

National School Counseling Week: Jennifer Schaffer

By Shawnta S. Barnes – February 9, 2018



National School Counseling Week takes place each year during the first full week of February. This year's theme is School Counselors: Helping Students Reach for the Stars. Jennifer Schaffer, School Counselor at IPS 60/Butler Lab School, definitely helps students reach for the stars, and beyond.

For ten years Schaffer was a math teacher. During her last three years in the classroom, she felt a shift. "I felt like I was a great teacher," Schaffer shared, "but I didn't feel passionate about the work I was doing. I felt like something was missing and I found myself admiring the work of two counselors in my building, Kyndall Carr and Sherri Barrow."

The admiration grew from how they helped her with difficult students in her math class. "I would put a kid out, but Sherri Barrow would help me see the student differently. Maybe the student didn't eat or had been up all night. She made me take a second look and understand the why behind the why."

Schaffer then completed a school counseling program and transitioned from middle school math teacher to elementary school counselor. Schaffer

enthusiastically stated, “I love my job and my current school! This is my calling and I absolutely enjoy it.”

School counselors are many times thought of as a person who just does student schedules or truancy phone calls home. Schaffer wants it known that school counselors do much more. “I call myself the chief encourager.” She emphasized that “Counselors are really concerned about the whole child, not just academics. Is this child progressing in their social environment? How is the child’s behavior? How is the behavior affecting the child’s grade?” Her main focus is finding the special talent in each child. “Counselors want to find that gift inside of each child that is going to help them with their livelihood in the future.”

Although Schaffer has only been at the Butler Lab School for only a year, she has been hard at work. She introduced the 21st-Century Scholars program and National Junior Honors Society this year to the 7th graders. The school is expanding from just being an elementary school. This year is the first year for seventh grade and next year the school will add 8th grade. She also helped the school organize its first dance. “The administrators were a bit nervous about this event. But once it happened, it seemed like they were having more fun than the students at the dance.”

Schaffer understands the need for representation. Reflecting on Black History Month and the progress that has been made thus far, she believes black educators are still seen as trailblazers to today’s youth. Having a black teacher, let alone a black counselor is not the norm for students. It is many times the exception and not the rule. Schaffer reflected, “I think it is monumental when kids see people in authority who look like them. I’m their advocate. Whether students are right or wrong, I’m there for them because they deserve a chance.”

School Counselors care for the entire student body. It’s a heavy load, but when it’s your calling, like it is for Jennifer Schaffer, it’s one carried with pride.