



For Immediate Release

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Media Release

West Ashley High School

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Ryan Cumback
Principal

AJ Barnes named Top 5 Teacher of the Year Finalist

Charleston, SC – AJ Barnes teaches AP European History, US History, and coaches baseball at West Ashley High School (WAHS), a school which he describes as a unique and diverse snapshot of our country.

“It’s a school with talented teachers who truly believe in our amazing students,” said Barnes. “Everyone at this school is proud of it and all of the great things happening here.”

That positive attitude is part of the reason Barnes was named a [2021 Top 5 Teacher of the Year Finalist](#). He’s humbled by the honor and will use the opportunity to promote and foster collaboration across the district between teachers and various high schools.

“There are so many talented teachers doing amazing things within their own schools,” said Barnes. “By strengthening communication between schools and departments, we can continue to grow academically and increase student achievement.”

His motivation to better the learning experience for students across Charleston County School District comes from his own experiences in high school and college. He was a high school athlete and played baseball at Otterbein University in Ohio. His teachers and coaches were positive role models.

“I had one teacher who was passionate about teaching,” said Barnes. “He was just as intense and passionate in the classroom as he was on the field. For him, the whole student mattered. Through him and many other coaches and teachers, I learned the importance of relationships and how to overcome adversity. I was taught those tools at a young age and I have carried them with me ever since.”

Barnes said that in his mind, it was always cut and dry that he would become a teacher.

"I had a sense of responsibility to give back," said Barnes. "I owed my teachers so much for my success and I wanted students to have the same experience I did. Also, my grandmother was a teacher and she shared her stories with me and that rubbed off on me."

Barnes is also passionate about history and is a self-described history nerd. For entertainment he buries himself in historical books. He shares those moments with his students to show them that it is cool and okay to be a history buff.

"I love bringing content and history alive," said Barnes. "Many kids do not enjoy history. Until you make the content real and relevant and have the discussions with them, and make the students a part of the conversations."

Barnes has been at WAHS for four years and is proud of the great things happening at the school. For example, their sports teams have weathered the COVID-19 storm and experienced quite a bit of success. WAHS's AP programs are growing as well.

"Mr. Barnes comes to work with a positive attitude and an unwavering commitment to make a sincere difference in not only the lives of his students, but also the greater West Ashley community," said Principal Ryan Cumback.

Before coming to Charleston, Barnes had the opportunity to teach internationally in the Caribbean. His fiancée Kristen attended veterinarian school there and he tagged along.

"I had already been in teaching for three years and considered it a unique opportunity," said Barnes. "It is a different culture where people go through life with less which allows one to appreciate the people around them rather than things."

Eventually they returned to the U.S. when Kristen finished her veterinary program. The couple wanted to live near the water and Charleston seemed appealing. Barnes was originally assigned to R.B. Stall High School and later transferred to WAHS to work closer to home.

"I love that I teach in the same community that I live," said Barnes. "I'm invested in these kids and when I am able to see them outside of the walls I feel like I can better connect with them. Many of our students work in the community; they leave school and go straight to their jobs. I make it a point to patronize those shops, restaurants, and businesses."

Barnes believes that the connection between a student-athlete can be life changing. It was for him.

"The amount of time a coach spends with his players is abundant," said Barnes. "This is where we provide structure, advise them, and instill work ethic with a

focus on academics. When a former player comes back to say hello, that says a lot. That says I've done my job."

For Barnes one positive thing came out of the pandemic. It became clear to him that CCSD values teachers and their input.

"At the building level the administrative team listened to what we had to say," said Barnes. "At the classroom level, they were adamant that teacher input was critical to returning to the classroom. I felt empowered by how much my input was valued."

Barnes said serving on the CCSD Teacher Roundtable will allow him to continue to be an advocate and voice for CCSD teachers.

"It is important that all teachers are given the maximum ability to deliver quality instruction," said Barnes. "I will fight for resources that we need, work to solve the teacher shortage, and fight for equity for our students."

"While it is incredible to witness Mr. Barnes' commitment and leadership, it is his sheer determination to close the achievement gap that makes him stand out from the crowd," added Cumback.

Barnes credits Principal Cumback for the school's advancement.

"His leadership is why we are where we are," said Barnes. "All things considered, WAHS is a great school and Mr. Cumback encouraged both students and staff to push through this challenging year. He responded to the challenges of this year and has done a tremendous job."

Barnes explained that Principal Cumback is already focusing staff on next year's challenges and remaining aware of their social and emotional needs emerging from this challenging year.

"Mr. Cumback brought with him new energy which changed the culture at West Ashley," said Barnes. "He is always focused on the whole child. Most importantly, he has high expectations for students and staff across the board. His vision was clear. He's authentic, he communicates well and you know where you stand because he is transparent."

For more information contact Principal Cumback at (843) 573-12013.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in

South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.