

A Child's Guiding Star

Morning Star School, Seeking to Serve



By Sheri Webber | Photo Credit: Morning Star School

“Basically, the school is an unknown in the community, but it’s the only special education school within the diocese,” says Maria Johnson, Director of Development. Morning Star is fully accredited by the Florida Catholic Conference and the only school of its kind in the Diocese of St. Augustine, serving children grades K-8th who have learning disabilities—ADD, ADHD, seizure disorders, and the medically fragile, as well as those with various processing deficits and high-functioning autism.

“There was no perfect place for these kids, and for so many, they just needed additional support,” says Jean Barnes, Principal of Morning Star. Founded in 1956, by the Sisters of St. Joseph at the request of Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley, the school recently celebrated its 60th year. Archbishop Hurley’s vision was to meet the needs of an underserved population in Jacksonville—families raising children with disabilities—and the ministry was designed without regard to the religious affiliation of its students. Currently serving about 50 percent non-Catholic families, the school includes all socioeconomic levels and provides a wide range of specialized services.

Principal Barnes says, “It’s a unique setting for a school and you’re really not going to find an educational institute set up like we are.” She started at Morning Star as an 8th grade teacher roughly 30 years ago. “I remember very clearly the first year I taught. At graduation, parents would say to me, ‘So where do we go now?’ It was absolutely heartbreaking.”

Covering 5 counties with its student enrollment, Morning Star and its teachers are all certified for special education, creating what Principal Barnes calls “a very homey, supportive and relaxed environment.” As part of its 60th anniversary, the school has embarked on an ambitious effort to extend services to students beyond elementary and middle school by adding grades 9th through 12th. “The need has always been there to continue the school past 8th grade because our kids don’t know where to go,” says Maria. “They often don’t have a lot of options.”

“Our focus has always been on those kids falling through the gaps,” principal says. “When I first started teaching here so many years ago, Jacksonville’s public schools had a super specific definition of individual learning disabilities and those children who didn’t meet that exact criteria didn’t receive services. At Morning Star, we take children as they are.” In a class of 20-25 in a typical school, even a child who is performing



at grade level, with processing deficits, won’t stay at grade level in that environment.

And it’s no wonder that families are reluctant to leave the school. “If you really want to get at what we’re really about, you have to understand kids whose disabilities go just a little deeper than academic deficits—kids with overwhelming stress related to school,” Principal Barnes says and then shares the story of a student who had such high anxiety that Morning Star staff could not get her out of the car in the morning. After much behavioral intervention, love and careful progress, that young lady ended up flourishing. She played team sports, held leading roles in the school’s annual musical, and is now thriving in a traditional high school setting.

“It’s hard to quantify, but those are the kinds of stories you see every day here,” Principal Barnes says. One of her favorite student stories is from several years back when an accreditation team was visiting Morning Star. A student being interviewed during that process said, “In the morning when I head to school, I don’t feel like I’m leaving home, but like I’m going home.” In a similar narrative, students have come to the school with selective mutism and eventually sing solos or develop true leadership skills.

Morning Star groups students into various levels of Primary and Intermediary sections, unlike other schools. “We group kids by age and



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ability,” Barnes says. “That way we retain the fluidity needed to move them up as they master certain skills.” Teachers communicate openly with students that it’s okay not to “get it.” They simply try it another way or do it over again. In addition, the faculty uses a lot of technology, hands-on activities and use of manipulatives campus wide. They offer a full curriculum, as well as social skills, life skills and problem solving techniques. Not only does the school enjoy a 12 to 1 student-teacher ratio, but many of Morning Star’s teachers stay for impressively long tenures.

“One of the coolest things about our school,” Principal Barnes says with a huge smile, “is our therapy dog. She’s incredible. Her name is Nova.” Trained as an autism service dog, two-year old Nova provides reading, behavioral, and emotional therapy for Morning Star kids five days a week, but she wasn’t the only one who underwent extensive preparation and training. “I went through two years of intensive service dog training before ever meeting Nova. We got her through a gift from Project Chance and the HEAL Foundation. They asked if we were interested in piloting the program, and we jumped at the opportunity.”

Everyone calls it “Nova time” and moments spent with her are the ultimate reward at Morning Star. Kids doing well on a behavior plan are awarded the privilege of walking Nova. Children read to her. Nova calmly places her own body between a student and a first-time adult visitor on campus. She also specializes in compression therapy for autistic students. “It’s amazing to watch,” Maria says, still in her first year at the school.

If a child gets frustrated, especially a student along the autism spectrum, often some degree of physical pressure needs to be exerted on the student’s body. So Nova leans into the children. She literally presses in, covering an anxious child’s side or snuggling against their legs or back until calm is restored. Jacob, one such student, was extremely reserved about speaking to others. Until experiencing daily interaction with Nova, Jacob had never before spoken to Principal Barnes. The day he looked up at her, unprompted, and told her that Nova had a red collar, Principal Barnes says she nearly dissolved into tears. This was no small victory for Jacob’s family either, and as a result, his parents soon welcomed home a dog of their own, furthering progressing Jacob’s success.

Coach Natalie Bryan teases that the teacher-to-student ratio is nothing compared to the dog-to-student ratio at Morning Star because next year the campus will house three full-time service and therapy dogs, including Nova. “Nah, Nova is the *second-best* thing about the school because my class is definitely the best,” says Coach.

She’s been teaching at Morning Star for 31 years. Often wearing a brightly-colored t-shirt with phrases like ‘*Learn to Move, Move to Learn*’ stamped across the front, Coach bryan can be found surrounded by colorful equipment—super-sized dice, Frisbees sporting mathematical symbols, and other games and gear, some featuring words and the letters of the alphabet. “This is home,” Coach says. “I’m one of those fortunate and blessed people that can truly say I still thoroughly enjoy my job.”



Coach and Principal Barnes both believe that teaching at Morning star is more a calling than a job. But that’s not all they believe. “We very much believe in physical activity and physical therapy. It’s not an extra part of the curriculum, it’s an *integral* part of it. Coach sees every student three times a week, at minimum.” Unlike most schools with limited student access to resource teachers, Morning Star prioritizes physical enrichment.

“We have a wonderful partnership with Christ the King Catholic Church and School right next door,” Principal Barnes says, explaining that though Morning Star is a completely separate entity and not affiliated with any particular parish, teachers have access to Christ the King’s sanctuary and full-size indoor gym, while the children have the ability to join Christ the King’s competitive sports teams. “When we sat down to really knock out the details of how our high school was going to work, my biggest concern was how to offer these kids the full, rich high school experience in a smaller, protected atmosphere.” Another key partnership with Bishop Snyder High School allows further integration of students. Morning Star’s upper grades experience more traditional high school life—dances, sports events, extra classes, Homecoming, pep rallies and visits with peer mentors.

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“We also rely heavily on the community for help with many things,” Principal Barnes says. “Our tuition doesn’t begin to meet the actual cost of educating a special needs child in a school with one teacher for every 12 students.” For example, the school was without a large enough space to function as a school cafeteria until the Neviasser Charitable Foundation stepped in and provided for the construction of a covered, open-air dining area that seats approximately 40 students.

Three community members who have made a tremendous difference at Morning Star in their guidance and financial support—Lou Walsh, Jay Demetree, and Bob Shircliff—serve as Honorary Chairs for the school and have been instrumental in Morning Star’s *Circle of Friends* initiative. Principal Barnes says additional support is always welcome. Naming opportunities are available and the school hopes to secure funding for a more extensive gardening program, a media/technology center and a physical fitness course for high school use. Principal Barnes also names Father Mark, Father Bodie, Father Houle and Sister Elise of the Sisters of St. Joseph as champions for Morning Star’s continued success.

“I had a dad in my office once—he has four boys, three of which attend MSS,” Principal Barnes says. “He said to me, ‘You’ve given me back my family. I didn’t know what we were going to do.’”

Coach says kids feel like, finally, they can be who they are without being judged or chastised. Many families are so stressed when they first come to Morning Star. But once they’re secure in an environment that is meeting their needs, much of that anxiety falls away. “Once you get here, you really don’t want to leave. It’s a supportive family environment,”

Barnes says. Teachers are constantly undergoing additional training and conferences and new families go through a pretty intensive intake process to ensure that the school can meet the needs of that student.

“Kids need so much more than paper-pencil activities. They learn through movement, they learn through art, they learn through music,” the principal says, saddened that these are often some of the first things that get taken away in traditional or public schools. “It’s mindboggling, but that’s not going to happen here.” Morning Star broke ground in November 2016 for their new building designed to accommodate intermediate and high school classes. In order to complete the project by the 2017-2018 school year, a \$1.5 million capital campaign, “Building a Brighter Future”, is currently under way. This is the school’s first capital campaign in 60 years. Community partners and private sponsors are key to the realization of this expansion.

Dr. John Luciano. Principal at Holy Spirit Catholic School and parent of a son who attended Morning Star School. From both a parent and an educator’s perspective, he believes the value of Morning Star’s expansion project is enormous. “In Catholic schools, each child is seen as a unique creation,” he says. “Morning Star met my son’s learning needs, but also trained his heart.”

For more information about the services, programs, enrollment, and support opportunities at Morning Star, please contact Maria Johnson, Director of Development, at 725 Mickler Road, 32211, by emailing development@morningstar-jax.org, or by calling (904) 722-8529. You may also visit the school’s website at www.morningstar-jax.org.



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