

5 Questions for Jean Barnes, Principal at Morning Star School

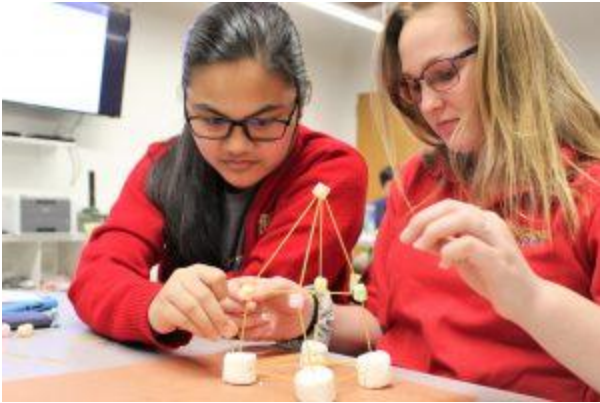
By: Andrew Campanella



In Jacksonville, FL, Morning Star School is a hidden gem of a school for students with learning differences.

Read our feature on the school: High school diplomas... a 30 year dream come true

Shelby Doyle: For someone who is curious about what a day in the life of a student with learning differences is like, how would you describe the experience at Morning Star School?



**Jean Barnes,
Principal at Morning
Star School:** It's so

different for any
individual child here. I
think what helps kids
succeed here most is that

it's a very welcoming, nurturing environment. The anxiety kind of falls away. They know they're not going to get lost or forget their locker combination or if they forget a book, no one's going to yell at them. We take those anxiety-producing things away so that they can focus on what's really important, which is the academics.

We provide a lot of special accommodations to kids. We have adaptive textbooks; we use a lot of technology. All of our teachers are certified in special education or a related field. We have experts here in the teaching profession who know how to teach kids who learn differently. We can break down assignments into smaller pieces, or reduce the homework load, or rather than taking a paper pencil test, the kids can do project-based learning, where they can demonstrate that they've mastered something by doing a project instead of taking a test. The curriculum, the things that they're learning are the same. It's the way it's taught and the way it's evaluated that are different.

Shelby: How have you seen the services you offer and the needs that children are bringing into the classroom evolve over the years?

Jean: That's truly a great question, because things have evolved and changed a lot. Because we're part of the Catholic school system, the regular Catholic schools are



providing services to kids with more mild disabilities now, so our population has changed. We have many more kids on the autism spectrum, a lot of our kids have severe anxiety disorder and communication disorders. We have a service dog on staff that really helps with the kids with anxiety disorders. We have a speech and language pathologist who works with the kids with language disorders. Most of the kids on the autism spectrum have pretty severe communication needs. We have a behaviorist on staff to really teach the kids more coping skills. So, we have had to become a little more specialized when it comes to dealing with very specific disabilities and kids with comorbidities, with more than one disability. Most of our kids have a primary handicapping condition, and then they have secondary disabilities that goes along with it. We've evolved to working with kids with greater needs. They'll have communication needs plus a learning disability, or they'll have severe anxiety disorder coupled with a math disorder.

We've had to learn really to work with a multitude of different kids, so professional development is huge for the staff. We're always going to trainings and learning the latest methods and purchasing the best materials we can to provide for the kids' needs.



Shelby: What do you think your students excel at?

Jean: The first thing I would say is they are so compassionate. They are so compassionate with one another and so helpful, so eager to learn.

They want to learn so bad. We have kids with so many different gifts. We have kids who are great athletes who might not be able to play on a sports team in a regular school because they wouldn't be able to keep up with the workload, but because of our unique setup here, they can make the grades and keep up and be able to stay on their sports teams. We have kids who are musically so gifted. Kids with beautiful voices. They have so many gifts and

talents that never were uncovered before because the focus was so much on “you can’t read, you can’t read, you can’t read,” that they weren’t able to develop all of the gifts that God gave them.

So here we see kids coming out of our their shell and waking up to find out that they are good at things, especially the compassion and the sense of service. They do service projects all the time. They are so aware of the environment and trying to recycle and keep the campus clean and teaching their families what’s important about recycling. They’re just great kids.

Shelby: What is the trajectory of your new high school program?

Jean: It’s completely full for next year. We have a 12:1 student-teacher ratio, because it’s all special needs kids and that’s mandated by the Florida Catholic Conference. We will have 12 graduates next year, and the most exciting thing about next year’s class of graduates is they’ve gone through all four years of high school with us. We’re super excited about that. We anticipate the

high school to stay full. Enrollment is usually not an issue with us because we serve such a unique population of kids and no one else really duplicated the services that we provide. I anticipate this to have an impact for generations on kids with special needs.



Shelby: How do you celebrate School Choice Week each year?

Jean: The majority of our kids would not be able to afford this education at all without school choice. Over 90% of our kids receive a state funded scholarship, either McKay, Step Up, or Gardiner. Without that, there probably wouldn't be a Morning Star School, because special education is very expensive. Because of our low student-teacher ratio, I'm paying for a full-time teacher for every 12 students. School Choice Week is super important to us. The kids wear the scarves, and we put up the banners, and we talk to the kids about how important it is and how fortunate we are to be in this state where parents have a choice and where that choice is funded, at least partially, by the state, so that they have an opportunity to come here.

