Jen Walsh: From the American School Counselors Association this is, I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, director of education and training here at ASCA. ASCA's school counselor of the year award honors professionals who devote their careers to advocating for the nation's students and addressing their academic and social emotional development and college and career readiness needs.

Today we sit down with one of the 2021 school counselor of the year finalist, Barbara Truluck. Barbara is a school counselor at Palmer Middle School in Kennesaw, Georgia, where she and another school counselor provide school counseling services to the suburban school's 905 students, grades six through eight. Congratulations and welcome Barbara.

Barbara Truluck: Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here today and really truly honored to have been selected as an ASCA school counselor of the year finalist.

Jen Walsh: It's a super exciting time. I always like to kind of start out by getting an idea of your school demographics.

Barbara Truluck: So I'm a school counselor at Palmer Middle School, and we're located in the Northern suburbs of Atlanta in Kennesaw, Georgia. And we're actually right down the street from Kennesaw State University. And we have a very diverse student population, which is wonderful. We have about right around 900 students in grades six, seven, and eight. And so for our demographics, 39% of our students are white, 29% are black, 23% Hispanic and 4% Asian.

And so it is, it's a wonderful diversity of our students, but there are some challenges with that. 40% of our students are economically disadvantaged, which really is a large part of our population, but we just fall short of qualifying for title one funds. So that's a challenge, we have that need, but we don't have those financial resources. And then also with our student population, 24% of our students are gifted.

So we want to make sure that they're challenged and they're served as well. And because we have that really multicultural population, we're always working to make sure that everyone feels included and that they feel valued and that there's a sense of belonging in our school. We're always looking at data and making those adjustments to our programs to make sure that all of our students are being served.

Our mission at Palmer is success for all students. And so when we say all, we always say this, all means all and supporting those diverse needs. I've got one example of how we dug into data recently and made a policy change. And that was when we were looking at our AC classes.

We just started an AC waiver program to help increase the opportunity for students who really want to challenge themselves and increase that rigor. But prior to this AC waiver program, students were placed in our AC classes by one Iowa test score. And you have to have over an 80 percentile to be placed in our AC classes.

Jen Walsh: What does AC stand for just for folks that don't know?

Barbara Truluck: Oh yes, that's our advanced content classes. So, that's our higher level classes. So we have the on-grade level and then advanced content. That's a great question. We really advocated for looking at the whole child and not just that one test score. So by providing this AC waiver, students and parents can waive themselves into those advanced content classes.

We've increased our black and Hispanic students in our AC classes by 30%. So I'm super proud that we have removed that barrier and really close that opportunity gap and work to make sure that all of our students going back to our mission of all means all, have the same opportunities. I know that I'm very passionate. I want every student that walks through our door to feel that this is a place where they can thrive and every child deserves that.

Jen Walsh: Definitely. And I love that, that is included in your mission. As anyone who is familiar with the model knows that is really the foundation of the model and really of school counseling now, as the profession has kind of shifted over the last 20 to 30 years, that importance of serving all students and not just a select few.

So I love that that is intertwined in your mission and that you're using data. It's again, part of the model, part of that foundation work. Just out of curiosity, you said that parents can opt into the AC classes now, did you find a lot of parents doing that?

Barbara Truluck: Yeah. We've had a great response and really an overwhelming response to the waiver program. It's really students that wanted to be in those AC classes, but may not have hit that 80 percentile marker on that one Iowa test. And really, we advocated for looking at the whole child. A lot of students are that higher achieving student. They want to challenge themselves.

They're making really good grades, but that one indicator was holding them back from being included in those AC classes. And as we know, especially our eighth graders, they want to take those high school level classes and those AC advanced content classes. So we've had a great response and great success with it.

Jen Walsh: I think that'll be interesting to see data from that in years to come.

Barbara Truluck: Yes. Thank you.

Jen Walsh: We'll hear more from Barbara in just a moment, but first, a quick word from one of our sponsors, The Student Success Agency. For the past eight years, The Student Success Agency has worked side by side with school counselors, teachers, and principals to build the student win box, which is your one-stop shop to capture student moments throughout the busy school day, collaborate with staff to turn moments into momentum and celebrate school wins.

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From there, they'll walk you through how to utilize the win box to elevate and mobilize and include school staff in strengthening all students' academic and emotional wellbeing. We are now back with Barbara. You talked about how 40% of your population are high achievers. I imagine that that often comes with anxiety. How are you able to address the anxiety and stress of your students?

Barbara Truluck: Well, I know I struggled with stress and anxiety when I was growing up. I had that worry brain and I really struggled in school because of it. I know how difficult it is to concentrate in class when your mind is really reeling with anxiety. And it wasn't until I was in college that I learned stress coping skills, and I really started to enjoy school.

And as a result, my grades improved, I did very well in college where I struggled in elementary and middle and high school, because I just didn't have those coping skills, especially now looking back, I wish that I had had someone that could have helped me when I was younger so I didn't have to struggle so much.

And that's one reason that I really wanted to become a school counselor. And that is to help students learn ways to deal with stress and those coping skills and how to turn off that worry brain. Just like you said, we know that stress and anxiety is on the rise with this generation. So stress management is a really important life skill.

It was about my second year at Palmer that I started to see a trend of the same students in the clinic with stress-related symptoms, coming down to the school counseling office with anxiety or panic attacks and requesting to leave class. Also, at the same time, looking at attendance data, I started to see a growing list of students with school avoidance.

So these students, they're missing valuable instruction time in class, and it really does negatively affect their grades. So I decided to implement a small group intervention and I called it stress busters and it's to help students learn coping skills. And it really has grown over the years.

I now run stress busters groups in all three grade levels. I've used it as a multi-tiered intervention throughout the whole school, and I'm even using stress busters to support our teachers right now with the tremendous amount of stress that they're under. The group that was originally designed to teach students ways to calm the worry brain, to learn those stress management skills, relaxation, and then coping skills for anxiety. The goal is really to help students stay in class because, we need to learn to break the cycle.

So a student becomes stressed or anxious in class. They asked to leave class, they go to the clinic or the counseling office. Then they go home and pretty soon they're falling behind in academics. Then their grades start to fail and it becomes this vicious cycle. So I just thought, how can we help these students really break that cycle.

At Palmer, we have a success intervention block. We're really fortunate to have those because that's time that we can pull students for our small group interventions and the stress busters, I'll paint a picture for you of what it looks like. When students walk into the room, I have the yoga mats on the floor and I have relaxing music playing, and we have the big screen TV in our classrooms. And I have the waterfall or nature, the sounds coming through.

I play that off of YouTube and really make this a calm space for the students. So the stress busters sessions, I usually run about six sessions, one a week, and the students start off with the first group session by taking a stress inventory, a stress scale. And I use that as the pre-assessment and then we go through and every one of the sessions follows the same.

We start off with circle share time, and the students sit around and really share any stressors or what's been going on in their life. And really that talk therapy and supporting each other. We also do deep breathing at the beginning of all of our stress busters sessions. And then with each session, I teach a different stress buster, usually one to two different stress buster strategies to help manage stress. And those include art therapy and visualization. And I love this one, I teach what I can control and what I can't control. And gosh, isn't that very current right now.

Jen Walsh: That's the motto of 2020, and probably will be the motto for part of 2021.

Barbara Truluck: Yep. Love that one and teach them that there's some things out of their control and we're using a lot of energy and a lot of stress with that. So just absolutely love that one. And then I also teach them what a healthy lifestyle looks like, eating healthy, staying hydrated, the importance of sleep.

We know that this generation they're really sleep deprived. They come to school tired because they're up on technology and cell phones and things during the night and they're not getting good sleep. And we know without that, without really good sleep, even the smallest stressor we're not able to handle.

So teaching all of these strategies throughout these stress buster sessions. And then at the end of each group meeting, we always lay on the yoga mats and quiet our mind, and we stretch and listen to relaxing music. And I'll tell you that the benefits have been great with this stress busters program and really infusing the mindset, the ASCA mindset, that first one to develop the sense of whole self, healthy balance of mental and social, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

And that's just the life skill that they're learning with stress busters. And then when we look at the ASCA behavior, all of those self-management skills really apply. But the one that we really focus on is that demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem. And then the other one is the balance of school and home life and community activities.

So infusing those ASCA mindset behaviors into all of the sessions, just been a great program that is very near and dear to my heart. But one of the benefits that I absolutely love and see, every time we do stress busters is the connection that the students feel to each other. They really form a little support group and a bond. And it's funny, they don't want me to start any stress busters session until everybody's there.

And they do really support each other, especially when we have that circle shared time, they show that empathy and compassion, and it's so cute to see them when they, if someone's sharing about they're having problems with their brothers or sisters and the other stress busters members are giving them advice, well, try this and try that. And really that support.

I know this one time we had a student that really just burst into tears telling us about some struggles that she was having, and it warms my heart. We just put that student in the middle of a circle and we just did a group hug and we all kind of laughed and cried together, but it was that support that comes from this group that really is invaluable and really priceless to see.

Talking about the data at the end of stress busters. So 90% of our students report decreased stress levels after the intervention. And so we use that pre-post stress scale, but also we just ask the students, we say, "Are you using the stress buster strategies?" And they tell us time and time again, "Yes, I'm using them not only in the classroom, but outside of the classroom."

And that is perfect because it's really, they report that they're happier, they're healthier. And as a result, their grades start going up, which of course makes them happier too. But when we look at the outcome data, the first year I ran stress busters, we had an 80% decrease in absences for the students. And the second year I ran it, an 82% decrease in absences. That was a huge success.

Jen Walsh: That's amazing.

Barbara Truluck: It really is because what we're measuring is time out of class, because when you're not in class, you're not engaged and you're not learning. So when we look at the clinic records and the absentee records and the leaving school early records, just tremendous success with that. So it's a mainstay at Palmer. I continue to run our stress busters groups every year.

Jen Walsh: How do you identify students to be a part of that?

Barbara Truluck: That's a great question. Looking at the attendance data, looking at the clinic data, and we have a very good relationship with our clinic. Our school nurse can tell when a student is a little stressed or it's really a stress-related symptom. And we start to look at that data, she'll call us and say, "The student is struggling right now. Can you come and see them?"

So we start to form that list quarter one of the school year. So looking at that, and then really self-reporting too. A lot of parents at the beginning of school will tell us, so-and-so struggles with anxiety and I'll say, "Oh, we have an intervention for that. Let me put your name on the list." And we can also look at our 504s for students with diagnosed anxiety and stress related depression. And so we start to build that list at the beginning of school, collecting data from a lot of different areas,

Jen Walsh: That brings up a good point about the importance of having that open line of communication with all staff and knowing and emphasizing the importance that you're all working together towards a common goal. I also loved how you talked about how kind of an indirect outcome of the group was the students forming that bond with each other.

I know you're entwining the mindsets and behaviors into the group, but that brought up another mindset and behavior that kind of happened in directly. And that's the ability to have empathy. That illustrates such a great point where, you can start an intervention in this case, a small group with certain mindsets and behaviors in mind, but then indirectly or another mindset and behavior can be achieved. Those mindsets and behaviors are so important for students. So I think that is great.

Barbara Truluck: Thank you. Like I said, that group is near and dear to my heart because it's something that I struggled with growing up. And I just love sharing that with my students and actually because of the success of this group intervention, I decided to present a few years ago for the Georgia School Counselor Association, state conference.

Jen Walsh: Awesome.

Barbara Truluck: And I presented this group intervention and I can tell you the room was packed.

Jen Walsh: It's definitely evident that there is a major need across all grade levels.

Barbara Truluck: Definitely it's a need. And I'm just thrilled that so many want to do the stress busters and they're helping their students. One story that I loved out of that session, I taught one technique is a worry journal. And with the worry journal, if you suffer from chronic worry, you'll understand what I'm talking about.

The worst time of the day is bedtime, right? When you go to lay down at night and your brain starts reeling with the list and the things you're worried about and what you're stressed about, and it can be very difficult to go to sleep. So I teach my students and I give them a journal and I talked about it at the conference at night to just write down your thoughts and your worries and get it out of your head and onto paper so you can go to sleep and that worry journal will be sitting there in the morning so you can look at it and give yourself permission to take a break from the worry.

And after I presented stress busters there maybe two or three weeks later, one of the school counselors that was there called me, and she told me how this had helped her own daughter and that she started a worry journal with her daughter at her bedside. And she would write down all her worries every night and how it really helped her be able to fall asleep. And I just love that. And I said, "It is such a simple thing, but it's so powerful to really help with that chronic worry." So just love the stories that have come out and all the people that it's helped.

Jen Walsh: I'm thinking I might need one of these because you're definitely right, bedtime is always the hardest. And like you talked about, we know that students are already deprived of sleep and the impact that lack of sleep can cause. I want to hear more about how you were able to continue these groups in a virtual setting, which we found ourselves in last year and then this year as well. But first let's take a quick break and hear from one of our sponsors, My Options.

As the nation's largest free college and career planning program, My Options is thrilled to celebrate your work, shaping the future of young people. They're here to help you blaze innovative approaches to counseling. That's why My Options has launched 21st century planning and mentoring apps at no cost for every student, parent and school counselor.

Use their tool to build college lists, find scholarships, track progress, and manage applications all in one place. Check them out at myoptions.org. We're now back with Barbara. So Barbara, how were you able to have these groups in a virtual setting?

Barbara Truluck: Oh, I've continued them all through the summer and right into back to school. So yes, every Wednesday I hold stress busters virtually. And what has been a great tool is the virtual calm rooms. If you haven't seen those just Google virtual calm rooms. There are several really good ones out there and we were able to use those.

We continued with all of the stress busters because there was such a need. And I didn't want to just leave my students back when school closed in March, that was such a traumatic and stressful event for everyone. So I continued it remotely for sure. And now that students are back face-to-face and remote, I hold the stress busters session with both at the same time so our remote students feel connected to our face-to-face students.

Jen Walsh: So kind of shifting gears a little bit, I read about how you were able to find a correlation between discipline referrals and certain male students and then student engagement. So what did you do to address this correlation that you found and what inspired this intervention?

Barbara Truluck: So, looking at ways that we can help close the gap. And like we talked about at the beginning with such a diverse population, data is so important and I really started digging down into some data when I started to see the same group of male students, they were seventh and eighth grade students with discipline referrals. And I noticed that they were also on our failing list of students that were failing grades at the end of quarter one.

So looking at that data intersection, so we've got a lot of discipline referrals and we have failing grades. And that makes sense, right? Because when students are not in class and they're out of class for in school suspension or out-of-school suspension, they're missing that valuable instruction, which leads to failing grades. And then, they start to become to feel defeated and that's when they start to disengage from school.

So I really wanted to build an intervention to support those students and really make it a focused intervention. And really the goal was to decrease the days of ISS and OSS and really help support those failing grades and help reverse those failing grades at the end of quarter one. But what was really neat was, as I was thinking about designing this intervention, I am also a member of this ACE committee here in Kennesaw, and it's called Accelerating Community Engagement Coalition.

And I'm one of the educators on that coalition. And it's a group of community leaders and from all around the surrounding area and at one of the meetings, they talked to me about their desire to be a mentor and to come into the schools and really, help students. So here I am, I'm trying to design this intervention to support students. And I have this group of mentors that want to come in.

So I said, "Well, this is perfect." I said, "Let's build a village around these students." And so I called it the champion mentor group and invited mentors in to our school to meet with these students. But first I had to build the group. And I remember when I put the list together of the students that were going to be in the group and I showed administration, they kind of looked at me and they said, "You're going to put these students all in the same room together?"

Because these were some of the students that had been in fights and all kinds of issues. And I said, "Yes, we are. We're going to put them in the same room. We're going to build leaders and we're going to build relationships." And so champion mentor group was born out of that. And I really used the restorative practice model and pulled these students together in a round table.

Each time we met and we met once a month throughout the entire school year, I knew this wasn't going to be like a short term fix. We needed to support these students throughout the whole year. So we met once a month with the mentors that would come in and then another time during the month, we would pull the students and work on their academics and their missing work and help support them academically.

And so really just focusing on those meetings, bringing a mentor in to share their story and to share how they overcame obstacles. And then I would also teach a different skill at each meeting. So like a skill on building integrity and leadership and setting goals, all of these group members, they are leaders. We just wanted to foster them to lead in a very positive direction. And what I love about this group so much is that it gave these students a voice.

It made them feel special. We built those positive connections. We practice those leadership skills. And the one thing that I did was I asked our PTSA, I said, "Can you guys provide snacks for all of my stress busters groups?" And of course they loved that. They would walk in the room and we'd have the room set up in a circle. And then it's sitting out, they'd have their snacks and their favorite drinks.

And so I asked them at the beginning, "What are your favorite snacks? What do you like to drink?" And having a Coke or a soda at school, that's a special treat. I did that very intentionally because I never wanted these students to feel like they had to be in the group because of anything negative, I wanted them to feel like this was something special, we're pouring into you, we support you, we want to build those relationships and really, help you through this school year.

The one session that really was such a great story and was our dress for success session. I had a mentor come in. He was a professor at Kennesaw State University. And he came in and talked to the students about how to build a resume and job skills and dressing for success. And our assistant principal, Mr. Blackman, he's a very sharp dresser and he wears a tie a lot. So I thought this is perfect.

I'm going to invite him in. And I went out and bought a bunch of ties and we put the ties on the table and the students, they each picked a tie and our mentor, Mr. Blackman showed them how to tie a tie and they all practiced and how to tie a tie. And they were so proud of that tie. They wore it all day. All 10 of the male students walked around school all day with that tie on. And they were so happy that they got to keep that tie. So it was just one of those sessions that I'll never forget that really touched my heart.

Jen Walsh: That's so special. I love that.

Barbara Truluck: But this group I'll tell you, I'm so proud of them. They are outcome data, 47% decrease in discipline referrals at the end of the intervention and what the other outcome data that I absolutely love is 100% promotion rate. So where at the beginning of quarter one, they had so many failing grades and we were really worried, all of them by the end of the year earned promotion.

So just another intervention that I'm very proud of. And I think the one thing that I think a parent said it best, and she said, "My son has come so far this year. And the compassionate work you do here really makes a difference." So again, our administration was so happy with this intervention. They asked, please continue this year after year. So again, it's going to be one of our mainstays.

Jen Walsh: I love the snacks and the ties, they're little things, but they can make such a big impact. And I love that you thought of that very intentionally as well. And the results are just are fantastic. And I think it's also important to talk about how important those results are in getting the buy-in that you've gotten.

Barbara Truluck: So, like I said, at the beginning, they were a little skeptical about it, but as we continued throughout the year and they started seeing the results and those relationships being built, they were getting excited and wanted to be involved too. And that's why we would ask administration to come in. Teachers started to get excited and wanted to get involved.

And we had one of our male teachers come in and speak to the group, too about his struggles. So really as the group evolved, more excitement really came about and wanted that involvement. And it is, it's supporting the school mission. And that's what you asked about administration. They're very serious about our mission, that we are showing success for all students.

And this was a group that needed that extra little TLC and needed some extra intervention. And so all means all, they even came out, one of our last sessions, we took the group out onto the field and played football with them and they got to teach Mrs. Truluck how to throw a football and that was super fun, but our administration came out. So they have tremendous support for the program. And it was great to see them interact with the group as well.

Jen Walsh: Shifting gears a little bit. Can you talk about your journey to school counseling? I've heard that you had one in particular, very interesting job prior to becoming a school counselor that I am very interested in hearing more about.

Barbara Truluck: Absolutely. Well, I grew up in Florida and during my college years, I worked at Disney and that was a great experience. I was a kid of the kingdom. And so I danced in the parades during the day down Main Street. And then at night I was in the electric light parade and I was Cinderella. And so yes, I was a Disney princess.

Jen Walsh: I mean, I can't dance and I can't sing, but I think that would be so cool to work for Disney in one of their parades. I'm a big Disney fan.

Barbara Truluck: What's funny about it is, you don't particularly try out for a character role. You try out as a performer in the entertainment department of Disney. So, I went to the audition and I was a dancer. And so I was hired in the entertainment department, but you have to have the look and the height.

Jen Walsh: It's because of the costumes, right?

Barbara Truluck: That's exactly right.

Jen Walsh: I took a little behind the scenes tour. So I heard about that. You have to be a very particular height because they only have the costumes in one size.

Barbara Truluck: That's right. And I was the right height. You have to be 5.7 to meet Cinderella. And I auditioned for that. And then I got that position in the electric light parade and what's super fun is you have to go and you have to learn the character mannerisms. So I had to go to Cinderella class and learn how to do the wave and how she turned and walked because they really want you to be in that character. So just a great experience.

Jen Walsh: Does that ever impact how you teach post-secondary options for your middle schoolers?

Barbara Truluck: Well, I know that I earned my teaching degree while I was in college. And most of my teaching experience was in middle school. I was a middle school science teacher for 12 years, but I really felt the calling to become a school counselor and really help support students with their social emotional needs.

So when we moved to Georgia, I knew that, that would be the perfect transition time for me to go back to school and pursue my dream of becoming a school counselor. So I think what I teach students is, to dream and to dream big. And I think that does come from my Disney background, but also I know talking about post-secondary, from the minute you walk into our school at Palmer, you can feel that post-secondary vibe. We are an avid demonstration school and the college readiness is really infused throughout all of our instruction and all that we do.

We have college banners hanging in all of our hallways and then outside of every teacher's door, we have a banner hanging the college that they graduated from. And so as a school counselor, support that mission of avid. We take our avid students on college field trips, and I love going with them on those college field trips, because for most of our students it's the first time they've ever been on a college campus and their eyes get so big and wow.

And really for our first-generation students as well. I know that I was the first female in my family to attend college. And so I know that struggle, I really didn't have anybody pave the way for me. I had to kind of figure things out myself since I was the first. So those first-generation students in our avid program just love going on those college field trips with them.

And then the other thing that I love doing is, every year we host an avid family night, which is really centered around that college and career readiness. And parents go to different sessions at our school on the college application process and financial aid. And the one session that I present every year is kind of a pay it forward. And it's NCAA requirements for recruitment because my daughter played college volleyball and was recruited out of high school play up here in North Georgia at Berry College.

And I had a lot of help and parents helped me and help us along the way, figure out what those requirements are. So I love presenting that session because I have a lot of eighth grade parents and students that come that really do have that dream of playing a college sport. But then what are the NCAA requirements and how do they have to set up their courses and credits to make that dream a reality. So I love doing that. Just using lots of my past experiences to really inspire students to dare to dream and dream big, to work hard towards those dreams.

And that's why I really do truly love being a school counselors because I help remove those barriers for students, support their success and really be a champion advocate and then sit back and be a cheerleader and cheer them on to go pursue those dreams.

Jen Walsh: We usually close each episode with just talking about something that motivates you.

Barbara Truluck: Definitely my family motivates me cheering each other on. I know being a volleyball parent, we were there at every game for all those years and all of her college volleyball games and cheering her on. And, really just teaching that support and that culture in our family. And I know when I went back to school, she was there to cheer me on and the support that I've received from my husband and really just that family unit there of supporting each other. That's what really motivates me. I know recently someone asked me, what is your self-care? And I said, "Just spending time with my family and my friends," that support system is really very valuable to me.

Jen Walsh: And I think that this year has really brought that out in so many people, just the importance of family and spending time with the people that mean the most to you.

Barbara Truluck: Absolutely.

Jen Walsh: Well, thank you so much, Barbara, for joining us today and thank you all for listening. This has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counselor Association. We hope to have you back for our next episode, but until then be sure to check out our website, schoolcounselor.org for school counselor resources. Also, we'd love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook at the American School Counselor Association, Twitter at ASCA tweets and Instagram at We Are ASCA. Thanks and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh and this has been, I Hear You Say.