

CASE STUDY: KARA O'MALLEY

Anti-Boring Study Skills Class Reduces 'Worried Parent' Calls, Need for Student One-on-One Support

Demand for coaching exceeds program capacity

Kara O'Malley's job is to help 7th through 12th-grade students at Trinity Christian school thrive within the school's rigorous college-prep curriculum. Seventh grade is a tough year for students, and preparing them for success takes a school-wide effort. "Things can snowball, and we try to preempt that," she explained.

Kara and her team provide one-on-one coaching for close to 15% of the students in those grades. The system she created was robust, but it wasn't always enough.

Students and parents asked for spots in the program even after it was full. Parents of struggling students wanted frequent conferences with teachers and pushed hard on the administration to offer more support. Many students felt overwhelmed by their classes.

7th and 8th-grade students struggle with college prep curriculum

"Telling kids to use a planner isn't enough," Kara explains. "They have no idea what to do with it. This is especially true for students with executive function deficits or other learning challenges."

"Students felt like they always had something hanging over their heads. It's a really frustrating thing for kids at that age."

Kara was constantly looking for new tools, and dug into brain science literature looking for scaffolding that might help offer support. "That's when I found one of Gretchen Wegner's free videos," she said.

Unique, easy-to-implement program for educators boosts student understanding

The video was so inspiring that Kara used Trinity's flexible professional development program to take Gretchen's course, *The Art of Inspiring Students*.

This course combines brain science with tools for developing habits. It addresses how students study, learn and retain information. It also includes sections on time management and organization.



EDUCATOR

- Kara O'Malley,
- Executive Function Coach and Curriculum Coordinator
- 7 years coaching experience
- Trinity Christian School, Fairfax, Virginia, USA
- 687 students grades K-12



STUDENTS

- 98% attend 4-year college after graduation; average SAT: 1330
- 75% White, 14% Asian, 5% Hispanic, 4% African American



CHALLENGE

- 7th grade students struggled with rigorous college-prep curriculum



SOLUTION

- New study skills classes based on Anti-Boring Approach



RESULTS

- 80% drop in need for student one-on-one support
- 50% decrease in "worried parent" calls. Students more prepared for assignments and exams

“I loved her simple approach,” Kara said. “Explaining studying as a 3-step process. Using a ‘mini-lecture format. Asking for permission from the student before teaching them something.”

The tools were so effective that the school decided to create a pilot “study skills” class to teach a wider group. She thought a classroom setting would be ideal for introducing and practicing study skills because every lesson draws on relevant material. The new program included all 7th-grade students, regardless of need.

“When it’s based on what’s happening in their classroom the kids are automatically motivated,” Kara observed.

One-on-one success catapults Anti-Boring Approach into the classroom

Classroom settings also have their challenges. Gretchen designed her program, *The Anti-Boring Approach for Powerful Studying*, for one-on-one settings. Kara needed to adapt them to teach in groups that included students with a wide range of “school-ability.”

Kara and her fellow coaches worked hard to get students interested. That’s where brain theory came in. Students learn why the *Anti-Boring Approach* works. They are intrigued by the idea that brains are plastic, that it’s possible to affect how neurons connect.

Some students pushed back on the new approach because they already found school easy. “I tell those students that it will get harder,” Kara said. “This method works whether you’re trying to pass 7th grade English or quantum physics. This approach will help you no matter where you are in your education.”

Next, Kara introduced part of the Anti-Boring Approach—the “Study Cycle”—to her fellow executive-function specialists. Often, she said, teachers are annoyed with learning scientists who tell them how to structure their classroom. Researchers suggest changes that are too time-consuming or too complex, or that aren’t based on the reality of day-to-day teaching.

But the Anti-Boring tools are so easy to use that Kara’s colleagues asked to learn more. “The *Anti-Boring Approach* gives us something we can hang all our other tools on,” she said. “My colleagues and I want to use this approach as the basis of our program.”

Successful pilot goes school-wide

The *Anti-Boring Approach* pilot program was so successful that the teachers decided to expand the program to all 7th graders and new 8th graders.

The format fit seamlessly with the school’s blocked 80-minute class period. For the first 30 minutes, students learned organization and study skills. For the next 50, they practiced those skills in their study hall.

“The hardest part was deciding on order,” Kara said. Ultimately the program started by teaching students to plan and organize their day, then moved to brain theory. After that came the study cycle, which teaches students how brains actually integrate new material.

During the first semester, teachers helped students build an Anti-Boring toolkit. The second semester focused on implementation—how to learn detailed civics material or do well on a test on *Romeo and Juliet*.

Students more prepared, administration fields fewer ‘worried parent’ calls

Kara described the *Anti-Boring Approach* as “student-focused, easy to teach and accessible to the kids. It’s a way to develop a common language, something all teachers can use with our students.”

The results so far? Students are more prepared for classes and exams. The number of students requesting one-on-one help has dropped significantly, and student stress level has dropped as well.

Kara recalled one student who was really wound up at the beginning of the year. “It’s fun to see her relax about school, connect with other kids, and just laugh.”

The numbers of parent-teacher conferences, and calls to the administration, have also dropped. “The administration is thrilled,” Kara said. “It’s been a very successful program.”

Gretchen Wegner is the industry expert in what every student needs to know about how to study, and what every parent and educator needs to know about how to inspire students to study. Find out more about her anti-boring coaching, courses and community at gretchenwegner.com.