

Beth Brandes - Shortened

Beth: My name is Beth Brandes, I work at Guerin Catholic High School, and I am the freshman and sophomore counselor.

Cheryl: How long have you been doing that Beth?

Beth: I am in my fifth year.

Cheryl: 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 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 student, 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, it was pretty easy to see because some of the students are so 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 studying in general, or how to study for a test. Because just with their innate ability have been able to get by, or do better than get by, I shouldn't just say get by, I mean 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 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: 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, since we have this period called The Kyros, which is our faith formation time, also academic support, there's a lot of the go on during that period. The 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 felt 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: Since you started working with Susan and with SOAR Study Skills, how do you see things differently? How are the students responding?

Beth: 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 the 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 that the planning method, the planner that they choose is huge.

Cheryl: Yes.

Beth: 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.

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.

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 meeting so it was very positive as a whole. And the students are very upfront and honest and will tell you how you they feel which I appreciate.

It was very positive with the students saying this was an area that I was struggling with a 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 revisit 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: 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. 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, or support, or assist 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 willing to put yourself out there and help others, I think you're almost guaranteed success.

Cheryl: 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 love what you're doing then it makes things that much easier and for me this gives me a chance to kind of reminisce of 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. I think what's very important I guess what I would add to that is you need to put yourself in the shoes of a teenager so you can identify with where they are at, and so I tried to do that when I am doing this to make sure I make sense, it would make sense to a freshman 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.