played the oboe and entered music competitions and eisteddfods.

Her mother, Margaret Matthews, sang with the Bellburn Singers and her late father, Kevin, was an engineer. Valentine loved school and was known to organise impromptu classes. “I used to teach my friends piano and … different things and organise study groups,” she says.

A Hawthorn fan, she also played kick-to-kick in the days before girls could join a football team. At school, Valentine and her friends defied the nuns’ frowns to play footy – until one broke a window. “That ended our rebellious girls playing football thing,” she says.

In late high school Valentine flirted with journalism, completing work experience with 3LO’s youth radio arm. But the pull of university was stronger and she did a bachelor of arts and a diploma of education at Monash University. Valentine then spent almost seven years at Mooroolbark High School (now Mooroolbark College), where teachers did their best with limited resources. “I found the staff really collegiate,” she says.

In 1995, she took a part-time music teaching job at Whitefriars Catholic College for Boys – it evolved into a full-time position teaching music and English. The school was among Victoria’s first to have laptops, and students grew up with the internet. Just as important were good programs and preparing students for adulthood. Valentine soon became involved in curriculum and policy issues, which she felt were crucial to ensure teachers had the best resources and programs.

“I was always interested in the bigger picture and making the changes that make a difference in students’ learning outcomes,” she says.

Among other things, at Whitefriars Valentine was co-ordinator for music, instrumental music, equal opportunity in the workplace, and SRC. She had time off while having her children, Astrid in 1998, Declan in 2000 and Siobhan in 2002. Her husband, Greg, works in commercial building. Eventually becoming head of performing arts, Valentine also acted as operations manager. After almost 20 years, she decided to seek a new challenge and joined St Aloysius. The school was founded in 1887 by sisters from the Convent of Mercy, in Geelong, who moved to the North Melbourne site in 1891. St Aloysius achieves excellent VCE results.

Moving from a boys’ to a girls’ school is challenging and exciting. With two daughters and experience at a co-educational school, Valentine is no stranger to girls’ needs and is looking forward to overseeing their education with the principal, Mary Farah.

“I want the girls to think that everything’s possible … they’re the 21st century women who are going to make improvements in whatever held they choose, so you want to give them the skills and confidence.”

Valentine is impressed by the school’s positivity, energy and what staff have achieved. As well as a focus on pastoral care, St Aloysius has innovative programs such as GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths), a technology-rich way to integrate science and maths learning into fun, hands-on activities.

“It looks small from the outside but it’s got a big heart,” she says of St Aloysius.

“I think you feel that when you walk through the corridors … there’s a sense of happiness and excitement. “It’s a small school but it’s got big ideas and it’s got plans for a future that expand on its academic enrichment and pastoral programs, and I want to contribute to that.”

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