

Tobi Flair - Full Interview

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 and started working with her at the end of last school year, 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: And at that time when you were writing your grant and looking into working with Susan, 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 looked 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, I will start with the beginning of the year. We came out of the gates real strong with the program. We trained our entire staff during staff development days in early August. We had everybody on board. Now the level of implementation from one teacher to the next would vary to some degree and only certified teachers throughout the building are running the SOAR program. Our para educators are not, so the certified teachers are and every teacher in the building has been assigned a core group of students so they work with about 15-16 students every afternoon, it's 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. Making sure that we've made the effort to check student's assignment planners, they have their homework assignments with them. I can tell you that that has helped tremendously in students turning in homework assignments and being more responsible with their work that they've submitted to teachers.

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, we've gotten good feedback I would say the whole first beginning part of the school year. Kids really like using the binder for the most part. I still had a few who would ask, well Ms. Flair, I already had my own way of organizing my notes in my cell, is it okay if I still use my own method?

And of course we didn't want to squash that sense of responsibility that they had already innately had, we didn't want to change that. We weren't trying to change the course of the river so to speak, we just wanted to give kids tools to help them be successful. I would say at this point in the year and it's a good thing that is

Christmas break because everybody needs to go home and just be rejuvenated, refreshed, and recommit to it and we're doing that a professional development in January when teachers come back.

But I can tell you over all the success of the program has been well worth the time and the effort and the energy that we spend following up with teachers about are they coming home and showing you their assignment planner, that it's all written in, it's completed. They have a system now, they check off things when they are done, they enter in dates for long-range assignments, working with teachers and difficult students, providing that with study skills. Overall I would tell you that it has been a very successful program.

Cheryl: Well, and one of the questions I was going to ask you but I think you have answered it for me is that I know that with Susan and with SOAR, one of the things that's really important to them is through study skills students can actually be more strategic in their thinking and that they can manage their school were better and all of that. And it seems like you have already seen evidence of that through your students.

Tobi: We have and what we've done, we kind of take a temperature along the way so to speak in my SOAR leadership team at the core group of teacher leaders that were trained in it with Susan, we meet periodically. And one of the last time that we met was, it was late October after Halloween and we decided at that point that we were going to begin really honing in on the study skills but we needed to train students in what our study skills? What are the most effective study skills that work for them? Because the same one that works for one will not work for another and then how are study skills different, they can be similar but how are they really different with one subject to the next because you can't study for math the same way you study for language arts.

Cheryl: Right.

Tobi: And so as a core team, a core leadership team, our SOAR leadership team I have various departments represented and so each of those departments went back to their larger departments and they designed to various study skills games that they could then bring back to the whole staff, train the staff in. We put together all of the materials, the supplies for it. We put the direction sheets together, gave it out to all of our SOAR groups and they played the game at the end of the day for several days just to get kids used to using the studies guilt tools that we were providing for them. You know to get their hands dirty with it, to get them really

used to it and more proficient with using it so that they can then start to turn around and use it individually or practice that a home for themselves.

Cheryl: Well, you know it's one of the things that when I was talking with Susan about you and you know her work with you, one of the things that she had said was she was highly complementary of you about how well-organized that you were, how you've all embraced this to such a degree and she was really excited about that. And I've just wanted to compliment you on that because I know she just, it's exciting for her to see somebody embrace it at the level that you have in I think is just been a lot of fun for her on her end as well. I know she's really enjoyed working with you through this process.

Tobi: Oh, good, I'm glad to hear that, that's good. Thank you.

Cheryl: You're welcome. One of the things to I wanted to as we're talking about Susan is that obviously you had some really great success and experience working with her company and with her program but what has it been like for you to work personally with Susan?

Tobi: Supportive is the first word that comes to mind. I mean of course she is knowledgeable about the program I mean, she basically birthed it. 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 some 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 with you, with us.

Cheryl: Yes, yes.

Tobi: That's what she has 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. You know the what if the students do this, or what if the students try that or what if they're not cooperative, you know those kinds of things 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.

Cheryl: Right, right.

Tobi: 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: In your work with her and I should say one of the things that she has asked of me when talking with people is that during your process of working through her was there any limitations that you felt or at any time were you felt like there was something more she could have done to provide better service for you or even any suggestions that you might have that she could add additional services or things that might help you out there in the field that she might not have thought of?

Tobi: Well hindsight I guess is always 20/20. I think back to the summer time when she came to train us and I had my core leadership team with her, I wish I could have had her either for not necessarily a longer period of time that day because it being enough time, it was efficient, it was a long day. I would have liked to have come back one more day with her and really look at our school calendar and lay out a plan or a roadmap so to speak and have her expertise, her professionalism, and her knowledge there with us just kind of watching us as we grappled with and packaging or unwrapping this little program and how we were going to lay it out over the course of the school year. Like what were we going to tackle the first nine weeks and what types of lessons could we plan in order to do that. And then the second nine weeks, and the third nine weeks, and so forth.

I would have loved to have had an additional day with her for her to help us think through it but then just to watch our planning and our thought process and be the voice of expertise or what have you to give us some feedback on what we were planning, how we were planning, and when we ran into a roadblock she could have maybe given us some remedies to those situations.

Cheryl: Right, well that's a great suggestion. I know she will be listening to this so I will certainly pass this on to her. That's really good information. Well, I just have one last question for you and then I can let you get on to the rest of your holiday and that is, is there anything that you haven't shared with me that if somebody was considering working with SOAR Study Skills that they should know?

Tobi: I would tell them kind of what we did, 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 so to speak. . 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 so don't try and use it as a Band-Aid or a cure-all because then you're going to miss the boat on what it really has to offer. 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 at the very end of the school year last year and when I tell you that 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.

Everything from the binder and what goes in it, all of the dividers and the labels and index cards and she protectors we use in the pencil kits and stuff that go inside the zipper pouches that go inside, sticky notes that we knew we were going to use, everything. Everything, every detail, we make sure that we listed out, we budgeted for it, and we knew that we wanted those pieces in place and then there were some pieces that we just couldn't afford so there were the nonnegotiable pieces that we knew we had to have.

But 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 fall 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 want it to work, you've got to put the materials in the hands of teachers and students. Otherwise, it really will flounder.

Cheryl: And it sounds like the way that you approach this as well Tobi was that it really optimize the program.

Tobi: Yeah, it did, absolutely.

Cheryl: That's terrific. Well, I can certainly see why you're having such success with it because you really have taken a very seriously and it sounds like the rest of your staff has as well. Everybody is going to be better off because of it, your students, your staff, parents have tools and I think that obviously that helps when there's the support, they get homework done faster and it just sounds like it's been a great experience for you.

Tobi: It has so far. We are addressing like I said, everything has its stumbling blocks or a roadblock but we are addressing those as they come and we're trying to find solutions to some of the problems and then just keep keeping on with what's working.

Cheryl: That's great. Well I so appreciate your time today. This is been really, really helpful and I know Susan will be happy to hear everything and I'm just really pleased that you had such a great experience with her and her company.

Tobi: Thank you and thank you for being flexible in the time that you could talk to me.

Cheryl: Absolutely, absolutely. Thanks again Tobi, Merry Christmas to you.

Tobi: Thanks, you too.

Cheryl: Thank you, bye-bye.

Tobi: Bye-bye.