

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast *Rocky Run's Story: Achieving Outstanding Results* with Dr. Jenn Jones, assistant principal at Rocky Run Elementary School in Stafford, Virginia (February, 2015).

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Butler **KNIGHT:** Dr. Jones. Thank you so much for giving me so much of your time to share your story. You are the assistant principal here at Rocky Run Elementary in Stafford, and you've been here for several years and I've certainly had the privilege of knowing you and working with you and witnessing amazing things happen by virtue of you being here and your relationship with the faculty and some of the faculty that we were involved with the year before you came. But I wanted to really talk today about this process using the Fishbone as a strategic planning tool--of using data and kind of unpacking it around an area where you experienced an outstanding result. And we met about a year ago and looked at an outstanding result that you had, and that was a student with disabilities that made substantial success, um, that resulted in her passing the Reading SOL (Dr. Jenn **JONES:** mmhmm) and we took that outstanding result and, using the Fishbone, looked at the bones--just brainstormed the bones that contributed to that outstanding result, which was the students using reading strategies, teacher increased professional learnings, there's increased efficacy on their part, co-planning increased, collaboration with the general education teacher increased, motivating student and relationships with teachers, differentiated instruction. There was flexible grouping, lesson presentation, learning styles, increased engagement, and teacher matching instruction to learner needs were some of the bones that were, that were there and then you ranked those in terms of "Well, what had the biggest impact?" And those were differentiated instruction, co-planning and collaboration, and teacher matching instruction to students' needs and to their strengths were those areas. So I'm curious with this process of strategic planning--What did you notice? What kind of momentum happened? What, what emerged as a result of this process? 'Cause it's been a year since we've done this (**JONES:** mmhmm). What have you noticed? What have you done?

JONES: Well, I mean, it's very interesting to take a look at what we did with the Fishbone, and it is a wonderful tool in helping us plan strategically to be able to look at goal-oriented behavior and goal-setting and goal-attainment. In ranking the, uh, strategies that we implemented for this outstanding result, differentiated instruction is something that's been a long-time focus. Not only within our school, but across Stafford County Public Schools in general, and, um, it is really, really, um, benefited our teachers as far as them being able to take a look at curriculum and really get to know students and then that, that piece about matching strategies for students' needs and strengths--that was really borne out of all of that work that we had done with differentiated instruction. The co-planning and collaboration piece has taken quite a bit of time, um, as you can imagine, um, a lot of personalities to work with and a lot of really getting to know your staff and their strengths and weaknesses (**KNIGHT:** mmhmm) to be able to pair them effectively and also looking at--we do have some classrooms that, that loop--quite a few on different grade levels. And that, that's built over time, um, and the biggest piece that came with that, um, in working through this outstanding result process that we did with this Fishbone was looking at different, different ways to allow teachers to take control of the learning for their students and allowing them to take risks. Uh, that's a huge piece to (**KNIGHT:** mmhmm) what led in to this outstanding result for this particular student and then many, many students after this outstanding result, um...

KNIGHT: Because at the end of the last school year, you had more outstanding results.

JONES: Yes. We did. We did, and it really was borne out of the momentum that was gained from just this one little, well it really isn't little, it's huge, outstanding result for a student--that power that it had for showing our collaborative teams that it could be accomplished, and if we could do it for one student then we could do it for all of our students. And not just the students who are identified through the SOL, the SOL subgroups, but, um, even though that's how it started is looking at one particular, uh, subgroup of students for students with disabilities who were continually not achieving on the Reading Standards of Learning tests across the board, but looking at this one student and really, really taking the time to strategically plan and to look at how could this student be successful and then applying that one student's model to many, many students. In doing so, um, it's really interesting that you bring up that we had many more outstanding results this school year. And we have because what happened was it was, it was really, really gained momentum as far as looking at the way we attain goals (**KNIGHT:** hmm) and looking at it more of a positive--in a positive light. Um, and what I mean by that is looking at it as a glass half full instead of half empty. Um, a lot of times when we're setting goals, um, we pose them as, you know, looking at the end result for, you know, eternity (laugh) it seems, but like looking at the impossible is how people feel when you tell them that they have to have 100% of students reading by such and such a date, it's really hard for teachers and for, uh, administrators to step back and say, "That's the end result that we want, but for this year, what do we have to do to meet the benchmarks for that overall SOL test. Um, and in doing so and reframing it and looking at "O.K. we have several different ways that we can make this benchmark. We can reduce the failure rate by 10%. O.K., what does that look like for this sub-population? That only means we have to increase the passing rate for 15 students." Well, wow, all of sudden you've got a goal that seemed impossible to attain, to something that really seems doable. And I think that that's where it ignited for a passion for our teachers, and a challenge--a healthy challenge for them to realize that hey, we're in this together and we can do this. This is attainable. And what happened as a result of that (**KNIGHT:** Yeah) is that we actually were able to knock it out, not just pass for our students with disabilities and meet the benchmark, especially for mathematics, but we were able to just knock it out of the park to where we went from being a school with a focus title, primarily because we weren't meeting benchmarks for our students with disabilities in reading and mathematics, to being a school that is not, uh, no longer has a focus status on it, of course, we're still Title I, but working more towards the excellence end of the spectrum and now we're asking g questions about how do we become a school of excellence versus how do I get out of focus? And I think that's really important for folks to realize that just starting a little, a little process like the Fishbone, um, and analyzing your data and truly looking at the data points that matter to gain an outstanding result--it's a little bit of a backwards design, but I think it allows individuals within the building, and also outside of the building, to really see the outstanding effort that's going into the achievement of that outstanding result.

KNIGHT: Absolutely. And I love this notion of you are a school of excellence. What an aspirational message for your teachers and for the, for the whole school community as well. You and I talked a little bit earlier about some of the ways in which you're achieving that very strategically. Could you say some more about how you've taken that and worked strategically with some alignment, um, with your school improvement plan? You mentioned writing across the curriculum, using questioning techniques with reading.

JONES: Absolutely. Well, when, um, I arrived at the school, uh, we conducted a survey--as any administrator would, to get to know the staff and to get to know kind of what they had been through. I was in a little bit of a unique, um, position coming here because I had previously been employed at the central office level for eight years prior to taking this position and had worked with many of the schools in coaching them through the Title I process and so forth. And

coming with those notions, not so much preconceived, but just knowing at the struggle that the school had been through to make benchmarks continually and then going through the cycle of meeting them, not meeting them, started to really frame my idea for the vision, um, that the principal and I see for the school. We, we do want this to be school of distinction and excellence for the students that it serves. It's really important that the efforts of the teachers, the community efforts that go into making it a, a positive place for students to learn is really important and is in the forefront of our mind constantly. And when we came here we took that information from that, that survey and really started to use it to look at all of the various functions within the school, and looking at the school improvement plan as more than just a document that, you know, is a living document. We talk about how it's living and breathing and, but to truly make it that, um, and in order to do that we looked at a lot of things. We looked at climate. We looked at just building mechanics, really if you, if you think about those functions. We looked at, along with the climate, the morale piece. But of course we looked at the instructional piece, safety, everything. I mean, just anything that you can think of that goes into making a sound school we, we, we examined it and took quite a bit of time to do that, but it was something we were committed to, which led us to looking at the school improvement plan and looking for that alignment piece and really, um, looking at all of the great things that we were doing and all of the practices that have been developed over time, um, as the previous administration went through this grueling process of making benchmarks, not making benchmarks, and taking all of those positives and putting them together, um, and looking at aligning it with our strategic plan, with the division as well our school improvement plan. With the push for 21st century learning skills we currently have made changes to align that piece with our strategic plan at the division and a lot of those, um, skills that we have built in there come from things like our new initiatives that have been borne out of just one outstanding result, uh, which led to many outstanding results over time. I know that we talked a little bit about responsive classroom prior to this and that's definitely something that we're working towards, but within that piece of it we've really taken an initiative to talk about executive functioning. So in order to build that into our strategic plan and, and to really cement that alignment, if you will, we built that into our 21st century learning skills because those really are what encompass 21st century learning skills for students. So being a previous, uh, school that was in a focus status we were having to, um, use Indistar as our school improvement planning tool and in the first year we adopted the indicators for questioning, for understanding, and for writing across the curriculum for understanding, and when we looked at that of course we were looking at all of our subgroups that needed to, to make the various benchmarks and that was very strategically written out within the school improvement plan, but we wanted to look at the student body as a whole. So what we started talking about doing was flipping--having students create the questions that they're asking versus having teachers--the top down effect--and, wh.., and in, in doing so what we wanted to do was have, uh, students take more onus and more initiative for their learning, and therefore have buy-in from the students so that they were taking control and asking questions, at, with guidance (**KNIGHT:** mmhmm) from the teacher and really they wanted to know what the standards lay out. So in doing that, there was that catalyst for us to continue on and, um, to adopt the writing piece to then check for understanding across the curriculum. Those are two goals that we started out with, and we still maintain to this day. Very powerful, powerful indicators for us to measure for our students. I wouldn't say that we're at complete, full implementation yet. We do still have some areas that we're working on, but in our flight for excellence we will continue to keep those in the forefront. Some of things that have also been borne out of that whole idea of working on alignment with the strategic plan and the school improvement plan we noticed that there was a, a definite need for continual professional development through PLC. That was not something that was strong here (**KNIGHT:** mmmm) at this, this school. (Unintelligible) there was such a focus on just making the benchmarks. We don't want to just make the benchmarks, we want to exceed 'em and we want to knock 'em out of the park. So that's the kind of license that we

(laugh) we gave to teachers in encouraging them to take risks and to not be afraid to fail the first time and to continually improve and, and in noticing that we realized that we had to create a forum for there to be that PLC so that they'd be able to get that administrator support, that (KNIGHT: mmhmm) specialist support to be able to invite the experts from central office in during working hours to allow them to get the curriculum knowledge that they needed to be able to keep this continual improvement going for students. So what we did...You were going to ask a question?

KNIGHT: I was gonna just say, 'cause I, I know a little bit from having talked with you before...you know that peer-to-peer part of what makes a PLC so powerful sounds to me like that was very important to you, and you've mentioned that came out of the Fishbone, too with that third step of reflection " So now what do we do?" and you're telling us a lot more about "now what do we do?" that professional learning that emerged from this process (JONES: mmhmm) I'm hearing you describe (JONES: yeah) and we know that when teachers have a chance to reflect on their practice (JONES: yes) the innovation (JONES: power) that I know that you were looking for with being a school for excellence--you could see that emerging (JONES: Yeah, you really can.) which is exciting.

JONES: You really can and it is very exciting. I'd even go so far to say it, it's infectious and, as you know, uh, when we ranked for the outstanding result on the Fishbone, the number two strategy that helped us reach that outstanding, uh, result, was the strength in co-planning and collaborative teams. And in order--the research says--that in order for us to continue investing in that we have to have professional learning (KNIGHT: mmhmm). Professional learning is at the heart of all of this, and, uh, we, we are strong--the principal and I are strong proponents for that and so we, um, sat down and continuing our continual flight for excellence we decided that one way that we could support this notion of professional development and, and guarded time for PLC, where there was that flexibility during the workday, unencumbered time (KNIGHT: mmmm) to permit for the experts and professionals to come in and offer what we were looking for and what we needed, um, and allow for some of the flexibility for data reflection, for discussions about unpacking standards. We, we changed our master schedule. Um, what we did was we looked at going from a five day rotation to a six day encore rotation, um, adding that, again, time in for the computer lab to work on some of the 21st century skills that our students are required to work on with that technology piece. Not that that encompasses, you know, 21st century skills, 'cause it's much more than just technology, but it just was a big point of conversation with teachers and with administration in the building that there wasn't unencumbered time. It was taking away from something else because it wasn't built in as a, a specials rotation or an encore rotation. So, in order to provide that time, we did go ahead and secure support for running a daily computer lab and offering that as our encore rotation. In doing that what it allowed us to do was that it allowed us to then implement a every 12 day, right now, uh, we're looking at making it more frequent, but for right now (laugh) to manage it we're taking baby steps (KNIGHT: mmhmm). We decided every 12 days that each grade level would get an opportunity to have an hour and 15 minutes of unencumbered time to be able to do the, uh, planning and necessary things that they need to continue to meet the outstanding results that we're expecting (KNIGHT: mmhmm) as building level administrators. Some great things have come out of those sessions. They're not perfect. We're learning and growing and there again by, by modeling for the teachers that it's O.K. to not get it right the first time. Boy have we made some mistakes as far as administrators. In just scheduling, you know, um (KNIGHT: mmhmm), having to make sure that we have paraprofessional support (KNIGHT: mmhmm) to cover 'cause that's primarily what we're using to be able to, to allow this PLC time to, to occur. It's just a balance, and that's what we're--that's what we're continually striving for as we move towards this notion of no longer being a school in sanctions for Title I. No longer being a focus

school, but moving towards the excellence and the blue ribbon school if you will (**KNIGHT:** mmhmm) is what we so much desire for our students.

KNIGHT: And sustaining (**JONES:** Yes) these changes is something that I heard you talk about (**JONES:** Yeah) before as well as how do we create the conditions and build them into structures. Build them into schedules so that we will continue to grow and aspire toward that, um, that vision (**JONES:** Right) that you have and that Nick has of being a school of excellence (**JONES:** Distinction, yeah). Yeah and, and blue ribbon school.

JONES: Just really fortunate here (**KNIGHT:** Yeah, well) a lot to celebrate.

KNIGHT: You have a lot to celebrate and you are a tireless leader that clearly is looking for the next goal. So I'm really looking forward to, at the end of this year, (**JONES:** Yeah) hearing as we look back for what was an outstanding result or many outstanding results that occurred from renewed partnerships, innovative practices, and inspiring children to be the best that they can be, and also inspiring teachers to provide the best of themselves for kids. So, Dr. Jones, thank you so much (**JONES:** Thank you) for your time. I really appreciate you sharing your story and the use of this tool, the Fishbone Strategy, as a planning tool.

JONES: Thank you.

KNIGHT: You're welcome.

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]