

Tammy Friend ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the G.U.I.D.E. for Life podcast, exploring topics related to the personal competency skills that empower Arkansas students and teachers to thrive at home, school, on the job, and in the community.

Tammy Friend ([00:18](#)):

Okay. Welcome back, I'm Tammy Friend, and joining us today is Dr. Michele Borba, world-renowned educational psychologist and author of *Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine*, and a parent. Hello, Dr. Borba.

Dr. Michele Borba ([00:39](#)):

Hello. Good morning to you, or good afternoon. Wherever you are, I'm so glad to be here.

Tammy Friend ([00:45](#)):

I appreciate you joining us here at the Arkansas Department of Education, the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. We did a book study on *Thrivers* and it was very enlightening, and I thought, "Man, if I could get Dr. Borba to come visit with us, how exciting that would be." So again, I appreciate you taking time to share your insights.

Tammy Friend ([01:07](#)):

You've worked for 40 years as an educator, educational psychologist, and a parent, and it seems like I read somewhere you have three sons, is that correct?

Dr. Michele Borba ([01:15](#)):

I do. Don't know how you get the girl, but I have three boys and they're fun

Tammy Friend ([01:20](#)):

With all of that background, when did you first realize the need to write *Thrivers*?

Dr. Michele Borba ([01:27](#)):

I began to see a trend, actually, the first time was about 15 years ago, and all of a sudden I started looking at the CDC that said something was amiss with kids, stress was going up. But it was about 10 years ago that my radar went into octane mode, and then five years before, even before the pandemic, when I started getting calls, Tammy, from counselors who said, "We're in a suicide belt. We have so many kids killing themselves," and I couldn't believe it until I started doing focus groups. Those counselors were extraordinary. I started talking to kids and I began to see that every one of them said, "We are the most stressed out generation," but they were also the loneliest, most risk-averse, most anxious, and more likely to be depressed than any other generation, thus was *Thrivers*. What do we do about it? What are proactive ways that are science-backed that we can make a difference on our students' lives?

Tammy Friend ([02:26](#)):

So with the suicide rates doubling even prior to the pandemic, what factors do you think contribute to these feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation, these things that the kids are reporting?

Dr. Michele Borba ([02:39](#)):

I think it's a build-up of a combination of factors, it's never one thing. I think the first thing is we are living in an uncertain world and anytime there's uncertainty and unpredictability, your sense of agency and control goes down. But the second thing is students these days have been raised to get the test score and the GPA, so resilience and character has been kind of lying dormant, and in all fairness to parents, they don't realize it's teachable, they think very often it's caught up in either a program or temperament. And then came the pandemic, and every other crisis known to man, which only amplifies preexisting issues. I'm sitting here in California with a fire zone right across the lake, I'm watching the firefighters, so I think we need to recognize it's a different world and our children are going to need a different skill set.

Tammy Friend ([03:26](#)):

Exactly. And so you mentioned, specifically, seven essential character traits, or character strengths, that students need, and they can be taught, self-confidence, empathy, self-control, integrity, curiosity, perseverance, and optimism. So how did you identify these?

Dr. Michele Borba ([03:45](#)):

First of all, thank you for the question because I'm a teacher and I wanted things that only were teachable. Second of all, I wanted things that were proven to reduce mental health, but also peak performance because I can't stop teaching my academics and my subjects, I wanted them to weave together. And the third thing is I combed all of the science, I got myself Post-Its and Post-Its and Post-Its and looked at, "What are the most highly correlated factors that really do enhance kids' mental performance, engagement, and peak performance?" Those were the seven that kept coming up over and over. And the best thing is it makes no difference if an early childhood educator or a high school educator, any subject we can weave them in.

Tammy Friend ([04:30](#)):

That's encouraging because teachers are so busy, counselors, administrators, everybody is, and so it's always important to try to find strategies, ways to, well, work smarter, not harder, where you can weave these opportunities for growth and for learning without adding one more thing to an already full plate. So what are some strategies teachers could use?

Dr. Michele Borba ([04:54](#)):

The first thing teachers, counselors, principals, it doesn't make any difference what the strategy is, you got to figure out what your students are needing and what you can weave into what you already have. I've had the absolute honor of going in and out of schools and classrooms across the U.S. and around the world, and I've seen some of the most profoundly simple things that I went, "Oh my gosh."

Dr. Michele Borba ([05:17](#)):

For instance, San Francisco and Oakland started what's now called Quiet Time and it's become a revolution across the country. What they realized is their kids were stressed out. They were teaching wonderful strategies called mindfulness or deep breathing, but it wasn't transferring to the playground, in the cafeteria, and the buses. So what they decided to do, and this was aha glorious, let's shave off a little bit of time off of each period and then add quiet time to the beginning of each class day so

everybody is doing the same three minutes of slow, deep breathing, we'll teach you teachers by having a counselor come into the classroom, she'll show you how. They videoed the counselor doing the lesson, sent it home as a flash drive to the kids to teach their parents, and what they began to see was textbook classic, suspensions went down, attendance went up, engagement went up, and test scores went through the roof, and now almost every school in Oakland and San Francisco is required to do quiet time. That's one idea.

Dr. Michele Borba ([06:20](#)):

I've seen other ideas, for instance, one of the simplest, most wonderful ones is: choose a hero. Who is a hero that you think would fit into your class or your history or your science? My favorite one was Irina Sendler. The history teacher, what he does is have kids work in teams, find somebody who you really admire. The kids found, groups of four girls, Irina Sendler, and then dug deeper. World War II, she disguised herself as a social worker, went into death camps, convinced parents to let them save their children, and one by one... Can you imagine? She put the child in a suitcase, passed Nazi guards, and saved 2,500 children. That is absolutely extraordinary and it's true. Find a hero.

Dr. Michele Borba ([07:09](#)):

Or you praise, simple praise. As you're praising your child, don't praise them for the end product. Say, "Okay, that is a little stumbler. So what's one little thing tomorrow you're going to do in order to improve?" If kids begin to realize they've got the agency, "All I need to do is look at where I was," so what's your goal in order to improve tomorrow, that's what builds perseverance and that's what builds, "I got this," kind of an attitude.

Tammy Friend ([07:33](#)):

Exactly. And you mentioned when you do praise, I remember in your book, to be specific, not just-

Dr. Michele Borba ([07:39](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([07:39](#)):

... "Good job. Well done." While that is nice, there's certainly nothing wrong with that, when you praise the specific behaviors, it reinforces them for the students.

Dr. Michele Borba ([07:51](#)):

It does. And so a simple little idea on that one is always use the word because in your praise. "That was fabulous, you hung in there because you did this differently than last time. That's how well you are doing." For some kids, you and I know you don't want to do that in front of the group. Stanford University did a fabulous Post-It praise where they tell the teacher, "Write the praise, be specific, put it on the test," and below and behold, those kids that they did that to dramatically increased the following time. "Wow, the teacher really cares about me to put the Post-It," and second of all, "Here's exactly what I can do in order to improve."

Tammy Friend ([08:30](#)):

That's awesome. So of the character strengths, which would you say, if any, would be maybe the most important?

Dr. Michele Borba ([08:37](#)):

Right this minute because of the pandemic, I'd say put self-control at the top of the list because we are looking at just, can you imagine, 77,000 pediatricians recently signed a pledge saying, "Our children are in a state of absolute crisis in terms of mental health." The issue is you can't change the home but you can change the moment they walk into that classroom in school. What they need is a healthy way to reduce the stress, and maybe it's quiet time, but there's dozens of other ideas in chapter three.

Dr. Michele Borba ([09:08](#)):

I'd say the other thing is optimism, hope. I mean, when we get into the shoes of our kids and go, "Oh my gosh." For two years they've been watching a daily death count or a live George Floyd murder or they've been watching now the Ukrainian War and live feed, what we now know the research is telling us is that optimism is a superpower for resilience, it's going to keep you going if you feel like you've got hope. But if you only see those dismal images, that's the mean world syndrome.

Dr. Michele Borba ([09:35](#)):

The best thing I've ever seen was a group of high school kids from Long Island who said, "We got this covered." I said, "What did you guys do?" "We told our superintendent we need a plasma TV right at the entrance quad when we walk in." And I go, "Okay, what's on the TV, guys?" "Good news. Good news. We're asking her to put videos of good kids doing good stuff. We walk in, look up, and go, 'Okay, we got this,' and keep on going." I actually saw them walk into the school, they looked so stressed, walked in, looked up at the plasma TV, every day that superintendent changes another 30-second, 1-minute screen, and you're watching kids start to smile, put their arms around each other, give each other high fives, and walk on. I'm going, "How simple and how glorious."

Tammy Friend ([10:18](#)):

And sets the mood, the tone for the whole day.

Dr. Michele Borba ([10:21](#)):

It sets the tone forever and goes, "Hope is here, guys. In this school there's hope."

Tammy Friend ([10:26](#)):

Absolutely. I know schools that start the morning with good things, share something good.

Dr. Michele Borba ([10:32](#)):

Oh, I love that. Don't you love that?

Tammy Friend ([10:33](#)):

I love it.

Dr. Michele Borba ([10:33](#)):

Or gratitude walls.

Tammy Friend ([10:35](#)):

Yes.

Dr. Michele Borba ([10:35](#)):

Let's just pass on with a Post-It. You saw somebody doing something great, could be your teacher, could be the janitor, could be your third-grade buddy, but write it down and put it on the wall. I've seen walls that are now going all around corridors. How simple. But it's a repetitive little thing that works, kids start to pick it up and it changes the school culture and tone.

Tammy Friend ([10:56](#)):

It does. In your book, you mentioned that there is a difference between strivers and thrivers. Would you mind sharing what you mean by that? It was so interesting to me, I thought, "I haven't thought about it that way. I've seen this with my own son."

Dr. Michele Borba ([11:11](#)):

Well, the first thing is, what we got to keep in mind is that anybody can be a thriver. It's not contingent on IQ, GPA, or zip code, it's being your personal best and extending one step more.

Dr. Michele Borba ([11:23](#)):

What I'm seeing is a tremendous amount of our children are strivers, they try their hardest, but when they get to the bump in the road, they quit, they give up, they raise the white flag, and I'm beginning to see the reason for it is they're smart, they're well-loved, but they don't have the skill set to go, "Okay, what else can I do instead?" Of those seven, curiosity is so key to helping a kid thrive because when the bump comes in the road, which it will, a thriver goes, "Okay, I'll find a way around it and through it," they're open to ideas and possibilities, they don't have somebody always helicoptering them and rescuing them. It's like, "Okay, I'll learn how to problem solve."

Dr. Michele Borba ([12:03](#)):

Maybe, teachers, the coolest thing we could do is say, "No, I'm not doing that for you, but I know you can come up with one idea or two or three," maybe that's a problem-solving center with a 1-minute sand timer. "Walk on over there, write down what the problem is, come on back with at least three other ideas you could have done differently, and then choose the one you want to do. Spark your brain because the answer is in there, you just have to storm it and come up with one more idea." That's so critical and that's what's going to help kids thrive.

Dr. Michele Borba ([12:32](#)):

Tammy, the correlation, the strongest correlation I've seen, because every kid has a different set, it's a rare child that has all seven of those.

Tammy Friend ([12:41](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Michele Borba ([12:41](#)):

Please, it's a rare adult that has all seven of them.

Tammy Friend ([12:43](#)):

Right?

Dr. Michele Borba ([12:44](#)):

But we're finding too many kids are lacking so many of those.

Tammy Friend ([12:48](#)):

Right.

Dr. Michele Borba ([12:48](#)):

The commonality of a real thriver is that, "I got this." They have agency or feel a sense of control over their life because they've learned some skills that are going to help them thrive so they don't struggle or just try to survive.

Tammy Friend ([13:04](#)):

Yes. Well, thank you. I really appreciated reading that in your book about the tendency for parents, myself included, I've been guilty of this, wanting to swoop in and help and I've tried to be really cognizant to it's okay to... in fact it's vital that you let them fail because it's in those struggles and the failing times that they learn, in the struggle is when the learning occurs.

Dr. Michele Borba ([13:30](#)):

Exactly. And I think what we've got to do is help our kids. So many of them are failure paralyzed. I don't know about you, Tammy, but many teachers are seeing one of the other trends that's happening with the pandemic is more risk aversion, afraid to try, "I may not be able to make it." And it's like, "So what, sweetie pie? That's the whole goal of learning is you keep on and you find a different way through," and that's what we've got to do to help our kids. If we could tell parents one little rule, never do for your child what your child could do for themselves. Oh my gosh, that alone would help reflip the whole paradigm so that the child is more likely to be resilient and thrive.

Tammy Friend ([14:11](#)):

Absolutely. So I'm gathering you're focusing less then on grades maybe and competitive success, high stakes testing, focusing less on those things would you say can help the child actually perform better academically?

Dr. Michele Borba ([14:29](#)):

I think what we have to do, we are an academically rigorous educational system, and that's what we're all trained to do. So I'm not saying throw out the subjects and throw out the teaching, uh-uh. What we've got to do is, instead, look at the science on how to help our kids become more engaged and work their way through it. Just the praise alone can make a difference, just the saying, "Okay, let's find your-" I love this idea, "... let's find your one little stumbler. What's the one little thing on that paper that's really

getting you down? Well, it's right there, you're borrowing and carrying the wrong way. Okay, let's work that one through. Now keep going." What happens is the child begins to look for their stumbler and sees it as a learning opportunity instead of a mistake to quit and give up.

Dr. Michele Borba ([15:17](#)):

For teachers, if you're dealing with little kids, oh, get out Remy Charlip's *Fortunately and keep reading* that book. Ned starts with a fortunate, he gets invited to a birthday party. The unfortunate on page 2 is that, well, the party is in Florida and he's in New York. The blessing of the book is every page turns an unfortunate to a fortunate until he finally gets to the birthday party.

Dr. Michele Borba ([15:40](#)):

Tammy, I was actually in a classroom watching a teacher read that book to the kids. Most wonderful thing is about a half an hour later, you saw when a little guy, obviously he had an unfortunate, and he made a mistake on his math paper, his eraser was desecrating the mistake until the hole kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. The best thing is the little guy next to him kept looking and looking until finally, clear as day, he leans in and goes, "So what's your fortunate going to be?" Oh, how wonderful is that?

Tammy Friend ([16:11](#)):

I love it. Yeah.

Dr. Michele Borba ([16:13](#)):

Yeah. Little [inaudible 00:16:14] things like that that we say as teachers and counselors, kids store them up and it becomes their internal dialogue so they can use them the rest of their lives, that's how powerful we are as educators.

Tammy Friend ([16:26](#)):

It's true. Yes. And we are in a unique position to make such a positive impact. I remember my son coming home, he went through the Bryant School District here in Arkansas, and he's came home and goes, "Mom, I'm a bucket filler." I know. I know. That really warms your heart to hear [inaudible 00:16:46].

Dr. Michele Borba ([16:45](#)):

It does. It does.

Tammy Friend ([16:47](#)):

And I remind him of that now that he's almost 18. "Oh, what about that bucket filler you were talking about?"

Dr. Michele Borba ([16:53](#)):

Yeah. I think that's so critical because I think as educators we need to keep one stat in mind. The thing on chapter 1 that just threw me on how critical confidence is, but 77% of the time parents focus on the child's deficit, their weakness, not their strength. You act how you see yourself to be. Your son sees himself as a bucket filler, let's help our kids begin to see a more positive image about themselves. It has

to be true, they don't need to breathe and exist and get a trophy for every little thing, but let's help them see the good parts of their lives so that they store it and that will change them and they'll be more likely to thrive as well.

Tammy Friend ([17:31](#)):

They'll be confident. You've interviewed more than 500 children of all ages for Thrivers, was there one story or two that really sticks out? That's probably hard to choose.

Dr. Michele Borba ([17:42](#)):

Oh gosh, so many, tammy, because I'm telling you, the first thing as an educator, if you really want to know a solution to a problem, ask a kid, they come up with the best ideas. But a group of middle school kids, I think really were the ones that had my head going, "Oh my gosh, they nailed it." They were telling me how stressed they were, this was a small focus group, and they were really lonely and they didn't know how to get along with others, and they were so worried about, here's an important point, they were so worried about disappointing their parents.

Dr. Michele Borba ([18:15](#)):

So I finally said, "Well, what do you think the cause of all of this is?" And there was a puzzle right behind me on a table that I guess some kindergartners had done, and they'd left out half the pieces, and one little guy kept looking at the puzzle, and then looked at me and said, "That's it." I said, "What's it?" He said, "The puzzle, do you see those missing pieces?" I said, "Yeah, that have to do with you guys?" He said, "Well, that's us. We're missing the missing pieces on how to be human beings." I said, "What pieces are you missing?" Like how to solve a problem, how to get along with others? We're raised for test scores and how to get a good GPA but we're not raised for how to solve the problem and get along with life and somebody has got to fill in the pieces.

Tammy Friend ([18:54](#)):

Okay so, Dr. Borba, do you have any final thoughts to share with us today?

Dr. Michele Borba ([19:00](#)):

So many. I think the most important thing is take care of yourselves, teachers, counselors, parents, because our stress is spilling over to our children and they have got to see that the possibilities of hope is alive, they really do look up to us and watch us. But the second thing is let's look at a new roadmap and use kind of like farsighted vision. Let's fast forward this and now our kids are graduating and what are they going to need in order to really succeed in a different, new world, a digitally driven, very uncertain, rapidly accelerating world? Yes, they're going to need what you're teaching them, but in addition, let's weave in, notice I said weave in, weave in those skills, those seven, in particular, those are the strengths.

Dr. Michele Borba ([19:49](#)):

If you go to the back of Thrivers, you're going to see the 21 most essential skills that will increase those, and then you'll look at Thrivers and you'll notice that all the ideas, there's dozens of them, are also grade related. Here's what you can do if your child is 5. Here's what you can do if you're dealing with 13-year-olds. Find what works for you.



Dr. Michele Borba ([20:10](#)):

But the bottom line to this, Tammy, again, with the kids, we got to keep practicing it. We got to keep practicing it, whatever you're teaching us, because we got to be able to do it without you. Transfer is the goal and that means maybe a minute or two a day, find ways to adjust, weave that skill in until the majority of your kids have it, and then add the next skill and the next skill and the next skill, and when they walk across the stage with a diploma, you'll go, "That's a generation of thrivers."

Tammy Friend ([20:40](#)):

I love it. Yes. Explicitly teach it, weave it in-

Dr. Michele Borba ([20:44](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([20:45](#)):

... and opportunities to practice and strengthen those.

Dr. Michele Borba ([20:48](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([20:48](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Michele Borba ([20:49](#)):

That's it. It isn't a worksheet, teacher.

Tammy Friend ([20:51](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Michele Borba ([20:51](#)):

It's not another program. Relax.

Tammy Friend ([20:53](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Michele Borba ([20:54](#)):

Maybe the best way to teach these skills is remember, "Show it. Don't tell, show it." Find your little kids who are doing this right. I've seen some of the coolest things, Tammy, are upper-grade kids coming in and teaching the younger-level kids.

Tammy Friend ([21:08](#)):

Yes.

Dr. Michele Borba ([21:08](#)):

That means the bigger kids are going to learn it even better because they're having to teach it to younger students. The other thing I saw was Temecula Elementary, I've got so many schools that are doing pilot sites on this, what they did, oh, this was like get the drum roll out. They got a group of kids and they call it a thriver squad. What the kids do during lunch is they meet with the counselor, and once a week, the thriver squad videos a short little 2-minute clip on how to use one of the skills or why it matters. I walk into every classroom and there's the video on the screen and all the kids are looking up because they're looking at their peers teaching them the lesson. And it's just absolutely wonderful. Thriver squads.

Dr. Michele Borba ([21:51](#)):

There's no right or wrong way to do this. Every time I walk into a school I'm going, "Oh my gosh, that's brilliant. Why didn't I think of it?" But they came up with it because it worked for them and they didn't quit because they're now getting the results with their students, their staff, and the parents are saying, "I don't know what you're doing, but it's a different kid at home."

Tammy Friend ([22:09](#)):

I love it. Yes. And speaking of that, that's something else I picked up on, in Thrivers, the skills that you talk about and some of the strategies and experiences, also the interviews that you've had with students, they can transfer, some of the suggestions can transfer whether they're your children, from a parent standpoint, or in the classroom, they're interchangeable.

Dr. Michele Borba ([22:29](#)):

Yes. Tammy, I'm so glad you brought that up because here's the other thing we do as educators, we kill ourselves doing it all, and if we could just align ourself with that parent somehow along the way, what happens is they'll reinforce, they're craving for new tools [inaudible 00:22:46], they're out of ideas. Some of the best ones I've seen are like the flash drive, a video of the kid in the classroom, send it home, the kid teaches the parent. If you have parent conferences, have one conference with the child, comes with the parent, then what happens is, while the parent in the child are waiting outside, they can be doing before they walk in to you, they can be creating one of the skills together, and then walk in and go, "Here's the one plus three. One is when you start to feel yourself getting upset, tell yourself, 'Chill out,' three is take a three, slow deep breath, 10 is count slowly to 10. Mom, we can put this on the refrigerator." So find ways that you can connect with those parents and I think we're going to be far more positive in the results that we get.

Tammy Friend ([23:35](#)):

That makes sense. It does. Absolutely. Well, thank you again for spending time with us today and sharing. I will put the link to Thrivers in the show notes and we just appreciate you.

Dr. Michele Borba ([23:48](#)):

Oh, thank you so much. Take care of yourselves. It's a different world but we got this.

Tammy Friend ([23:54](#)):

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