



Letting the Small Stuff Slide

—by Wayne Binns, retired SESA education specialist

“Wayne, I can’t believe that you’re still working at SESA after all these years. That’s a young man’s job.”

This was the surprised response that I received a few years ago from a school psychologist after I answered his question about what I was doing these days. His comment, similar to some made previously by several other friends, triggered a brief period of self-reflection. What exactly was it that made my work at SESA remain interesting, challenging, and enjoyable over all these years? After some thought, I was able to summarize my approach to working as an education specialist in rural Alaska, despite the on-going challenges and general “wear and tear.” Similar conditions had caused many of my former SESA colleagues to move on to other positions within Alaska and out of state. Here was my “magic formula:”

Always listen more than you speak, maintain a sense of humor, let the small stuff slide (be flexible), and constantly be on the lookout and appreciate all of those unique and wonderful opportunities for developing new relationships and experiencing unexpected adventures.

Looking back over my more than 20-year career at SESA, which began in the mid-1980s, helps me to recognize the major changes that have occurred within Alaska’s education system, with SESA as an agency, and with my own personal and professional life. When I first started working at SESA, the agency was called Alaska Resources for the Moderately and Severely Impaired (ARMSI). We were a close-knit group of mainly single people who were pretty self-directed and willing to push their comfort levels with the rigors of frequent travel in rural/remote Alaskan school districts. At the time, the agency was funded primarily by a collection of grants (state and federal), because the agency’s services were not yet mandated nor funded through funds appropriated through the state’s Department of Education until 1986. During my early years at SESA, village schools

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SESA Board & Staff

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RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Behavioral Strategies



Brief recess- Chignik Lagoon School



Wayne Binns with silver salmon—
Kodiak, Fall, 2009.

“It’s been a long, challenging and rewarding career at SESA. Now it’s time for me to slide into the next chapter of my life with the hopes that it can provide a whole new set of potential adventures.”

—Wayne Binns

The Spring 2012 Issue of the SESA Newsletter is dedicated to Wayne Binns who served communities as an educational specialist throughout Alaska for over 20-years. Wayne graduated from The University of Colorado Boulder in 1977 with a BA in psychology, received a master degree in counseling from University of Alaska, Anchorage in 1982, and received a doctorate in educational psychology in 1997 at the University of Utah. During his long career as an emotional disturbance specialist at SESA, Wayne participated in the creation of the statewide Bring the Kids Home program, and implemented FASD education and training for professionals throughout the state. He fondly remembers the exotic places that he visited in Alaska and the special relationships that grew into friendships with many people throughout Alaska. Wayne is now enjoying his time traveling, fishing, golfing and skiing with his wife Pam of 30-years.

in rural/remote Alaska were still experiencing “growing pains” associated with the continuing introduction and construction of village-based high schools, following the Molly Hootch decision of 1976 and the subsequent decree for wide-spread school construction.

This landmark Alaska Supreme Court decree resulted in the construction of new school buildings across the state and included some 126 villages over an 8 to 10-year period at a cost of about \$150 million. High school students from most rural villages had previously been required to leave their home communities to attend boarding schools, many in the Lower 48, if they chose to attend school beyond the eighth grade. Following the Molly Hootch decision, high school students could remain in their home communities to graduate.

A few of my earliest SESA trips to the Bush included some village schools that were still in transition, operating partially out of the old Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) buildings (circa 1950s), some of which were still staffed by teachers who had originally been hired by the BIA to teach grades one through eight. During one of these early visits, I was surprised when I browsed some of the text books that were in use at the time, and realized that they included reading books that I had read during my early elementary school years (e.g., Dick and Jane) some 25-years earlier. At the time, I remember thinking that these books and other curricula that were in use seemed very irrelevant to village life and the experiences of the young students who were just learning to read.

Years later, I had similar thoughts and questions about curriculum relevance when I saw first-hand how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) changed the educational climate in many rural schools. With the pressure of high stakes testing (e.g., HSGQE), there appeared to be an almost frantic approach to direct instruction in the “Three Rs,” with many of the less academic subjects (music, art, vocational, etc.) and activities losing status, taking a back seat, or being eliminated all together. Along with these changes, there seemed to be a corresponding increase in student disinterest, apathy, and feelings of defeat.

This was highly obvious with a number of high school students with whom I worked. Most had no interest in preparing for post-secondary education, but they no longer had access to well equipped school shops or opportunities to learn through hands-on experience. These were both the types of activities that were often the highlights of the students’ school day, which kept them engaged and involved. Shop teachers and vocationally related instruction, were often considered expendable, when districts needed to focus on hiring highly qualified teachers of academics because of strict federal regulations. Although there was a need for higher levels of rural school accountability, the resulting improved academic performance at the school and district level has not been accomplished without a significant number of casualties and morale problems for both students and teachers over the recent past.

Over time, the BIA school buildings often morphed into teacher housing and faced eventual demolition as the newly constructed schools spread across the state. Ironically, the original “open classroom” design used in most of the new schools, which had large open, common spaces, were already being modified a few years after their original construction. It seemed that more traditional classrooms with walls, reduced noise and helped with classroom organization. As a result, many of the new schools were retrofitted with remodeled interiors a few years after their original construction.

Besides having new buildings with running water and often some of the only telephones in the village, the new schools also provided parents and the

“During my early years at SESA, village schools in rural / remote Alaska were still experiencing “growing pains” associated with the continuing introduction and construction of village-based high schools.”

community opportunities to participate in activities that were unavailable when high school students attended school out side of the village. Events and activities that are often taken for granted at most high schools in larger communities, took on the role of important, highly anticipated community events in small villages. The new schools became the central social hub for the community and hosted events like school proms, high school graduation, and inter-school sports. It is easy to overlook why these previously unavailable events, which occurred hundreds or thousands of miles away (i.e., at boarding school), were now highly valued and only a brief walk, snow machine, or four-wheeler ride away. After having attended my fair share of village-based games, and the small schools state tournaments, I have often felt that the love, intensity, and importance of high school sports (basketball in particular) would make a great documentary film. For most, it is difficult to understand what an important role travel between villages and around the state means for

rural students, without having been directly exposed to the ins-and-outs of village life.

As these new schools sprung up around Alaska, they all required new high school teachers to teach the courses that were previously unavailable in the typical village-based school. In many cases, these new teachers were young, inexperienced teachers fresh out of college. Many were recruited at Lower 48 job fairs, where they were lured by attractive salaries and the possibility of an adventurous life in rural Alaska. What was not initially obvious to these new hires was that they had to quickly adjust to a harsh climate, long dark winters, challenging living/housing conditions, and often a new, unfamiliar local culture.

Some of the teachers with whom I worked were able to adjust, fit in, and thrive under these unique challenges. Most of them, however, required a lot of mid-year counseling to handle their homesickness and/or help with coping with the conflict among school staff, as well as local village politics. These additional challenges were not anticipated. Few of the young educators had any idea that there were many non-teaching issues that were not discussed in their teacher-prep programs at college. I soon realized that a big part of my job duties would be to support these teachers, while being careful not to unintentionally take sides or become caught up in the school/community politics or dynamics.

These challenges were often magnified in the area of special education. Special educators were usually trained as generalists for teaching students with high incidence, mild to moderate disabilities (LD, speech-language problems,

Welcome New Staff

MERIAH CORY joined SESA as a Multiple Disabilities Specialist in January of 2012. Most recently served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan. While there she worked under the Department of Education helping to develop after school programs for students. She worked with both government and non-governmental entities to develop life skills programs for youth with mild to severe disabilities.

Meriah graduated in 2008 from Montana State University with degrees in Special Education and Elementary Education. When not traveling for her job, Meriah enjoys hiking, biking and anything out of doors. She is enjoying her time in

Alaska and in particular appreciates the cultural experiences she has had the opportunity to witness.

PHYLLIS BARNETT joined SESA in January of 2012 as a new Educational Specialist with GAINS/PBIS. She received her undergraduate degree at University of Alaska Anchorage in 1999 and completed the MAT degree program at UAA in 2000. She comes to SESA from 10-years of teaching in the Western Alaskan village of St. Mary’s. Phyllis is born and raised on Homer’s Kachemak Bay. Her parents came separately to Alaska, her father in the 1930s and her mother in 1946. Her

father was a fur trapper in the Upper Kuskokwim area and later a bank Vice President in Homer. Her mother come to Alaska to work on the railroad and moved to the Kenai Peninsula to “prove-up” on a homestead there. Phyllis and her husband enjoy spending as much time as possible out of doors in both summer and winter; boating, fishing, hiking in summer, and skiing in winter. Travel is also a part of her life as her husband is from Scotland where they go on a regular basis to visit family, and her son and his wife live in San Diego with her four month old granddaughter, Bella, whom she feels compelled to visit as often as possible. ■

etc.). They were now required to work with all special needs students in the village, despite the severity of the disability, including those with intensive needs. Lack of specialized training often led to an inexperienced teacher's feelings of incompetence, reduced self-confidence, which only added to their ever-increasing stress levels.

I quickly recognized that another big part of my job would be to help teachers to feel and progressively become more competent in working with students who were identified for special education services because of their emotional/behavioral challenge (emotionally disturbed). I also realized that the last thing that these teachers needed was an Anchorage-based "expert" flying in for a few days, pointing out how little they knew, and telling them how much more they had to read, learn, and do to promote student success. As much as possible, I tried to identify the teachers' strengths and teaching styles. I then tried to add to what they were already doing in incremental steps, building a series of small successes over time. In other words, I attempted to apply some of the same strategies that I encouraged them to use with their target students.

This was often a real challenge because of high teacher turnover and the problem of teacher retention in rural school districts. I quickly learned that paraprofessional teacher aides would play an enormous role in maintaining consistency and continuity in a student's school program from year-to-year. Paraprofessionals knew and often had a long history with students and their families. They often grew up in the village and had a broad perspective of the school and local politics. Most importantly it was almost guaranteed that they would be remaining in the village.

Over the years, I have had the privilege to meet and become friends with the families of many of my students. I worked with some students beginning from pre-school all the way through high school. For many of these students I provided a historical perspective and served as a link during the change in school staff. Over the years, I witnessed a number of student successes. I was able to watch several students' progress from a significant amount of time being spent outside of the classroom, including suspensions and self-contained settings. They gradually became full-time successful participants in the general education classroom. Extra-curricular activities and social functions, which often presented the greatest challenges for these students, also became increasingly accessible and successful following the joint efforts of the students, their teachers, and their families.

One example of student success that stands out for me involved a fourth grade girl. She was very withdrawn, had little self-confidence, and was easily frustrated with academic tasks she found challenging. Following three unsuccessful tries, she eventually passed the High School

"Lack of specialized training often led to an inexperienced teacher's feeling of incompetence, reduced self-confidence, which only added to their ever-increasing stress levels."

Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE), after her refusal to give up and by an on-going level of encouragement and support from several of her teachers.

Of course, there were a number of students who were not successful at school or in the community, despite high levels of concern and support. These students wound up being hospitalized in psychiatric facilities, placed in out-of-state residential facilities, were incarcerated, dropped out, or moved away with their families and virtually disappeared. These students and their on-going problems were always the saddest and most disappointing reality for me. I always took it hard and somewhat personally when I received the sad news about the need for one of my students to leave their home communities because of inadequate levels of support for the severity of their problems.

Unfortunately, variations on the sad situations like those described above have changed little over the span of my career. There has been a chronic lack of consistent, quality rural/remote behavioral health services over much of the state. Where there are agencies and facilities available, they have historically been understaffed, overworked, with a high turnover rate and difficulty with staff recruitment and retention. There has been an on-going series of attempts to transplant successful models from the Lower 48 that have often been a poor match and poor fit for rural Alaska. Because many of these programs have been grant-funded and included limited local-input, they have often resulted in a lack of motivation, trust, and hope from the local people who could benefit most from consistent reliable services. Witnessing a seemingly endless stream of time-limited projects and the changing personnel that come and go quickly, it is hard for rural stakeholders to not fall victim to that "here we go again" syndrome.

Not wishing to appear or resign myself to being overly pessimistic, I continued to promote what I saw as the best potential solution to this lack of services. I still believe that in order for behavioral health services to be successful they need to be school-based and use an instructional, educational approach; to use the community, including the schools and their staff that are already familiar to students

and their families. Schools continue to be community hubs with well-trained staff. Through continual improvement in technology, including band-width, and school staff's familiarity in working with it, access to training, technical assistance, and continuing support via distance delivery (e.g., Web-based, video-conferencing, etc) is currently becoming second-nature in rural schools. These developments allow for much more cost-effective forms of consultation, coaching, and support from specialists and professionals who cannot be accessed through face-to-face contact.

More importantly, emphasizing and beefing-up school-based behavioral health models can encourage schools to "grow their own" local experts. Through stipends and other innovative use of funding, teachers could be encouraged to develop mental health skills to address all but the most serious and acute crises. Using their existing teaching strengths and skills, educators could learn to promote social skills, decision-making, problem solving, and self-regulation. With the back-up and support via technology from specialists in urban Alaska or elsewhere, students with emotional/behavioral challenges could receive preventive and early intervention without the need to go anywhere other than the school building.

For the same reasons described earlier, para-professionals could also play a key role in delivering school-based behavioral health services. Much like the existing village health aide model, school-based aides could provide similar services using educational strategies in a school. Again, paraprofessionals would provide the added advantages of local knowledge of the community, its history, its families, and its unique challenges through their deep connections and roots. ■

NOTE— For a more in-depth look at the important role and function of paraprofessionals in special education, please see the insert from the Spring 2011 issue of the SESA Newsletter.

Not Your Ordinary Workday... Remote Alaska —by Wayne Binns

With all of the air travel required of an every-other-week SESA travel schedule, I logged thousands of air taxi miles as a passenger throughout Bush, Alaska. Most of the village airstrips were more than a long walk from the school. As a result, riding to and from the strips was done on the back of a four wheeler (ATV), a snow machine or on the freight sled being dragged behind it, or in the back of the school's pick-up truck. One important piece of advice that I offered to new hires at SESA on the subject of travel was, "Never be the last one standing at the airstrip." In other words, don't be afraid to ask whoever is there for a ride to the school. Another critical travel step was maintaining frequent contact with the village-based air taxi agent, and keeping them informed of my whereabouts during my stay and when I was scheduled to fly out.

Although I was fortunate enough to never crash, I had a number of white-knuckle flights. At one gravel strip, the pilot buzzed the airstrip several times, prior to his final approach, to check to see if it was still frozen enough or too rutted out to land during Spring breakup. Then, there was the time that the pilot had to turn around midway into a mountain pass and return to our point of origin, when the weather closed down. Those mountain peaks were beautiful, but way too close. On another occasion during a Southeast floatplane flight, the pilot began to circle, waiting for the visibility to improve. Finally, he landed in the ocean and waited for the cloud ceiling to lift before being able to continue to the home base. Another noteworthy incident involved getting a radio distress call from a private pilot while I was on a flight back to a hub town from a Southeast village. The private pilot who made the distress call had hit a submerged



Middle Kenai float trip, Spring 2010.

rock on a lake and ripped a gash in one of his plane's floats. He had his two sons with him and all three were standing on one of the planes floats with their life jackets on when we landed on the lake to help. One of the plane's wings was just beginning to touch the water. We picked up the boys and flew them to town while their father chose to stay with his airplane. He asked the air taxi pilot to bring him a pump on his return from town so that he could pump out the damaged float and limp the plane to shore to repair the float. Lastly, following 9/11, I was on Prince of Wales Island, unsure when I would be able to fly to Ketchikan and return to Anchorage. When the government lifted the no-fly decree, I was lucky enough to get the first northbound Alaska Airlines jet from Seattle to Alaska. I quickly had to gather my things, rush to the town's float lane dock, and fly to the Ketchikan airport dock just in time to catch the jet home.

Not all transportation was by air. In one Southeast district the school's "bus" was actually a boat. In the same district, I once conducted a home visit with the special education teacher by way of a damp and choppy skiff ride to the family's float house in a nearby cove. And of course there were the numerous ferry trips when the weather was not conducive to flying. One of my "fondest" memories of one such ferry trip was being surrounded by a group of Brownies and Girl Scouts who took turns stumbling to the ships rest room during a group attack of seasickness – and it truly was contagious!

All travelers in rural Alaska have their fair share of wildlife sightings and experiences. The following are my choices of wildlife-related "greatest hits." During my very first trip to the village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island in 1984, we landed at the height of the village's roundup of its reindeer herd. Mounted on their snow machines, village men were corralling reindeer into a pen for later butchering as part of the village's commercial operation. Later, during a visit to King Salmon, a hotel manager showed me a video of a huge herd of caribou that he recorded a few days earlier. That same day I came upon the same herd just off the side of the road. It was a sea of hooves and antlers, almost as far as I could see. When I rolled down the window of the vehicle the experience was enhanced by the herd's sounds and smell. Sadly, possibly because of a shift in migration pattern, this same herd has dwindled in the area from several thousand to several dozen animals.

A fine example of how routine wildlife experiences are to children in rural schools was a Show and Tell session that I observed in a school on the Alaska Peninsula. The highlight was the head of a wolf that had been shot and killed by an elementary girl's father the previous afternoon after a wolf pack had recently killed several village dogs. Students passed around the skull, counted and felt the wolf's teeth. Another special incident occurred while I was cross-country skiing after school in a Southwest village. I saw a significant amount of steam rising a hundred yards or so away. Through the fog



Prince of Wales Island - Spring, 2011.

I thought that it might have been some form of geothermal vent or hot spring. On closer inspection, I found that it was actually a hunter gutting a musk ox after killing it with a bow and arrow. Finally, my all time favorite wildlife experience occurred in Southeast Alaska. It was a living example of the food chain in action that occurred during a class' field trip to a local river mouth, presumably to observe the hooligan running up the river. Sea lions were chasing masses of panicked hooligan that splashed up on shoreline as the sea lions zoomed back and forth at the mouth of the river. Killer whales then arrived and waited for the tide to come in so that they could reach the river's mouth to attack the sea lions. Despite the discouragement by their teacher, the students insisted on waiting for a few more minutes for the fast approaching tide. The result wasn't pretty, but it was very educational.

The final set of experiences that stand out for me do not fit neatly under any single category. Other than being fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time, each episode was unique. That is, each of these experiences was very special in its own way and would be difficult to plan or duplicate. The first was being invited to take a steam bath by a male school aide and several of the village elders. I didn't find out until quite a bit later that it was somewhat of an honor to be invited to participate as an "outsider" during one of my first visits to the village. Another memorable experience occurred in the late evening in an interior village with a teacher who was training a team of sled dogs for sprint races later in the year in Fairbanks. The temperature was between 40 and 50 below and the Northern Lights were out in all their glory. I could have stayed out all night, but it was a bit too chilly for this city slicker, even with full arctic wear. Finally, during a trip to an Alaskan Peninsula village I had the opportunity to meet and talk with a couple who had walked and paddled an inflatable raft from Washington state to the village on their way further down the Aleutian Island chain. They had been making their epic journey for several months and just happened to show up at the village while I was there. ■

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SESA Board meetings are open to the public.

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Conferences & Workshops

Alaska

■ **2013 Alaska Statewide Special Education Conference 2013**
February 2 – 8, 2013
Hilton Hotel, Anchorage
www.assec.org

National

■ **Breakthrough Strategies to Teach and Counsel Troubled Youth**
May 3, 2012 - May 4, 2012
Holiday Inn, 19621 International,
Seattle, WA
<http://www.youthchg.com/live.html>

■ **2012 National Transition Conference: College and Careers for Youth with Disabilities**
May 30, 2012 - June 1, 2012
Washington Marriott - Wardman
Park, Washington DC
<http://www.transition2012.org/>

■ **The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach: Dr. Ross Greene Treatment of Kids with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges**
May 4, 2012
Overland Park, Kansas
http://www.transdis.com/live-courses/course_detail.php?id=100

■ **Web-Connected Minds: How Technology Transforms Brains, Teaching and Attention**
May 4-6, 2012
Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel
Arlington, VA
<http://www.learningandthebrain.com/Event-95/Web-Connected-Minds/Program>

■ **Child and Youth Mental Health Matters**
May 6-8, 2012
The Coast Plaza Hotel & Suites,
Vancouver, BC Canada
<http://www.interprofessional.ubc.ca/CYMHM/default.asp>

■ **NJAFPA - Spring Training Institute**
Keynote Speaker: Dr. Robert Marzan
May 23 - 24, 2012
Atlantic City, NJ
<http://www.njeducatorsprofession-aldevelopment.com/spring-training-institute/>

■ **PEPNet 2.0 Training Institute**
Instructing students who are deaf or hard of hearing and their varying communication needs.
July 9, 2012 - July 14, 2012
New Orleans, LA
<http://www.pepnet.org/pti/>

■ **Improving Children's Mental Health Care in an Era of Change, Challenge, and Innovation**
July 25, 2012 - July 29, 2012
Orlando, FL
<http://guchd.georgetown.edu/training/88504.html>

■ **Touch Technology Applications for Children with Special Needs**
Renaissance St. Louis Airport Hotel, St. Louis, MO
September 17 - 18, 2012
<http://www.specialneedstouchtechnology.com/>

■ **National Federation of the Blind Teacher Leader Seminar**
Holiday Inn Baltimore-Inner Harbor, Baltimore, MD
January 25 - 27, 2013
<http://www.nfb.org/teacher-leader-seminar>

International

■ **The 5th International Conference on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**
February 27, 2013 to March 2, 2013
The Westin Bayshore, Vancouver, BC, Canada
<http://www.interprofessional.ubc.ca/FASD/default.asp>

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“...In living I was taught to be respectful to others. I was taught to follow all the rules about living in the village, so that I would be a respectful person in the future. You see, if I did not help the older folks, they would be inclined not to help me, because I did not obey the rules. The more I obeyed their counseling, the more they gave me their ideas as I grew up.”

PAUL TIULANA from King Island
Courtesy of the Alaska Native Heritage Center