

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast *Changing Behavior and School Culture at South Morrison Elementary School*, features an interview with Betsy Clary, Principal at South Morrison Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia.

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

Fritz Geissler: Well, I'd like to welcome Betsy Clary, principal at South Morrison Elementary School. How are you doing today?

Betsy Clary: I'm fine, thank you sir.

Fritz: Great. Well thank you so much for joining us. What we wanted to do is just, if you could give us some background on South Morrison: what the school was like when you came in and sort of some of the challenges that you faced when you first arrived there.

Betsy: I sure will. Well I am Betsy Clary and I am the proud principal of South Morrison Elementary in Newport News, Virginia. We're a Title I school. I have a school that's pre-K-5 and about 600 students. Umm, about 80% of my children are African-American, 10% White, and other in that category, so as you can see in my school I have a large population that easily fits into the AYP category - 3 out of 4 of the categories. When I got to South Morrison seven years ago, my school umm was a school that had a lot of needs. I was very privileged to come into a school to be able to design a school of excellence. When I got there, my school was in the bottom tier of low performing students and umm, it was also a very disruptive place in the classrooms and hallways with student behavior. We had a lot of referrals that were sent to the office. In fact, there were 400 the first year, and so I was very busy as an administrator in trying to clean up umm some discipline and get children on task. I really had a wonderful staff. Some of my staff is still there. Now I had a big turnover at the end of the first year and the second year, but we really needed to get on the same vision and that was building this school of excellence for students - not only academic, but also with their character.

Fritz: Sure. Great. So when you came in, you said you had a lot of discipline to sort of clean up.

Betsy: Yes.

Fritz: And umm, so how did you start with that? What were sort of some of the first steps in looking at that and moving forward?

Betsy: Well it was really interesting when I first started umm seven years ago. I started in November, and by December I lost my assistant principal. She took a job elsewhere, and so I had a new assistant principal in January and umm, it was neat because his name is James Battle. He certainly lived up to his name.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: He and I went to battle together with the discipline and that is all we did honestly the first year is to try and clean up. We used the old school model of punitive discipline and umm, just showed them the rules, nail it, and go to the consequences. We did a lot of communication with

not only the students, but also with the parents if the parents didn't come to school. We usually got into our cars and went to the houses...

Fritz: Wow.

Betsy: ...because we wanted children on task, so our first couple of years really was uhh, punitive discipline, very immediate discipline, but you and I know from research that does not last. It's very temporary. It hits what we need to hit, but it's not an anchor for the students.

Fritz: Sure. Sure. And umm, in moving towards giving an anchor for them, what sort of steps did you take? It sounds like that was sort of the tipping point there where you recognized that the punitive discipline wasn't working and looking more towards something else that would help give them that anchor. What steps did you take at that point?

Betsy: Well one of the neat things that I did, was I built a leadership team and it is not about Betsy Clary's initiatives at my school, but we do have shared leadership. I really relied on answers. Umm, there were so many needs in that school. Our performance was very low on the SOLs - they were in the 30s, 40s, 50s, no more than that their first couple of years. And the staff really wanted to start a change, certainly I did, and so we had to look at what was it going to take to have a school of success, so we really talked about our school being one school with one mission and that would be success for all students in the school. We used some of the clips from one of the movies - where in *Drumline* it talked about one band with one sound, and what would that look like at South Morrison. We really talked a lot in our leadership group about what does it look like academically? What should be going on in the classroom? What structures should be in place for success academically? But then we started talking about what structures should be in place for discipline? For students on task or students being respectful? Fortunately, to our wonderful fortune, we were offered umm, the opportunity to become an effective school-wide discipline school. Jake Wilson, who is a very dear friend of mine in the division, came and said, "Betsy, you know, I see that you've really cleaned up a lot of discipline, but we have a new program and would you be interested in looking at that? So, James and I readily said, "Yes...

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: ...give us some answers!" And so we built a leadership team with discipline. Umm, our ESD team and for one year, our teachers - five of them, went to every in-service, every workshop, every conference. Umm, they were very hungry to find out the answers. Either James or I would go with them. We came back and talked about what needed to be put into place. We wanted to be very careful that the structure would be in place for all staff and it wasn't just a quick fix. It wasn't going to be this silver bullet, but it would be something that would be long-lasting and I think taking our time to figure out what components need to be in place for us definitely was a key point. So after that year of studying and learning about ESD, during the summer, the ESD team umm continually met and sometimes I would be at the meetings and sometimes not, but they always kept me abreast of what was going on. And the other thing I think that is really critical to know about that is I empowered them to make some good decisions.

Fritz: Mhmm.

Betsy: And they always brought that back to me, “Well what do you think about this? We're thinking about this certain piece.” So during the summer they said, "Betsy, we really need to present this to the staff when they come back in August." And I said, "Okay, so we have two days. Would you like a half a day?" "Ooh yes yes yes". But once we sat down and looked at what we really wanted to present, we took a whole day - morning and afternoon to present to the staff. What pieces needed to be in place to begin and ESD program? We really looked, delved hard into the data. What were our trouble spots? You know, what were our hot spots in the school, on the bus, on the playground? What needed to be addressed very quickly when the students came back to school? So that's really how we began is just a lot of communication, a lot of studying, a lot of looking at the research, and then beginning to put these practices into our school.

Fritz: Great, great. And I hear a bunch of things I want to ask you a ton of questions about...

Betsy: Ha.

Fritz: ...but I guess I wanted to start first with the leadership team and your mission. You know you said earlier that when you came in you had the opportunity to set up the school that you wanted and success for all, and then picking this leadership team. I'm just curious if you could speak a little to how you imparted your mission to your staff, or your school mission to the staff, but then also how that sort of played in choosing, and you talked about empowering, the leadership team. Who's on it and those sorts of things?

Betsy: Well you know, I've always been that kid that loves school and...

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: ...and I always want to be a learner. I just really started looking at the research and effective schools, and what made them effective and what pieces were in place. The leadership team and I, every time we met we would come back with the staff and talk about what does a good school look like? What does a school of success - what pieces need to be in place? If your child was at our school, would you want them there? If not, what needs to be corrected?

Fritz: Mhmm.

Betsy: And so we really started talking about that academically, as well as with the discipline, with character. And I started to umm spend, in fact I still do, spend an enormous amount of time in the classrooms, walking in the hall, being in the cafeteria, and going to resources. I would much rather be in the classroom than be in the office and this is where the person would say, "You're never in the office!"

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: But I'm not because I love having the pulse, seeing the pulse, feeling the pulse - what's going on in the school and seeing kids engaged. I really determined who would be on my leadership team by the style of what they were doing in the classroom. There were some magnificent teachers that really hungered for what good leadership looked like - what as a teacher, as a professional, what practices needed to be in place for academic instruction. I also had some magnificent teachers that were very proficient at being a leader in the classroom with

their discipline. Umm, sadly years ago I had teachers that would holler and scream and slam the door. You and I know that that's not an effective practice and umm, and students need a change with that. I chose teachers and asked them. I didn't appoint, and there's a difference with that. I asked them would they be interested in being on my ESD team and then every time a decision was made, we always went back to the staff to let them know because the staff must feel a part of the decision-making. They must have that. You know that they'll have ownership when they feel like they're able to make decisions with the other staff. Umm, and that was the beautiful thing too. When we began the ESD, because we always said one school with one mission, we were all on board.

Fritz: Sure.

Betsy: If there were some teachers or a couple of teachers that were not rallying around this initiative, Betsy went to talk to them.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: And I really wanted - and my ESD team so appreciated that because their worry was, "I'm just a teacher. You know, why should they listen to me? I'm their colleague." And I didn't want that to be a hindrance in the outcome, and so they have so appreciated me not only supporting the ideas or fine tuning the ideas, but they have also supported that if there is a glitch with a staff member that I also go to correct that, so that we can be on one accord at our school.

Fritz: Sure. So them being empowered to umm design programs and decisions and then you being there to support them has been, sounds like, it has been really effective for them.

Betsy: Absolutely, and I think that that has always been the joy at our school, to see that we're on the same page and that doesn't always happen unfortunately, but umm I think it is incumbent upon the leader to ensure that if you are going to have this initiative and I'm going to tell you, once again it was a wonderful wonderful decision that we made together at our school because the kids are very successful, but in order to keep it going, the leader must be out in the trenches and out communicating and out seeing that my teachers are wearing their pouches and giving out their tickets and affirming "The Four Be's", umm as well as I'm modeling that for the teachers and also for the students and for the parents. It really has been a win-win situation all the way around.

Fritz: Great, and you started to talk about some more specifics and if I can pick your brain about some of that.

Betsy: Sure.

Fritz: The team came back and they wanted to do some training at the beginning of the year and if you could speak a little about the training, but then you were also starting to talk about the pouches and the tickets and "The Four Be's", and sort of how - to expand on that, but then talk a little bit more about how that rolled out in the school.

Betsy: Okay, umm, one of the nicest things that absolutely helped us was the training that they received through the workshops through ESD, and to be able to study that and then to be able to

come back and say what does that look like, what will it look like in our school and as we determined that, as I said we had many staff meetings. My staff meetings are ones that it's not fluff, it's about talking about what's going on in the school and how are we going to do it and what tools do we need to make it happen with our students. But umm, one of the first things we did was in using the research, we used some of the videos that you guys gave us and a really neat turning point with that was we saw a school on the video - I remember it being Riverside Elementary because it's not our Riverside in Newport News. They were modeling what does hall behavior look like with this teacher and what does it not look like, and my staff really loved that and they thought, "Wow, what does that mean for our school and how can we do this?" So, the very first semester that we rolled this out we did not use tickets at all. We wanted to be very firm in what do we - we started with three be's: be respectful, be responsible, and be safe. And umm, we modeled that. The first week of school when all the students came back, we had stations that were set up. My staff volunteered - my teacher assistants, my resource staff, some of my teachers found coverage, but we had about eight different stations that the children went to by class and by grade level to see; what hall behavior looks like; how do "The Three Be's" look in the hall, how does it look like in the cafeteria, how does it look like in the bathroom, in the classroom, when you're on the playground, when you're walking home, on the bus. We actually had a bus. A bus driver came so the children could sit on the bus. We modeled what it would look like getting on the bus, sitting in the seats, off the bus. It was a wonderful win-win situation, so it wasn't just we're telling you about it, but we're demonstrating that. And then, umm, as we went through that first semester of really implementing "The Three Be's", we also had town meetings once a month where we came back by grade level and every month to this day we still have a town meeting, but we take one of the be's and we go back and we re-talk about that. We might use some videos with that. We might download some united streaming with that. Umm, we might have children that do a skit about one of the be's. Sometimes our classrooms will bring a poster of what it looks like in the classroom, so it is just really neat to see how it's unfolded, but always going back to the mission - just not in August...

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: ...but always going back every month, so you don't lose the focus and I think that's where sometimes schools get caught up - "Well I told them about it", but kids and teachers, teachers are sometimes...

Fritz: Yeah, ha.

Betsy: ...but they uhh, they need to revisit that, so that that focus never goes away. The second semester we did introduce the tickets and umm, because of the grant money we were very pleased to be able to buy several incentives. We went to the kids and talked about what they would like. We bought lots of school supplies, lots of things from Oriental Trade. We gave out tickets for umm - 100 tickets you could eat with the principal. They loved eating with me.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: You know, things like that. Some things that you could give away for free, lots of books, etc. that the kids could cash in every two weeks. They cash in their tickets. It also has been neat

because the children are responsible to count up their tickets, to put them into groups of ten, so that gets into the money and the counting...

Fritz: Sure.

Betsy: ...and so forth, but it makes them responsible too for holding onto their tickets and taking care of that. One of our be's is be responsible, so they know that they have to put their name on the ticket. They keep it in their own little pouch in their desk and umm, and it's just a win-win situation.

Fritz: Sure, and that's neat to hear how that becomes life skills for the students and you talked earlier about giving them anchors. That's a neat thing. I'm curious, umm, you know one of the things that I think we generally assume that kids know how to behave. You know, "Oh they should know how to do that by now", or something like that. The impact of the instruction - it sounds like you all gave direct instruction and modeling on behaviors around the school and that first semester where you weren't giving tickets, just sort of some of the impact of that direct instruction.

Betsy: Well I'm going to tell you that because of our strong focus on academic instruction, we really had to do lots of learning workshops, staff development on differentiated instruction on reading. We made that a strong priority at our school, but because of ESD it was really wonderful to infuse that into the academic arena because our scores began to go up. Kids were on task. Teachers could teach. Teachers were happy that they could teach.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: We saw that when, umm, when kids - we went from the old model of whole group instruction all day into some whole group instruction, but really getting into small group instruction and children being engaged when they weren't with the teacher and so forth. Our scores began to really rise with that. We also saw that the kids, because of now the be's, we also added year before last another "be" called be a problem solver. That is huge because if you truly follow "The Four Be's": be responsible, be safe, be respectful, be a problem solver - that is a huge umbrella of what their attitude, their behavior, their character, the academic character. It all falls under that umbrella of high expectations. We cannot - you know, the teachers and I always talk about how we can't change what goes on at home, but when they come to South Morrison that is their home of high expectations. The coolest thing is, is when I've had conferences or parent meetings, whether it's individual for behavior or if it's at a PTA meeting, all of my parents will say, "Mrs. Clary we already know about "The Four Be's"."

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy. Our child has told us at home or they're teaching it to their younger brother or sister. And I'm like, "Yes!"

Fritz: [Inaudible] Ready.

Betsy: Exactly. Many of my children, umm, come from a disruptive neighborhood or a disruptive lifestyle and in having "The Four Be's" and having effective discipline in our school

has certainly given them a wonderful anchor, but also a calmness, something that they can count on. That consistency really that's in their life, and that is what they need. And we have found that to be a wonderful practice, so it's not just about what my teacher says, but it's what the whole staff says. Our kids have quickly found out too they can't play us.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: They like to do that. "Well Mrs. Clary said..." It's what we all say. Our bus drivers follow the, you know, use "The Four Be's" and use the tickets. Our cafeteria people, the office, everyone that touches the life of a child at our school, certainly supports the ESD and "The Four Be's". And again, it's been a great win-win situation. I'll tell you another cool thing about that is when we go on field trips, over and over I have had museums, people call me or people that come to my school and volunteer, and say, "Wow, your kids are so well behaved." And I just beam because I use those opportunities to go back to the children and say, "I want to give a shout out to Miss So-and-So's classroom for following "The Four Be's" today on the field trip today". You know, "Thank you for being a strong Eagle today." That really supports again that other kids are like, "Wow, this classroom is doing that. Mrs. Clary also expects me to do it and my teacher does too." So we are certainly happy that it's infusing - their behavior is actually going out into the community too. You know, seven years ago we were looking at school where I felt like a big ole black cloud was over my school of, "I don't want my child to go there." I couldn't find teachers to come, and now it's like the parents love our school, support our school. The community has - we have many many wonderful business partners that support our school that are so proud of the results that have happened academically and with character at our school. And so, it certainly has afforded us to get out there. And that ole black cloud, thank goodness, is no longer hovering over the school. We're looked as a school of success. We've been in the paper many times over the wonderful things that our kids are doing, our resource teachers, my teachers, are doing. My ESD team last year, they did something really neat. They had at the end of the school year, you know, it's always tentative with the busses...

Fritz: Mhmm.

Betsy: ...and umm, bus behavior. So we decided let's up our ante, or the leadership team, my ESD team, let's up the ante with, let's give tickets for great behavior from the bus drivers and so the tickets that they received for the last two weeks of school they went in a box every day when they got off the bus whether they went home, whether they went back, they got their name on a special bus ticket and at the end of the two weeks right before the last day of school, the day before, we did a drawing and eight students in K-2 and then eight students in 3-5 got to go on a limo ride.

Fritz: Oh wow, ha.

Betsy: And they went in a limousine and they got to go to McDonald's. Many children, goodness, had never ever done that. The most precious thing about that, Channel 3 was there to tape it. They just couldn't believe that we were doing something so cool for the kids. But really the coolest thing about the whole thing is when I called the K-2 students to come down, my 3-5 and the rest of my K-2 students, they lined the halls and they lined the front sidewalk for the

students that were chosen and they clapped and applauded the kids that got into the limo and that was really special for us as a staff because we were like, "Yes! Instead of the kids saying, 'Well why didn't I get it', they were supporting and applauding kids that did do it."

Fritz: Sure, and it just sounds so great and awesome, wonderful - all of the words that I can drop there.

Betsy: Ha.

Fritz: But hearing you talk about the impact you've had, not just at your school, but in your homes and in the rest of the community. This has just been a really powerful process and program for your school there.

Betsy: It has, and I'll tell you another neat outcome. Because of the great behavior and the focus, kids really began to yearn, "How can I learn more? How can I stretch myself?" My resource teachers, sometimes the schools call them the specialists - and that's my library, my computer, my music, my art, my P.E., my resource teachers really upped their game and began to, umm, they began clubs for our students on Wednesdays. Especially for our upper grade students, with art enrichment, music enrichment. We have a ballroom dance club that kids tried out. Last year, my fifth grade students were learning about different venues of music and they asked my music teacher, "Well, can we learn to ballroom dance?" And she was so taken back. She was like, "Holy cow!"

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: You know, and she went to our coach, our P.E. coach. And coach came to me and said, "Betsy, what do you think about that?" And I said, "Go for it girl!" And so we had boys and girls in fifth grade that were selected. They tried out and they became ballroom dancers. And I'm going to tell you something - that is not an easy thing to do. Maybe *Dancing with the Stars* is something that motivated them too, but our children learned the steps. They learned the cha cha.

Fritz: Wow.

Betsy: They learned to do different kinds of dances and they wanted to give back. And that's another great thing from this ESD. Our kids that certainly get from the community, want to give back to the community. So umm, at the end of the year when we had our fifth grade graduation, my ballroom exhibition team danced for the parents and there was not a dry eye looking at our boys and girls. We were giving them social skills, so that when they go to college they're going to be able to dance and to know how to dance. We had a Cotillion for them, The Junior League gave us a Cotillion for the kids and that has once again been a thing where kids couldn't do and we didn't expect them to do till high expectations. We have orchestra this year.

Fritz: Wow.

Betsy: Kids playing the violin and the community bought violins...

Fritz: That's awesome.

Betsy: ...for our kids to rent out. So again, it's just - in the book *Good to Great*, it talks about that fly wheel that starts moving and then you can't stop it.

Fritz: Mhmm.

Betsy: The fly wheel is rolling at my school and that's what makes it so exciting.

Fritz: Yeah, well I could ask you questions all day. Ha. And I would love to hear about it all day, but I was just wondering if umm, sort of moving towards wrapping up. You gave us some numbers early on. You know, 400 referrals and you know, the SOL scores. Just wondering if you could sort of update us on where you all are now in terms of SOL scores and those sorts of things.

Betsy: Ah! Well I'm glad you asked.

Fritz: Ha.

Betsy: Umm, I'm so proud to tell you that today - last year when we took our SOL tests, we were in the 80s and 90s and we received a Governor's Excellence Award for our scores. And we really celebrated that and our teachers once again were like, "We're not satisfied with that! We've gotta get 100 percent of our kids there!" And I certainly support that, and so we expect our scores to pop up again this year. The referrals have gone down to very minimal referrals. This year, yes, we still have some kids that we must work with and that we must fine tune and we must give them those tools to be successful, especially when they leave us and go to middle school. But we use, we certainly today is no different than when we first started - our ESD team still meets every month. We still look at the discipline and the data every month. We look at what hot spots there are and what needs to be corrected. Our relationship with the children is stronger today than it's ever been, with the parents. And so umm, it's been a wonderful thing to see my school become a school of excellence and umm, we just, as Eagles, that's our mascot, we anticipate to soar even higher.

Fritz: Well congratulations.

Betsy: Thank you.

Fritz: You all have done a wonderful job.

Betsy: Thank you.