

## **Beth Brandes - Full Interview**

**Beth:** My name is Beth Brandes, I work at Guerin Catholic High School, and I am the freshman and sophomore counselor. I used to be for all freshmen and sophomores but as we've grown I actually have the alphabetical split M-Z.

**Cheryl:** Oh, okay and how long have you been doing that Beth?

**Beth:** I am in my fifth year.

**Cheryl:** Oh, wonderful, can you tell me just a little bit about some of the challenges that you were facing when you first contacted Susan?

**Beth:** Certainly, actually myself and our guidance director and just our office in general were discussing different programs and initiatives and talking about our year-end review and reporting where we thought maybe our students could benefit especially transitioning from middle school to high school and my self being a former middle school teacher kind of looking at maybe where especially the freshman in particular. It's their first year and a very important year in the transition into high school that they do well and they're successful not only through high school but then we also give them skills to build on, post secondary career and life in general.

And we were talking about study skills and it seemed kind of funny because if you look at our students, kind of our demographic is a very high functioning, diverse, well educated demographically so to say I'm looking at these kids who are for the most part very gifted and talented, and you think study skills, how does this apply? And for all of us involved, it was pretty easy to see some of the students are blessed with their academic aptitude, they really haven't had to tap into I would say your true study skills whether it be reading strategies, note taking, or just study in general. How to study for a test because just with their innate ability has been able to get by or do better than get by, I shouldn't just say get by, I mean they are A's, B's and have never really had to open a book and put forth that extra effort.

So freshman year for most students is somewhat I would say of an easy transition academically. It's not too demanding and certainly it does pose some challenges for the fact that they are in high school but still able to kind of use that same method or approach that they had been in K-8 and do somewhat well but it was starting to slowly catch up to them. So the reason from what we had seen and

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what we were experiencing, we thought well, if we could help them out even just a little bit more by giving them some skills and resources that they are going to need and they are going to need to know how to utilize, why not start with the freshman and give them something like I said again that can help them currently with where they are at in high school but then like I said post secondary and beyond.

**Cheryl:** So what you basically focused on the freshman themselves now how long have you been working with Susan and when did you first start the program?

**Beth:** This is our second year. We just completed our second year of the SOAR Study Skills curriculum in the last year being our first, we kind of were playing around with it and we actually brought Susan any year ago, last summer when we were first implementing the program and since we have this period called The Kyros, which is our faith formation time, also academic support and there's a lot that goes on during that period. But faith formation for the first 15 or 20 minutes where they, our students, the freshman are paired with their freshman teachers but then sophomore, sophomore through senior males as well as sophomore through senior females are paired then with a corresponding female teacher, male students with male teachers.

I mean it's kind of like an extended family of home. I mean it's a very close bonding time period especially from a faith formation aspect and where they attend mass in groups and other things. But then it's a 45-minute period so the remaining 30 minutes are for academic support where students can see teachers or make up tests or they work on homework, whatever they need to do during that time. We thought this would be the perfect place or opportunity to have our freshman teachers come to know their students even better and to incorporate the study skills curriculum and to enforce it with them, as they would see them all day long. And all their teachers who taught the freshman curriculum would be in sync.

**Cheryl:** That actually leads me into another question. Since you started working with Susan and with SOAR Study Skills, how do you see things differently? How are the students responding? One thing I know that Susan mentioned to me personally when she was there speaking with you guys, she spoke to a parent who really juggling between which of the two schools she wanted to enroll her student in and it was these study skills piece that she was most concerned about and so she was actually thrilled to know that you guys were providing that. Susan mention it to me in she says boy, I don't think a lot of times schools think of the fact that this really can be a deal breaker to a degree with some people. It could really be a great piece that they could use to help bring more students to their school. So I

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know that was an important thing to the parents so I would be curious as to how you have seen things different and change and how that is working for you.

**Beth:** Definitely, I would have to agree, it's especially for private, or Catholic schools like ourselves where it's tuition-based and the numbers are important to us. So that could definitely play an important role but I see a mixture of things. I see students who have been very happy with the program as well as parents. And then sometimes I think at this stage in the game your parents are going to be the ones that tend to appreciate it more than the students and that just happens to be where they are at developmentally. It's the difference between an adult and a teenager.

**Cheryl:** Right.

**Beth:** And it's not, you know I see the teenagers or our freshman seeing some very good things. Like you said even if it's one strategy or one initiative that they learn that they can take with them to improve what they're doing to make them a more efficient learner, then great. I mean that's one more thing you've empowered yourself with so I see it being positive all the way around. Like I said and you could draw a lot of positives from it but I think sometimes what we have thought just in general and not even with SOAR, it would be anything has become like I said, these students still don't see the need of certain skills because like I said their freshman year, they're still able to do what's working for them.

It's still working to a certain degree because it is still possible in the freshman year where that possibility starts to become less and less as they go on through high school, as it should as expectations step up and the fact that they are in a private Catholic college prep environment. And so it is different, the expectations are a little bit different but with the parents seeing this in recognizing this where their student strengths are and there are strengths to be had, they appreciate those aspects of organization and the binder system to help them to get organized with their locker or those pieces where I would say for kids certainly there are aspects of SOAR like I said the test taking, note taking that can help all of our students but I see those kids who are a little bit higher achieving with our groups in general. It seems to be organization is huge for them, anything and like I said the binder system and the organization, the planning method, the planner that they choose is huge.

That's a very big element or piece for our kids that I see across the board because to me that's kind of the fundamental, the basics, these are the things you have to be doing first in order for the other aspects or topics that you are covering in SOAR to work. I mean you have to be doing the simple things first and to me the

simple things are, I apologize Cheryl I'm going to be fighting announcements here...

**Cheryl:** That's okay.

**Beth:** But simple stuff meaning like I said, just the fact that, writing down your assignments, do you know where you wrote down those assignments or did you even write down your assignments and if you did, where did you put them? Did you put them on sticky notes? Did you write them in your calendar on your laptop? Do you write them in your school planner? I mean we still have kids that are still fighting those battles and then of course the binder system, kids having some the that they can keep in order in an organized in order to find like I said, homework assignments getting turned in. You think, oh well, their freshman in high school, they are 14, 15 years old they should have this down, but there are still a lot of kids that, that's their biggest nemesis and keeping them from being prepared and successful in their day-to-day activities.

So I, just as I told Susan I will share with you is to me, like being an educator, being a counselor, being a former teacher and a parent, I can see huge rewards with this program. And like I said certainly there are students who see that but I think the parents appreciate it even more and it gives them tools to kind of equip them in how to handle their students and give them tips and/or suggestions on how they can handle different aspects that maybe their students are struggling with along with us as a school.

**Cheryl:** Now I have another question for you too and it just made me think about this as you were telling me about they are freshman and then you're going to be going into the second year of having a group, I think it will be kind of interesting to watch to see if that class as they keep moving through, if they seem to have better success in staying organized and all of that, having had this foundation.

**Beth:** The one thing I can tell you and I apologize because I don't have these statistics in front of me but we did do kind of a breakdown where we gave them and we looked at the study skills scorecard which we use as a pre-and post-test with our students. And then we kind of look at the averages of that in the different categories and looked at where students felt that they were stronger or weaker and we kind of had a breakdown of that. And it was very positive looking at that, I apologize I do not have that information to share with you because we want to see and kind of gauge where we are at and see what they thought and if it aligned with our own thoughts from a guidance perspective since we are the ones facilitating the process through our freshman teachers.

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And I can say this, the class last year who are this year's sophomores so the class of 2013, the current sophomores who would have done the SOAR program last year. I can remember like I said after having – we are on a trimester system so they are 12 weeks long and so roughly the middle of November last year, a year ago November when the students had finished, they had taken their first high school finals ever. I am looking at those credits and we had roughly 185 students, 185 in the freshman class and we get a no credit list. And for us a no credit is anything below 74%, anything less than a C- does not count as a grade, it does not go on the transcript. Excuse me, it is on the transcript that shows up as an NC, no credit or as a failure. And that was in compared to previous years, I just are that was an ultimate low of no credits that we had for the end of the first trimester.

Now, to say could we hone in on and say that SOAR was the advocate for that and helped keep them from failing particular classes, it would be hard to say. I mean there's multiple variables that you could look at however, I certainly know it didn't hurt them and I know there were probably some things in there that help them stay fresh and maybe they were more attentive too because they were doing that and they were practicing it and they were actually putting it into action. So that was very positive for us to see as well in comparison to other trimesters. You know, I don't have that, I just remember myself and the other sophomore freshman counselor looking at it and saying, wow, this is great. At least we can say, I'm sure played some role in it and obviously having done that that was another positive for us to see and to kind of attribute to SOAR as well as the help.

**Cheryl:** Well, and I know that SOAR's number one objective is through study skills to help students realize that they can learn to be strategic with learning and to be organized and so one of the questions that I was going to ask you is, if keeping that in mind, if you saw any signs or evidence from students, actually becoming more strategic or taking greater initiative in managing their schoolwork and it kind of sounds like that is sort of happening.

**Beth:** Yes, the only way I can prove that and say there's a correlation between that and actual SOAR are the one to one sit down meetings that we have with our students at least once sometimes twice a year with each grade level and then actually sharing that feedback which we do during our freshman meetings. So and that was coming through and some of it was student volunteered and some of that was counselor led questions. So it was very positive as a whole and the students were upfront and honest, they will tell you how they feel which I appreciate and not just because you're an adult or whatever else. They will be pretty honest about yeah, it was very beneficial or no I think I'm doing okay here whatever but it was very positive with students saying this was an area that I was struggling with a

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little bit but now I have some tips or suggestions and I'm really trying to work at that.

So that was good, at least whether they are or not the fact that they were cognizant of it and they were able to talk about it makes me believe that yes, it has had an effect on maybe some of how they plan things and what their strategy is for attacking different things.

So yeah, I do believe that like I said, it does make them think about some things that one; they learned a very long time ago but have not been reinforcing maybe for several years or ever or whatever. And we are making them reduce some things or introducing some new things, concepts that every student should know and know how to utilize and for whatever reason they got away from and so we want to get them back on track and make sure that they are maximizing their God-given potential, that's our number one.

**Cheryl:** I do appreciate your time and I want to be respectful of that and I just have a couple of other things real quickly for you.

**Beth:** That's fine.

**Cheryl:** Obviously, you've had a really good experience working with SOAR in with Susan and had some great results with that but on a personal level what was it like working with Susan?

**Beth:** I thoroughly enjoyed working with her, it makes me reminisce about when I was back in the classroom. That's what I feel like in our conversations and having that dialogue it takes me back there, which is a fond memory of mine and that's the number one thing I miss about being a counselor is not getting to have – we get a lot of interaction with our students one to one. I mean small groups, you name it we have a lot of different – were very blessed and fortunate in that way being a smaller school but we are able to get in the classrooms and do things with our kids. We are very hands on but Susan is so very easy to work with and so flexible, so supportive, very prompt. I feel like whatever I would need she's going to go the extra mile in order to try to meet that for support or assistance in any way she can.

So I think that's another reason why her program is so successful because she is so passionate about it and you can see that. So anytime you're passionate about what you're doing and you're willing to put yourself out there and help others, I think you're almost guaranteed success.

**Cheryl:** Boy, I couldn't agree with you more on that, that's for sure.

**Beth:** Well thank you.

**Cheryl:** I so appreciate your time and I know that I want to give you one last opportunity. I know that one of the things that Susan has asked me is to give you the opportunity to share with her if there's anything during your experience with her that you felt could have been done better or any limitations you experienced or even any suggestions you might have for additional services she could provide for you in the future that she might not have even considered that would be helpful to you.

**Beth:** Oh thank you Cheryl, I appreciate that and there's nothing urgent or that takes priority that I see really needing any... The fact that I'm the one that facilitates it and runs it with our freshman teachers it's kind of my baby and I set up all of the lesson plans. I put together all the lesson plans for the teachers and get those to them a week prior to the lesson and so really all they have to do is just take my notes and take what I've given them in lesson plan format and then kind of convey that to the students and then start that dialogue and conversation with what needs to be done.

So I've really taken that to heart and I've fine-tuned a couple of things this year as I continue to work with the students but one of the things that I thought was helpful and actually she did this with our guidance director, Martin Kirkwood is she sat down because we do this on a trimester system. So we roughly are trimesters are from August to November, November to February, and then February to May and sometimes spill into June.

Our goal was to do this, making sense at the beginning of the year and basically taking the first trimester to implement these various study skills and also out of respect for our teachers we try to leave sometime. We use about 10 of the 12 weeks for SOAR and that's only taught one day a week but the focus is the end that hopefully they will revisit those ideas not only during SOAR time but also then they will see those strategies and techniques they are learning used throughout their freshman curriculum as the freshman teachers are teaching that.

**Cheryl:** Right.

**Beth:** So, the hope is that they are getting that constant reinforcement which for the most part I really believe they are but it really was, like I said and coming back to – I kind of trailed off there is we had the weeks because we had 10 weeks and there's more topics, I believe there's about 15 topics or so. I apologize for not having that in front of me.

**Cheryl:** That's okay.

**Beth:** But we kind of sat down with Susan or she sat down with Mr. Kirkwood to kind of plan out which topics do you think are adamant, which ones do you think are necessary, and then what order would you teach those in, in comparison to the table of contents. Would you stay with that order or whatever? So that was very helpful and I was grateful for that.

And so what I tried to do this year to make the most of things as some things are I think of the topics she gave us are imperative to teach the students and especially like the test taking is a little bit longer endeavor and there's a couple of others too like the binder system that we want to make sure they really get down that I tried to find tune and tweak.

So I guess that would be the only thing and that's what I need to do is to get in touch with Susan to see okay, would you still agree with this system that we have in place, would you think that we need to change anything, or is there a better way we could be doing this. You know some more just kind of a checking in and kind of briefing, debriefing session about what's going on. But that's it, other than that I feel pretty good and confident, we have a lot of positive feedback regarding this program.

**Cheryl:** I will be passing this on to her. She will be listening to the recording so I will make sure that she notes that because I'm sure that this will be of real interest to her just to talk to you about that. Well, I think that's pretty much it as we wrap this up I guess the only last thing I would have for you Beth is if somebody were interested in working with SOAR, is there anything that you would want them to know that's important that you may not have already shared with me?

**Beth:** It kind of goes back to what I said about Susan. I think, you know someone working with soar, you definitely have to be passionate and have the knowledge, and love what you're doing then it makes things that much easier and for me this gives me a chance to kind of reminisce and put myself back in the classroom and teaching which I love to do.

And like I said, I live for every moment that I get to be with the students in front of them and teaching them and interacting with them. So for me putting this curriculum together and actual lesson plans isn't a task for me as it is more of a almost a therapy, a hobby. It is relaxing, it just kind of fits together. The word that comes to mind definitely is passionate. You've got to love what you do and you have to find out – I think was very important I guess I would add to that is you've got pictures of the shoes of a teenager. You definitely have to be able to do that



and I'm not saying that my teaching experience at middle school gave me the experience or background to do that but it certainly helped.

And I love that age group, and to me freshman, there's very little difference between freshman and middle school children but I think is very important to be able to put yourself in their shoes so you can identify where they are at and what skills developmentally, socially, physically, emotionally. I mean there's a lot of things to consider so I try to do that when I'm doing this to make sure I make sense, it would make sense to a freshman, and how they can get the most out of each lesson.

So it's not just an okay, I need to get this done and here's what I've got hit, here's the points that I've got to hit, the objections and make sure I have covered it but as to what are the students going to draw from this experience. Certainly I can't be in there to teach them the lessons, that's going to be also based upon the teacher that they have that I try to do everything that I can do all my end to account that I'm going to provide the best lesson possible for them and the best experience.

**Cheryl:** And I do know personally that when I was speaking to Susan about you as we were talking about the interviews is that she spoke very highly of you and I know she's really personally enjoyed working with you and I can see why because I think your two very passionate people that really care about the students and that they have a good experience in the prepare them for bigger things and better things in life. So congratulations to you, it sounds like you're doing a really good thing there Beth.

**Beth:** Well Cheryl, thank you so much. I really appreciate that, I do. Education is near and dear to my heart as both of my parents are educators and I have two other siblings and one is also another educator. So we are definitely in the majority there, I think it is in the genes. But I just really appreciate like I said phone call and taking the time to ask me these questions as it is a privilege for me to help both you and Susan out and do what I can to promote SOAR. I thoroughly enjoy having it under my wing.

**Cheryl:** Thank you Beth. I appreciated as well. It has really been fun talking with you and I appreciate you making time for me today in your busyness.

**Beth:** Well thank you, and like I said I hope you and Susan both have a wonderful holiday season.

**Cheryl:** Thank you, you too.

**Beth:** I look forward to and please pass it along to Susan that I look forward to speaking with her in the future and that she have a wonderful Christmas and New Year's as well.

**Cheryl:** I would be happy to do that for you. Thanks so very much and you have a great holiday yourself Beth.

**Beth:** Hey, take care Cheryl.

**Cheryl:** You too.

**Beth:** Okay.

**Cheryl:** Bye-Bye.

**Beth:** Bye.