

Gary Thompson - Full Interview

Gary: My name is Gary Thompson; I am the director of Toledo Technology Academy. It's the ace public high school in Toledo, Ohio. Toledo Public Schools district.

Cheryl: And how long have you been doing that Gary?

Gary: Seven years.

Cheryl: Right, fantastic. Now I know you've been working with Susan for what about three years? You've been working with her for quite a long time since you first started working with her. Am I correct on that?

Gary: Yeah, I think its five years.

Cheryl: Well, tell me a little bit about when you were first working with and even as you've been working with Susan. What are some of the challenges that you are facing?

Gary: Challenges we were facing were probably typical of any school, we were looking at something that made sense for the students, that they could use to organize and the process of doing their work and keeping it in a fashion, and they could access it easily. Everyone organizes differently, everyone processes differently and we noticed that our students didn't have a plan of attack that served them in being successful.

So one of my teachers, actually, my math teacher had heard about Susan Kruger and said let's take a look at this. The teachers, first the math teachers and then one of my humanities teachers adopted the process and since that time over the years we have infused it throughout the curriculum.

All of the teachers use the same process with the students and with the parents so everyone knows how it works, how they can use it for their success. So it's really been a process for us too, first a very neat process or methodology that we could purchase and use but we've seen the advantages moving through the years of incorporating it throughout the curriculum.

Cheryl: So you started out actually with kind of a focus group that as you realized the results you were getting then you were able to take it to more of a full school wide initiative at that point.

Gary: Yes, it works for students and we saw that. We have an inner-city urban population, many of our students don't have the economic advantages or financial advantages of suburban schools. This actually is not a very costly method to employ and we were able to continually purchase it for our students and it works for them. Watching it move through the student body and being able to observe it over a number of years students continue to use it, implementing it throughout the curriculum made sense to all of my teachers as they watched it work for the students.

Cheryl: That would make sense and you had mentioned to that the parent piece of this, tell me a little bit about how that has helped having the parents support you in this initiative.

Gary: Well, we probably do more parent conferences than certainly any high school in northwest Ohio. Getting parents on board to help with students' homework is a challenge at times. Not many parents are particularly comfortable with saying, "I am going to sign up to help my child with calculus or AP physics," but giving them a process, they don't have to be a content expert to use. Here's what will help your student move forward.

This really works for all of our parents, it's simple, and it's easily understood by all of the parents no matter what the demographic is and makes sense. That's a huge benefit to using the SOAR process.

Cheryl: Now, one of the things I noticed that's a main objective that Susan has with SOAR through the study skills is to help the students realize that they can be strategic with their learning. Now have you found that to kind of go across the board in how they approach learning and organizing, just the principles of this. And in any other ways do you see any evidence of that outside of the actual process of study skills? Has it been helpful to them outside of that?

Gary: Outside of just the study skills and organization pieces? Huge, having one binder, it makes sense to me, but I'm much older than the students but for them, just one simple place where they can reference their work, use it for studying forward, being able to find it. I don't know if you've looked into a 15-year-old backpack recently, normally, they're very disorganized and very much of a mess.

So this is a system that kids can use, it facilitates their being able to access their organizational process. It's easy. It doesn't require taking 80 hours of an in service for a student to use.

Cheryl: Very easily applicable.

Gary: Yes, very much so.

Cheryl: Well, and just from what I have seen, I would think that piece right there is just extraordinary in many ways but separates this from other processes because yes it helps with the study skills and obviously you see the result of that in their academics. But to be able to apply the same principles to generally organizing their lives will certainly put them way far ahead than most students as they go into their life and can use it in other ways.

Gary: Yeah, absolutely that is very much true and many of my students, as I said, we are in urban inner-city school with all the same challenges and opportunities that urban school districts are facing across the nation so many of our students don't necessarily come from a background where they are just taught organization or correct study skills. And this is like I said earlier a very easy to use methodology for them and they adapt to it really quickly.

Cheryl: And that's a beautiful thing, their parents have the same access because I'm sure many of them as you said haven't had the training either and so together it's a great thing that you are kind of doing for your whole community is how I look at it as you see it moving forward.

Gary: We have a really diverse student population and along with that comes a very diverse parent population. So giving them all the tools that they can use and to some, is just comes naturally but to others it's like oh, well I can be involved. This is a good thing and maybe they haven't done that in the past.

Cheryl: Well, as far as your experience with working with Susan personally, how has that been, working with her and with her company?

Gary: Wow, she is very hands on, very, knowledgeable and yet very accessible on a personal level and very easy young lady to work with. I truly appreciated having her in my building, she's been there quite a few times – it's been a number of years ago but instant relationship with students, able to establish the relationship and that's the most important part of establishing a process, being able to establish a relationship with the people involved.

She did the very same thing with my teachers and with my parents, just a very, very easy lady to work with. She has huge credentials and could very easily be intimidating, she does not come across that way at all, and just a regular person, easy to relate to and that facilitates her process being used.

- Cheryl:** But do you found her responsive as well to your requests and to getting back to you on things, that sort of thing?
- Gary:** Absolutely, I e-mail her any time something comes up and she immediately gets back to me about it. Once again being in urban school district, financing is sometimes a challenge and we've come up with different scenarios and ways of using her materials and she's immediately figured out how to make it work for us.
- Cheryl:** I got a kick out of it that she had shared with me with her last baby she had that you had contacted her and it happened to be the day that she had her baby.
- Gary:** Yeah, yeah.
- Cheryl:** And that she called you back. And I said, you called him back?
- Gary:** Yeah, my goodness gracious, I mean that's some level of customer service.
- Cheryl:** I know.
- Gary:** Yeah.
- Cheryl:** Yeah, I got a kick out of that, that Susan. Well one of the questions that Susan also wanted me to ask you when I was speaking with you Gary is that through this process obviously it sounds like you had an extremely favorable experience with her and with her process and with the SOAR. Was there anything during that process that you may have identified or you felt had any limitations or do you have any suggestions all potentially some other services that may have been helpful to you? She just kind of want to me to give you an open door there if there are any other things that you would like to address that we can certainly pass that on to her for you.
- Gary:** Well, I have to believe that she is doing the things that I would think of. The one area that I would expand on and I'm guessing she's already doing is even more parental involvement. I had a workshop for my parents and I believe that that's an area that really, really had a lot of opportunity inherent in it. There so many of the parents who do not know how to get involved and I think that is an area they could use expanding but I do believe that she already offers that it's just that we didn't take advantage of it completely.
- Cheryl:** Well, I certainly will pass that along to her.
- Gary:** Yeah.

Cheryl: Absolutely, because it does sound like as I mentioned to you earlier in the call, I did think that's just such a unique piece of this that has just such great repercussions in so many areas, it's terrific.

Gary: Yeah and if you look, I don't know how much research you've done in urban districts, the parental piece, that's what Jeff Canada is shooting for in Harlem. Is part of what Michelle Ree was doing in DC and this is a really great way to put that component even more solidly in place across any sort of economic demographic involved.

Cheryl: That would totally make sense.

Gary: Yeah.

Cheryl: Okay, I guess just one last question for you and that we will wrap this up Gary and that is if someone were considering working with Susan and with SOAR Study Skills is there anything that you can think of you haven't already shared with me that you think would be important for them to know about Susan or the process?

Gary: I would encourage anybody to ask any question that occurred to them about utilizing the methodology and the materials and make sure that they aren't hesitant about doing that was Susan. Her response is fantastic and I learned a lot from her. I'm in inquiring type of person and I would just encourage people to ask as many questions as they can think of.

Cheryl: Wonderful, well thank you I so appreciate you taking time today out of your Christmas break and having a conversation with me about Susan and SOAR and your experience there. I know she's very much enjoyed working with you, she shared that with me and she's very proud of you too and the success of your school. I know it's been a great experience for her to work with you guys as well.

Gary: Oh, that's very nice. If I can be of any further help, feel free to call.

Cheryl: Thank you Gary, you have a great holiday and a Merry Christmas.

Gary: Oh, and you also.

Cheryl: Thank you, bye-bye.

Gary: Take care, bye-bye.