

Tobi Flair - Shortened

Tobi: My name is Tobi Flair, I'm a middle school principal, and I work at Harry Hurst Middle School in Destrehan Louisiana. I have seventh and eighth grade and we have about 500 students that we service. I have been a principal here for four years now. I was actually a teacher here for seven years so it is good to be back home so to speak. And then I was in an assistant principal at various places for six years so I've just kind of been in and around the district doing some different things.

Cheryl: How long has it been that you've been working with Susan and SOAR Study Skills?

Tobi: This is the first year. We started doing some research because we were writing a grant at the end of last school year in an effort to help our students with organizational skills, study skills, that sort of thing and we found some information about the program. We contacted Susan, she came in and did a training of the summer of some key staff members of mine, and we've just implemented SOAR beginning this year.

Cheryl: What were some of the challenges that you were facing that made you want to inquire more about the study skills program?

Tobi: Well, at the end of last year, our test score results were really good but we noticed that students as far as their grades were concerned, their coursework grades, they struggled in several of their classes. And when we look a little bit deeper as to why they were struggling, what we found for the most part overwhelmingly was that students had missing homework assignments or had lost points on homework assignments.

And in talking with teachers, they really felt like it was a disorganization kind of an issue. It was a lack of support at home kind of an issue. It was a lack of a study skills kind of an issue so that was really the driving force behind our looking for something to remedy some of those problems for students in working on the grant.

We knew those were the areas we wanted to tackle and then when we looked at our failure rate, not the standardized test score failure rate but our course work failure rate at the end of the year, that just drove home for us even more why the SOAR program was a critical need.

Cheryl: Now, I know you've only been doing this for just a few months at this point but how have you seen this affecting your students? And I know that the parents are involved with this process and your teachers and what have the results of that been for you at this point? Have you noticed some results already with your students?

Tobi: We have, we came out of the gates real strong with the program. We trained our entire staff and only certified teachers are running the SOAR program. Our educators are not so every teacher in the building has been assigned a core group of students so they work with about 15-16 students every afternoon, the last 20 minutes of the school day every day.

And it's basically the way we sold it to the parents aside from the organizational skills that it fosters to making sure they are prepared for the next day, organizing their books, their notes, their binder, what to do at home with all of their belongings and supplies and papers throughout the year. Aside from that, we really sold it, as the last 20 minutes of the day is our way of preparing students for home learning. It's kind of like the bookend to the end of the day.

I can tell you that that has helped tremendously in students turning in homework assignments and being more responsible with their work. I can also tell you that their school bags have become so much lighter, they are only carrying around one binder and then any textbooks they might need for the day. So we've gotten good feedback on that, the kids really like using the binder for the most part.

But I would tell you overall the success of the program has been well worth the time and the effort and the energy that we spend following up with teachers, following up with students, talking with parents, working with teachers on difficult students, providing that was study skills, overall I would tell you that it has been a very successful program.

Cheryl: What has it been like for you to actually work personally with Susan?

Tobi: Supportive is the first word that comes to mind. I mean of course she is knowledgeable about the program and so having the support and the follow-up from her, I still receive e-mails about how are things going? Do you have the pitfalls right now? Can we support you through anything? The survey that she sent out not too long ago, being able to do this and answers to questions, it's just good to see that there is someone who is so indoctrinated and completely immersed in the program but at the same time is willing to share that passion and enthusiasm at least that's what she shared with us over the summer.

And I would tell you that she was very confident in answering some of the logistical questions that came up on the end of some of the teachers that were in the training over the summer and she help them to think through it. Her confidence, I think gave them confidence in being able to turn around and train the rest of the staff and she didn't send the don't worry; everything is going to be okay message.

It wasn't that, the message that she sent to them was, are you going to have some roadblocks? Absolutely. Are you going to have some students who will be resistant? Most definitely but you deal with them the way that you deal with any student who would be in your class who would be resistant to anything instructional anyway. So that was the ultimate message and I really enjoyed working with her as a teacher but also as a professional and a consultant who was very confident.

Cheryl: Is there anything that you have it shared with me that if somebody was considering working with SOAR Study Skills that they should know?

Tobi: Really, know what it is that you're trying to target and really be clear on why your students may not be performing to the level that you expect them to perform. Don't try and just use this program as a fly-by-night Band-Aid. It is a very purposeful well-constructed program and it has great potential to develop student responsibility, develop student thinking, and develop their autonomy in owning their own schoolwork and taking pride in it.

It has great potential to do that if it is used in the right way. I would also say when you're looking at the program, if you're considering it, think about and really map out – I had from my core leadership team, I had a group of four key teachers that I had in with me and I'm so glad that we planned it out in as much detail as we did because we looked through the entire program, the whole book and we started listing all of the materials and supplies that we would need for the entire school year to get us through the program.

It is so critical to do that and not just say, I'm going to order this book for every teacher and just give it out to teachers and say, okay use this instructionally in your classroom because then you will not do justice to the program and it would just follow part. You really have to plan out what materials you need to purchase and from there move into the professional development. And if you really wanted to work, you've got to put the materials in the hands of teachers and students. Otherwise, it will flounder.