



2023 School Counselor of the Year

Meredith Lindsey Draughn

School Counselor
B. Everett Jordan Elementary School
Graham, N.C.

Meredith Lindsey Draughn has been a school counselor since 2014. She currently works at B. Everett Jordan Elementary School, a Recognized ASCA Model Program school, in Graham, N.C. Draughn received a bachelor's degree from Wake Forest University and a master's degree from Appalachian State University. Draughn is an ASCA U School Counseling Leadership Specialist; Mental Health Specialist; Anxiety & Stress Management Specialist; Cultural Competency Specialist; and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Specialist.



"As the daughter of a school counselor and someone who is lucky enough to work with incredible colleagues, I have witnessed the positive and life-changing impact that school counselors have on school communities my entire life," Draughn said.

After students returned to school from the COVID-19 pandemic, many were struggling, some more than others. As Draughn said, "We were all in the same storm, but we

were certainly not all in the same boat." To address this situation and attempt to meet students' needs, Draughn coordinated with Elon University to become part of their "It Takes a Village" project. Through that project, the university serves elementary schools in Alamance County by sending college students to work with students after school on targeted educational concepts. In collaboration with her principal, MTSS coach and five teachers, Draughn facilitates weekly tutoring for the more than 10% of the school's students who have potential for growth but likely do not meet the criteria for intervention services during the school day due to the lack of personnel and other students with greater needs. Last year, students who participated in the program benefited greatly. More than 97% showed growth on end-of-year assessments compared to their beginning-of-year assessments, and many forged supportive relationships with their tutors.

"Being a consistent, supportive part of student's lives through their highest highs and their lowest lows," Draughn said, is the most rewarding part of being a school counselor.

Draughn is a member of ASCA, the North Carolina School Counselor Association and the Appalachian State University Professional School Counseling Alumni Association. Twitter: @ms_draughnscc, Instagram: @ms_draughnscc



2023 School Counselor of the Year Finalists

Keisha J. Larry Burns, Ed.D.

School Counselor
Shadow Hills Engineering and Design
Magnet Academy
Palmdale, Calif.



Keisha J. Larry Burns, Ed.D., has been a school counselor since 2016. She currently works at Shadow Hills Engineering and Design Magnet Academy in Palmdale, Calif.

Burns received a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, and master's degrees from Chapman University and the University of La Verne. She received her doctorate from the University of Southern California.

"Creating a sense of belonging has been essential to my school counseling program," Burns said. "Middle school can be awkward as students navigate the terrain, experience personal growth and build relationships." To address their needs, Burns implemented two programs: Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) and the Falcon Lunch Club. The WEB program assigns trained eighth grade leaders to mentor sixth grade students. In addition, WEB leaders plan and host activities specifically for sixth grade students that create a rapport and connection to the school. The Falcon Lunch Club came about from a need Burns identified through her work with WEB: a sense of community within the school. The Lunch Club created a space where all Shadow Hills students could participate, interact with each other and practice their soft skills through play. The initial twenty students participating for both lunch periods quickly grew to 60 students per lunch period and the need for a larger space. Today, the Lunch Club has evolved into a schoolwide intervention where teachers volunteer to host students in their classrooms. Interested students and teachers are matched with each other based on their preferences (e.g., art/drawing, computer games, reading, board games, Dungeons & Dragons, study hall and sports) and selected by using a Google Form. Building community is important and aligns with the school's motto: Be Here! Be You! Belong!

"Advocating for students as they find their voice," Burns said, is the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor.

Burns is a member of ASCA, the California Association of School Counselors, the National Education Association, the California Teachers Association, the USC Alumni Association, the UCLA Alumni Association, the Palmdale Teachers Association and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. Instagram: keishalarryburns

Joshua Nelson

School Counselor
Richard Lewis Brown Gifted and
Talented Academy
Jacksonville, Fla.



Joshua Nelson has been a school counselor since 2015. He currently works at the Richard Lewis Brown Gifted and Talented Academy in Jacksonville, Fla. Nelson received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from the University of North Florida.

"The greatest accomplishment I have had in school counseling was decreasing discipline referrals by 47.5% since 2017, which resulted in academic success for my students schoolwide," Nelson said. He accomplished this by working with administrators, teachers, parents and community partners. In 2021-2022, Nelson focused his instruction on regulation strategies by teaching zones of regulation in every classroom and producing 15 video minilessons on how to use various calm-down tools and techniques called "A Strategy a Day Keeps Me Learning Every Day." Working with the PTA and community partners, he created calm-down corners with a calming toolbox in every classroom so students could regulate and then return to instruction. For students who needed a different space, they created a sensory room so students could have a nonpunitive, safe space to go to, regulate and then return to class. Teachers, faculty and staff learned to identify students who are becoming dysregulated and give them the safe spaces they need to regulate, so they can achieve academically.

Another beneficial program has been mentoring. For many of the students he mentors, Nelson works through a lunch bunch and then engages in an activity, such as playing catch with a football. Administrators and teachers mentor students through daily check-ins, while community partners send in members of the community to serve as mentors. As a result, positive, trusted adults have become supports for students, which allows them to reach and achieve their goals.

"What I find to be most rewarding about being a school counselor," Nelson said, "is the opportunity I have to work with all students during times of need, support them in finding a solution, being a listening ear, giving the students encouraging words and helping them see the good within themselves. I also find it rewarding when I have an impact on systemic change."

Nelson is a member of ASCA, the Florida School Counselor Association, the First Coast Counseling Association and the National Education Association. Instagram: @mrnelsonj_schoolcounselor



2023 School Counselor of the Year Finalists

Beth Ruff, Ed.D.

School Counselor
Powder Springs Elementary
Powder Springs, Ga.



Beth Ruff, Ed.D., has been a school counselor since 2008. She currently works at Powder Springs Elementary in Powder Springs, Ga. Ruff received her bachelor's degree from the University of West Georgia, a master's degree from the University of Georgia and a doctorate from the University of West Georgia.

"With the pandemic's onset, the world began to shut down, and so did our kids," Ruff said. "They returned to school struggling to manage their emotions, handle conflicts and regulate impulsivity. Our students needed a space to express themselves artistically while learning and practicing coping skills." With the administration's support, Ruff built a team of counselors and teachers passionate about arts integration to develop a sensory hall infused with the arts and social-emotional learning. They drafted plans to add mirrors, colorful paintings and textured walls to a mundane back hallway and won a local grant for nearly \$9,000 to purchase materials and build the sensory hall. The "Regulation Station" was finally ready for its big reveal in August 2021. When the students stepped in the hall, they let their guards down while they played a beat in the drumming room or hopped down the sensory path. Not long after, teachers began to report its positive effects on the students' self-management and a decrease in classroom behavioral problems.

Ruff finds building relationships to be the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor. "Everyone needs a cheerleader and safe person in their lives," she said. "As a school counselor, I find the relationships I build with students, parents and staff to be the most rewarding."

Ruff is a member of ASCA, the Georgia School Counselor Association, the Licensed Professional Counselors Association of Georgia and the Chi Omega fraternity. Twitter: @artsy_counselor and @psecounselors, Instagram: theartsyfartscounselor

Matthew K. Shervington-Jackson

School Counselor
Susquehannock High School
Glen Rock, Pa.



Matthew K. Shervington-Jackson has been a school counselor since 2015. He currently works at Susquehannock High School in Glen Rock, Pa. Shervington-Jackson received his bachelor's degree from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

"I have worked to create an atmosphere that promotes diversity, equity and inclusion," Shervington-Jackson said. During the 2021-2022 academic year, he served in an advocacy role for students that wanted to establish a multicultural club. After establishing the club, he served as the adviser for the students as they worked to create awareness of the concerns of BIPOC students. Also, he served in the same role for students looking to reestablish a dormant (due to COVID) GSA club to foster inclusivity for LGBTQ+ students and their allies. Shervington-Jackson's department also worked to establish initiatives to better identify and provide economically disadvantaged students with fee waivers for postsecondary exams. This has resulted in a 400% increase in identified students and a 250% increase in those who've taken the exams since 2018. For their school counseling program, he implemented numerous pre- and post-assessment efforts to better track counselor and student outcomes. Concerning assessment, there was a major focus on postsecondary awareness and perceptions of preparedness for 11th and 12th grade students. The other major focus centered around the quality and impact of responsive services under the school's Student Assistance Team umbrella on quantitative measurements, including grades, course failures, attendance and behavioral referrals.

"Advocacy is far and away my favorite part of the job," Shervington-Jackson said. "More specifically, helping and seeing students achieve their goals, especially when they once felt those goals may have been unobtainable. Oftentimes, that goal may just be graduation, but there's nothing more rewarding or that makes me feel better."

Shervington-Jackson is a member of ASCA and the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association. Twitter: @suskysherv



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Amanda Nichelle Atkins

School Counselor
Sunset Hill Elementary School
Lawrence, Kan.

A school counselor since 2014, Amanda Nichelle Atkins has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Northwest Missouri State University and a master's degree in counselor education from the University of Central Missouri.

Atkins is a co-founder and board member of Rainbow Kids and Families (RKF), a nonprofit supporting LGBTQ+ elementary school students and their families. In 2018, while Atkins was collaborating with another school counselor to get more resources and support for their transgender students, they connected these families with one another. Seeing the beautiful empowerment and safety the students and their family members felt, they wanted to spread this opportunity and advocacy to others. The two school counselors, along with a parent from each of the original families, decided to form RKF as an elementary-level Gay-Straight Alliance club to advocate for students who are LGBTQ+ or who have LGBTQ+ family members. RKF became an official nonprofit in 2020, allowing them to advocate for local and state policies and provide resources for families, students, educators and community members as well as opportunities to connect with one another for support and community. RKF also provides training and support for Educator Champions who serve as an LGBTQ+ resource at their schools. Atkins' unique roles as an openly gay educator and an elementary school counselor help her to lead and support the RKF mission to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students and families.

"I find it most rewarding to watch students learn and grow," Atkins said. "I feel honored to get to be someone who helps to teach them social and emotional skills. I get to celebrate with them as they use those skills successfully."

Atkins is a member of ASCA, the Kansas School Counselor Association and the Kansas Counseling Association, and is an ASCA LGBTQ+ Affinity Group leader and a current board member and past president of the Northeast Kansas Counseling Association. She has an ASCA U Trauma & Crisis Specialist designation.

Sheryl Bass

College/Career Transition Counselor
Linn-Mar High School
Marion, Iowa

A school counselor since 2012, Sheryl Bass has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Mount Mercy College and a master's degree in rehabilitation and counselor education (school counseling) from the University of Iowa.

"One of the accomplishments I am most proud of as a school counselor," Bass said, "is starting the college/career transition program at Linn-Mar High School. This program allows us to partner with the local community college to provide targeted college and career planning interventions to underserved student populations." As the school counselor leading this program, Bass uses academic data to inform programming for students and families. By examining data related to college and career readiness, such as FAFSA completion, enrollment in dual-credit coursework, participation in work-based learning, postsecondary enrollment and postsecondary persistence, the school counseling team is able to plan and implement interventions to support students in college/career planning. In addition to individual student planning meetings, the school counselors also provide workshops and small groups for students and parents and have added a class for juniors and seniors to teach them about career development, postsecondary education and training opportunities and life skills aligned with ASCA Student Standards. In addition to student services, the school counselors use their academic data to advocate for changes to support marginalized students in the school through professional development opportunities with staff. In the first year of the college/career transition program, the school saw the rate of free- and reduced-lunch students who completed the FAFSA more than double and the number of underrepresented minorities who completed the FAFSA surpass the number of students who were not underrepresented minorities.

"The most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is watching students grow from high school freshmen to launching into adulthood and their postsecondary endeavors," Bass said. "Their postsecondary success and happiness makes my role much more fulfilling."

Bass is a member of ASCA, the Iowa School Counselor Association and the Iowa Association for College Admission Counseling. Twitter: @missscline



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Barbara Beebe

School Counselor
Torrington High School
Torrington, Conn.

Barbara Beebe, a school counselor since 2007, has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Gordon College and a master's degree in guidance counseling from Springfield College.

"One of our primary goals at Torrington High School is to boldly disrupt the barriers that may stand in the way of our students' success," Beebe said. "For our prospective college-going students, one of these barriers was completing the FAFSA. Last year, we aimed to increase our senior FAFSA completion rate by 5%." After several FAFSA events, both workshops where the school provided one-on-one help for students and parents as well as incentive events, like pizza parties and coffee trucks, they increased the school's FAFSA completion rate by 12%. Not only this, but the percentage of students attending college (4- and 2-year colleges) increased by 10%, which they believe is a direct result of the FAFSA initiatives. By achieving this goal, they created a buzz and shared knowledge about completing the FAFSA that has propelled their current senior class to make completing FAFSA a priority. "It has also been fun to celebrate these accomplishments with our students and to see their excitement in completing this often arduous, but necessary, task," she said.

For Beebe, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is watching students overcome barriers and find success.

Beebe is a member of ASCA and the Connecticut School Counselor Association.

Emily Braggins

School Counselor
Lamoille Union High School
Hyde Park, Vt.

A school counselor since 2016, Emily Braggins has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the State University of New York at Geneseo and a master's degree in mental health counseling with a certification in school counseling from the University of Rochester.

"One of my proudest accomplishments is helping to build our school's Intervention Team in my fourth year of working at Lamoille," Braggins said. The team is made up of representatives from the school counseling department, administration, student support systems, the special education department and relevant local agencies. They meet once a week to identify struggling students and discuss student progress. Teachers and support staff identify student needs and bring them to the Intervention Team for review. From here, the team makes referrals for additional academic support, Educational Support Team meetings, outside agency support, etc. This past summer, as part of her work for the Intervention Team, Braggins was part of a systems team that worked intensively for two weeks to review the school's existing systems and update any outdated practices that prevented them from achieving their behavior intervention and prevention goals. The team created new reporting systems and updated the language around attendance to emphasize trauma-informed, non-punitive language. Braggins was in charge of taking the report's information and building a data collection system that tracks all of their student referrals, along with their demographic information and follow-up statistics. She was excited to present this data to the faculty and staff to determine how they can continue to better support their students.

"The most rewarding part of being a school counselor is the relationship I build with each of my students," Braggins said. "It's so important to me that my students feel seen and heard in and outside of my office. I rely on trauma-informed practices to make sure that each student feels safe to bring their authentic selves to each conversation we have."

Braggins is a member of ASCA, the Vermont School Counselor Association and the National Education Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Brittnie Caraulia

School Counselor
Helemano Elementary School
Wahiawa, Hawaii

A school counselor since 2015, Brittnie Caraulia has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling psychology from Chaminade University of Honolulu.

"My proudest accomplishment during my time as a school counselor at Helemano Elementary has been establishing a data-driven MTSS and school counseling program," Caraulia said. When students reported feeling unsafe at school and needed more support with their emotional regulation, the MTSS program included a systemic approach to monitoring student success, creating schoolwide social/emotional learning (SEL) initiatives and strategies and focusing on quality teacher-student relationships. In collaboration with teachers and administration, the student safety rating improved to over 90% as a result of the MTSS efforts. As part of the school counseling program, Caraulia conducts quarterly training for staff on SEL interventions and classroom management, collaborates with teachers to incorporate SEL into their core curriculum, creates biweekly SEL lessons for all grade levels and designed a referral system to make data-informed decisions for all students. The school counseling program serves as a foundation for student social, emotional, behavioral and academic success. Caraulia has also had the opportunity to meet with other elementary schools across the state to share the MTSS and school counseling program, and she gives presentations at state trainings on how they use their school data to support the needs of their students.

"What I find most rewarding about being a school counselor is the relationships I build with my students, staff and families," Caraulia said.

She is a member of ASCA and the Hawaii School Counselor Association.

Jaclyn Chaplin

School Counselor
Alfred Elementary School
Alfred, Maine

Jaclyn Chaplin, a school counselor since 2004, has a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Southern Maine and a master's degree in counselor education from Rivier College.

Chaplin's 5th Grade Peer Helper program is a leadership program that provides interested fifth graders with an opportunity to be role models in the school, while also enhancing their leadership, decision-making, empathy and communication skills. Through Chaplin's collaboration with other school staff, Peer Helpers are able to serve as helpers around the building in a variety of ways, such as helping in the classrooms of younger students at the beginning and end of the day, helping specials teachers (art, music, library, PE) with setting up and putting away materials and leading the school's morning announcements. "Through my guidance and collaboration," Chaplin said, "the Peer Helpers brainstorm, choose and organize projects to help support a respectful, safe, responsible and kind school environment." Recent projects have included organizing Kindness Week, giving tours to new students, making birthday cards for all students and organizing a food drive to benefit the local food pantry. This program has greatly supported both the Peer Helpers and the larger school community, and the collaboration between Chaplin and the Peer Helpers, school staff, PTSA and the school community has substantially contributed to its success.

"Over my 18 years as a school counselor, there have been many things that I have found rewarding," Chaplin said. "For example, when a student has had Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions focused on social/emotional skill development, it is very rewarding to see the student be successful as a result of the supports that I helped identify, coordinate, deliver and monitor for progress. It is equally rewarding to see the growth that students have as they increase their application of these social/emotional skills throughout their school day and no longer need Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions."

Chaplin is a member of ASCA and the Maine School Counselor Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Christy English

Elementary School Counselor
Rose Bud Elementary School
Rose Bud, Ark.

A school counselor since 2013, Christy English has a bachelor's degree in education from Arkansas State University and a master's degree in counseling and an education specialist degree, both from Harding University.

In 2015, before the Arkansas school counseling laws changed, and despite monthly use of time reports, English's administrator had an issue with the amount of time she reported on her Student Services report. While the law required that 75% of her time be spent on direct services, her administrator thought the majority of her time was better served on administrative activities. The situation evolved into a legal battle with the school. "I did not ask for any compensation and did not get any," English said. "I just wanted to be allowed to be a school counselor for my students. I wanted my time with them to be protected and allowed." After the case was filed and reviewed, the school decided to settle with her. English's "other duties as assigned" were decreased and she has been able to spend up to 90% of her time in direct counseling with students in the years since. "This was a long, hard battle," she said, "but probably what I consider my biggest accomplishment as a school counselor for my students." English purposely shared the court documents with the Arkansas School Counseling Association to help them advocate for the new laws that the state put in place in 2019.

English said that seeing the kids every day, making them smile and know they are wanted and loved at our school is what she finds most rewarding about being a school counselor.

English is a member of ASCA, the Arkansas School Counseling Association, the National Education Association, the Arkansas Educators Association, Pet Partners and PawAble Pets. Twitter: @cenglis3, Instagram: cmenglis3

Emily Kate Fain-Lynch

Elementary School Counselor
Green Magnet STEAM Academy
Knoxville, Tenn.

A school counselor since 2018, Emily Kate Fain-Lynch has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Maryville College and a master's degree in school counseling from Johnson University.

Camp Engineering Feelings is an interactive lesson format that Fain-Lynch and her STEAM teacher co-created. Fain-Lynch said, "Together we tie SEL and STEAM standards to provide an interactive lesson for students where they learn about skills such as teamwork, empathy, calming strategies and goal setting and then have the opportunity to apply the skills they learned about in hands-on STEAM challenges."

Fain-Lynch said that seeing students understand and apply strategies is the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor.

Fain-Lynch is a member of ASCA and the Tennessee School Counselor Association. Twitter: @fainlynch, Instagram: @thesteamcounselor

Elizabeth Fasteson

School Counselor, Department Lead
Charles E. Shea High School
Pawtucket, R.I.

Elizabeth Fasteson, a school counselor since 2004, has a bachelor's degree in secondary education and history from the University of Rhode Island and a master's degree in school counseling from Providence College.

When Fasteson left administration and returned to Shea High School as the School Counselor Department lead in the 2015-2016 school year, she analyzed Shea's data and put together a needs assessment presentation for her superintendent. The counseling caseloads kept increasing along with the number of student failures. "At that point, I saw a direct correlation that student needs were not being met with the overwhelming number of students they had to service," she said. "I am pleased that some of my recommendations based on the needs assessment were taken into consideration." The school eventually gained a full-time school psychologist and the math intervention classes were separated into a math lab for algebra and math lab for geometry. But school funding had always been an issue in Pawtucket and Shea did not gain another school counselor. In the 2020-2021 school year, Fasteson learned about the School Counseling Corps grant, advocated for the grant to her principal and worked on the application. The grant was approved and now Shea has four full-time school counselors who are focusing their efforts on the high absenteeism rate at the school. Their rationale is that if students are not in school, they are missing out on instruction, thus leading to a higher failure rate. At the same time, the school counselors are making a concerted effort to do home visits and keep the families engaged with their children's attendance and success.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

“The most rewarding part of my job,” Fasteson said, “is working with first generation students and helping them navigate the college process.”

Fasteson is a member of ASCA, the Rhode Island School Counselor Association (board member), the Boys and Girls Club (board of trustees, Program and Camps Committee), the Institute for Portuguese and Lusophone World Studies and the Community Advisory Board at Rhode Island College. Twitter: @fastesone, Instagram: lizfasteson

Nancy Fernandez

School Counselor
Edwards Elementary School
Chicago, Ill.

A school counselor since 2009, Nancy Fernandez has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Illinois – Chicago and two master’s degrees, one in elementary education from Northern Illinois University and the other in school counseling from Loyola University.

“As a school counselor, I was able to accomplish a longtime professional goal and earned RAMP designation for Brighton Park Elementary School in 2021, right in the heart of the pandemic,” Fernandez said. “As students began to show us a closer look into their home environments during remote learning, the need for equity and access for all of our students, especially those in the LGBTQ+ community, became a significant need.” After reviewing schoolwide data, it became clear that a support group was needed, as was mental health awareness for students in the LGBTQ+ community. This began the very first GSA at Brighton Park Elementary School. At the start of the GSA, only two students came out and shared their pronouns. After the third GSA meeting, 12 students shared their pronouns and chosen names. “Now,” she said, “fast forward to 2022, and these 12 students have become our ambassadors, supporting equity and access events by incorporating mental health awareness through Erika’s Lighthouse.”

Fernandez said seeing the impact one person can have on the life of a student is the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor. “There is nothing more rewarding than seeing your students grow, mature and use their coping skills or social/emotional learning tools that I supported them in learning,” she said.

Fernandez is a member of ASCA and the Illinois School Counselor Association. Twitter: @nancyfersc

Kathleen Clark Hager

School Counselor
North Star Elementary School
Albuquerque, N.M.

A school counselor since 2015, Kathleen Clark Hager has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Swarthmore College and a master’s degree in counseling from Marymount University.

“My mission as a school counselor is to ensure all of my students, no matter where they are from or what language they speak, feel welcome, seen, safe and gain the tools they need to be successful,” Hager said. “I tailor our school counseling program based on the feedback and data from teachers, staff, families and students.” In addition to ongoing preventive programs, she focuses on the current needs of the school’s students. Hager’s goal is to give students the skills they need to regulate their emotions and behaviors at school so they are ready to learn. In 2019, there was a need for behavior regulation and conflict regulation. In 2020, the effort targeted how to de-stress, calm their bodies and reach out for help from their families and the school. In 2021, they focused on personal space and behavioral regulation. This year the counseling program is focusing on sizing up problems and conflicts while recognizing rude, mean and bullying behaviors and dealing with them. For the past three years, Hager has worked after hours to support her peers in fighting to change the promotions process at her school district to one that is transparent and equal for all. “Proudly, this change took place this summer,” she said.

To Hager, the most rewarding aspect of her job as a school counselor is helping kids and families navigate through tough times and circumstances to try and find a way that lets them see the light in their lives. “I find so much truth in the quote ‘Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light,’” she said.

Hager is a member of ASCA, the New Mexico School Counselor Association, Swarthmore College Alumni and Marymount Alumni. Instagram: kathleenchager



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Carri Noelle Hale

School Counselor, Student Services Department Chair
Verona Area High School
Verona, Wis.

A school counselor since 2004, Carri Noelle Hale has a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's degree in counselor education from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

"I began the Multicultural Leadership Council (MCLC) in my first year at Verona Area High School in 2007," Hale said. "MCLC invites leaders from all identities to come together on a weekly basis to dispel stereotypes by building relationships." The primary focus of MCLC is producing and creating the Annual Multicultural Showcase. This year's crew is 45 students strong and meets weekly. This is a student-led group with an executive council leading committees in the full council. In the words of the co-presidents: "MCLC is a club that promotes cultural diversity and acceptance. Our goal is to bring in all cultures and to bring them together and give them a voice. Cultural diversity is important to our Verona Area High School community. There are many representations within Verona and acceptance makes us a stronger community. Promoting cultural diversity dispels negative stereotypes and personal biases." MCLC also creates and hosts Verona's annual Wildcat Leadership Retreat. This day-long event is a brave space for student leaders from all clubs and organizations to talk about leadership, school culture, mental health and other social issues.

"Working with young people, building relationships and leading in the community are my life's work," Hale said. "School life is 'real life' - our young people need a sense of belonging, love and care. My work as a school counselor is legacy work, creating stronger communities and ensuring our young people have a great start building their identities and planning for their futures."

Hale is a member of ASCA and the Wisconsin School Counselor Association. Twitter: @carrihale, Instagram: halecarri

Leslee Hazzard

School Counselor
East Millsboro Elementary School
Millsboro, Del.

Leslee Hazzard, a school counselor since 2014, has a bachelor's degree in middle-level education and a master's degree in elementary and secondary school counseling, both from Wilmington University.

For one of the programs Hazzard has been involved in, she cofacilitated a group called Golden Knights: Guys with Ties. The group was created based on data that showed a disproportionality in discipline referrals among male students that were African American and qualified for special education. Due to this disproportionality, those students had an increased amount of time out of their classroom setting compared to their peers. To reduce the disproportionality, it was essential to intervene with those students to increase the time those students stayed in the classroom. Students in Golden Knights: Guys with Ties learn leadership skills, receive explanations about the choices and consequences related to peer pressure and learn lessons about empathy and how to be kind to themselves.

"School counseling is not only my profession, but it is my passion," Hazzard said. "I take pride in mentoring interns who are entering the world of school counseling because I recognize the important role we, as school counselors, play. I come to work knowing that our students have unique issues that require an innovative and collaborative approach to problem solving. Through facilitating a comprehensive and engaging school program, I am able to teach students the tools they need to be successful across all areas of their lives. Advocating for our most vulnerable populations is a way to give voice to those that often suffer in silence. Through collaboration and leadership I am able to fulfill the missing gaps for our students and their families."

Hazzard is a member of ASCA and the Delaware School Counselor Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Jeff Heavlin

School Counselor
Oscar Howe Elementary
Sioux Falls, S.D.

A school counselor since 2006, Jeff Heavlin has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology and a master's degree in counseling, guidance and personnel services from the University of South Dakota.

"I have been part of a reform that we believe has made the selection of our student council members (grades 3-5) more equitable to students interested in serving our school and community," Heavlin said. After his building's leadership team received additional training in cultural responsiveness, they changed the selection system from a traditional popularity vote to an interview process, which allowed for greater diversity among the students selected to represent their classrooms. Heavlin also started his building's Career Café program, which gives fifth grade students the opportunity to learn from community members in a variety of fields. Using an interest inventory, students are matched with speakers and participate in the program during their lunch hour. This past year, Heavlin was honored to be asked to be one of two representatives to serve on the interview team as they searched for a new principal. The principal at the time recommended him for the team based on his knowledge of the school's students, staff and programs. Heavlin believes his work serving on various teams and committees at both the building and district levels helped to not only prepare him for this, but also helped district leaders know him and the value a school counselor can provide.

"Being able to help students learn and grow during their journey to become the people they will be is one of the most rewarding aspects of this work," Heavlin said.

Heavlin is a member of ASCA, the South Dakota School Counselor Association, the South Dakota Counseling Association (SDCA), the South Dakota Association of Counseling Educators and Supervisors and the SDCA-Sioux Chapter. Twitter: @jheavlin, Instagram: @jjheavlin

Julie Hill

School Counselor
James and Rosemary Phalen Leadership Academy
Indianapolis, Ind.

A school counselor since 2000, Julie Hill has a bachelor's degree in theatre and a master's degree in school counseling, both from Butler University.

In her previous school, Hill worked to create community partnerships that resulted in establishing a community food pantry, career fair and apprenticeship opportunities. She led her school to receive the Indiana Gold Star and ASCA RAMP awards as well as a comprehensive school counseling grant from the Lilly Endowment. Through the use of data, she advocated for two additional school counselors and a school social worker, doubling the size of the student support staff in the district. At James and Rosemary Phalen Leadership Academy, Hill has made creating relationships with her students a priority, and her impact has been felt in just a few short months. She quickly established a care closet of hygiene and school supplies to meet the needs of her students and provided staff training on supporting transgender students. Also, she is working to develop a new program that will allow a greater number of students to earn honors diploma designations and is enhancing another program to provide greater opportunities for students to learn about apprenticeships and other workplace experiences. With other school leaders, Hill is working to develop better methods for collecting data to identify the school's most critical needs and develop an intervention plan.

"To me, school counseling is all about opportunities," Hill said. "Knowing that each day I have the opportunity to help a student move toward their best possible future is most rewarding."

Hill is a member of ASCA, the Indiana School Counselor Association, the National Education Association and the Indiana State Teachers Association. Twitter: @scjuliebaumgart



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Shari J. Hooper

School Counselor
Mossy Creek Elementary
North Augusta, S.C.

Shari J. Hooper, a school counselor since 1999, has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Akron and a master's degree in counseling from Augusta University.

Hooper designed the Adopt a Turtle Mentoring program after the leadership team determined that, in order to meet grade-level standards, 37.4% of third graders needed to increase their reading scores, and 22.4% needed to increase their math scores. Once identified as a group, school stakeholders considered another common denominator to reduce the pool of mentee students. They considered the free- and reduced-lunch identifier based on common knowledge that this demographic group often lacks regular and/or has less adult support than other children. As a result, the forty children they identified were placed in the program. After participating in the mentoring program during the school year, the children's scores increased in both subjects, and many moved up to the grade-level target. Student perception data also changed positively. Overall, the students cited more satisfaction with school, better grades and an increased belief in their ability to succeed. With Hooper's leadership, the school has maintained the largest mentoring program in Aiken County, and she has been able to show other school leaders how to duplicate this success. Though other teacher and school interventions often impact the increase in student achievement, the team found that participating in Adopt a Turtle significantly motivated students to achieve more, which directly increased their academic scores.

Hooper said, "The most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor are the student relationships that grow over six elementary years, the many 'mini' daily successes and observing the grit and resiliency of students despite their tremendous difficulties."

Hooper is a member of ASCA, the Palmetto State School Counselor Association and the Georgia School Counselor Association.

Chad Emmons Jackson

School Counselor
Ponderosa Elementary
Billings, Mont.

A school counselor since 2011, Chad Emmons Jackson has a bachelor's degree in modern languages and literature in Spanish and in elementary education from Montana State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Montana State University.

One of the most influential and impactful programs Jackson has implemented was an intentional tiered intervention system for Ponderosa's playground and recesses. Jackson created a survey on bullying, school climate and problem solving that was administered to all third to fifth grade students. Over several years, the data was collected, analyzed and used to make effective changes and meet the needs of the students and the school. This led to a proactive intervention on the playground, specifically for lunch recess, but it was also implemented by all adults during any recess time. The program connected and correlated the content and skills being taught in school counseling lessons on topics like bullying, advocacy, empowerment, problem solving and self-regulation to the most critical time of the day for students to implement these skills. The students were modeled, scaffolded and guided in how to use these principles while at recess. The results were incredible. In a three-year period, office referrals decreased by 84%. The school also saw incidents of bullying, and accusations of bullying, drop to zero while fighting and physical violence went from very prevalent to nonexistent at the school. The program was so successful that Jackson has presented this program at the district and state level so it can be replicated and implemented in other schools.

"As a school counselor, caring for the social and emotional needs of children truly matters," Jackson said. "Even on days that are incredibly difficult or feel impossible, I know that I wouldn't want to be doing anything else in life. My job as a counselor is honestly significant, meaningful and an incredibly noble calling."

Jackson is a member of ASCA, the Montana School Counselor Association, the National Education Association and the Billings Education Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Rebecca L. Johnson

School Counselor
Daphne Elementary School
Daphne, Ala.

A school counselor since 2016, Rebecca L. Johnson has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of South Alabama.

Johnson, the Alabama school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Daphne Elementary, a suburban school serving 700 students from pre-K to third grade, lives by the motto to see a need, fill a need. She spearheaded the development and implementation of a data-informed school counseling program in her school district and led and encouraged her peers to continue to achieve 12 bronze, 11 silver and 8 gold RAVE awards, as well as 10 Alabama Distinction and RAMP awards. She considers herself fortunate to have built relationships within her school and community that allow her to advocate for systemic change in a positive way. Johnson promotes her role in her school by being visible and letting her students know that they are loved, and she finds creative ways to connect with them by wearing costumes and moving around campus in a pair of roller skates.

Johnson said, "I find that communicating to another person their worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves is what I find most rewarding about being a school counselor."

Johnson is a member of ASCA, the Alabama School Counselor Association and the Alabama Counseling Association.

Erin Drickey Justice, Ph.D.

School Counselor
Rainelle Elementary School and Crichton Elementary School
Rainelle and Quinwood, W.Va.

Erin Drickey Justice, Ph.D., a school counselor since 2010, has bachelor's degrees in psychology and sociology from Catawba College, a master's degree in school counseling from Winthrop University and a doctorate in counselor education and supervision from the University of the Cumberlands.

As an elementary school counselor, Justice notes she rarely sees the difference she makes in the lives of her students, but sometimes she witnesses the impact of her school counseling program. After the thousand-year flood experienced in Rainelle, West Virginia, in 2016, many home addresses changed to match 911 addresses. "Suddenly, most of my students no longer knew their personal safety information," Justice said. "My mission is for all students to leave elementary school knowing and understanding the importance of their personal safety information. What started as a lesson in safety turned into an opportunity for my students to practice confidence, independence and perseverance." She is also proud of her advocacy and collaboration efforts with the pediatric department at the town's clinic. After noticing a lot of miscommunication between parents, the school and the clinical staff, Justice contacted the pediatrics staff and started a conversation about their overlapping services and interests. This collaboration helped streamline services and eliminate unnecessary referrals for services that had already been provided. As a result, both worlds understand each other better and communicate more efficiently.

"I love being a school counselor and am proud to have the opportunity to impact my students' lives positively," Justice said. "I love working with kids and helping them with everyday life and in moments of crisis. I love listening to their problems and helping them find solutions. Students need to be heard and their feelings validated, so my work is meaningful and essential."

Justice is a member of ASCA, the American Counseling Association, the West Virginia School Counselor Association and Kappa Delta Pi (KDP).



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Michele Kimle

School Counselor
Hastings Middle School
Hastings, Neb.

A school counselor since 2007, Michele Kimle has a bachelor's degree in special education (K-12) and a master's degree in school counseling (6-12), both from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

At a time when data showed middle school students were really struggling with high anxiety and stress, Kimle was painfully aware that there were not enough minutes in her day to reach the number of students requesting her time. She needed help. At the ASCA Annual Conference in summer 2022, Kimle learned about an SEL/MTSS program called SchoolPulse, a texting program that could reach 100% of her students several times each week. After months of communicating and planning with officials at Hastings Public Schools, and networking with educators from districts already using the program, Hastings Middle School rolled the program out. Kimle is proud to have been part of a collaborative team advocating for students. A couple of times each year, the school counselors survey students to see how connected they are with other students and staff in the building. Their goal is for every student to feel supported and cared about while they are in the school's care. This data helps the school connect students with each other via small groups during lunch or their intervention time. They have also been more intentional in trying to build relationships with students who don't feel like they have a connection with an adult at school.

Kimle said, "The relationships I make with students and families are one of the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor. Seeing the growth of our students as they journey through the ups and downs of middle school is rewarding. Even though I don't always have the answers, I enjoy cheering students (and parents) on during one of the most challenging and unpredictable times of their lives."

Kimle is a member of ASCA, the Hastings Education Association and the Nebraska School Counselor Association.

Tama M. Lang

School Counselor
Sgt. Robert R. Litwin Elementary School
Chicopee, Mass.

A school counselor since 2001, Tama M. Lang has a bachelor's degree in psychology/sociology from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and master's degrees in psychology from Boston University and in social work from Smith College School for Social Work.

One of the successful programs at Litwin School is the Peer Mediation program, in which trained fourth and fifth graders help facilitate mediation sessions for students who are having difficulty with relationships or friendships. Many times students are referred to mediation because of a misunderstanding or miscommunication. The mediation sessions provide a safe space where students can collaborate and solve problems. Mediators have the opportunity to assume a leadership role, which helps foster confidence. Because the students are active participants in problem solving, many of the issues brought forth are not repeated. The Peer Mediation program complements the anti-bullying program that is offered as a Tier 1 intervention for all students. The effectiveness and success of these programs are due to a teamwork approach between Lang and the physical education teacher. "I am proud to have built this program over the past 10 years," Lang said.

"As a school counselor, it is rewarding to see students utilize learned SEL skills in real life situations," Lang said. "I feel proud when a student is able to take a calming breath and think before responding to a situation."

Lang is a member of ASCA, the Chicopee Education Association, the Massachusetts School Counselor Association, Chicopee ALANA and the Western Massachusetts School Counselor Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Erica Lewis

School Counselor
Coventry Oak Elementary
Lexington, Ky.

A school counselor since 2016, Erica Lewis has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in elementary education, both from the University of Louisville, and a master's degree in school counseling from Eastern Kentucky University.

"Upon the return from virtual learning," Lewis said, "our administration team noticed that the students had some social/emotional deficits. In an effort to help fill in those deficits, the administration decided that we would continue teaching weekly SEL classroom lessons and providing daily Morning Mindfulness on the school's news show." Still, some students needed more socially and emotionally and from this need came the "Embracing You" girls group, a six-week group that Lewis facilitates. The group, which began a year and a half ago and operates once in the spring and fall, focused on friendship, self-esteem, effective communication skills and empathy. The group has been very successful since its implementation and the school plans to continue it in the coming years.

"What I find most rewarding about being a school counselor, honestly," Lewis said, "is just being there for the students. When they have a pressing situation, I take pride in knowing that they want my assistance in working through that situation, in the hope that we together can make the situation better. I love that they trust that I will be an advocate for them and support them mentally, emotionally, socially and/or academically. I am inspired by the relationships that I have with the students and families and their willingness to trust and communicate with me."

Lewis is a member of ASCA, the Kentucky School Counselor Association and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. Twitter: @ericamichelle05

Ebonee Magee-Dorsey, D.P.C.

District Counselor
Monticello Elementary School and Rod Paige Middle School
Monticello, Miss.

Ebonee Magee-Dorsey, D.P.C., a school counselor since 2013, has a bachelor's degree in mass communication and psychology, a master's degree in school counseling and a doctorate in professional counseling, all from Mississippi College.

Middle school is a critical time for students developmentally and academically. To address graduation rates, Magee-Dorsey spearheaded the implementation of an eighth-grade Commitment to Graduation ceremony. This ceremony promotes a school culture with a constant and consistent message to all stakeholders about the importance of education and the expectation of graduation. "Eighth grade is vital for students," said Magee-Dorsey. "It is vital for them to learn how to set goals, prepare to transition to high school and celebrate commitment, all while striving for a high school diploma. The Commitment to Graduation ceremony is a charge to the eighth graders to transition to high school and graduate in four years." The ceremony presents a framework of successful schoolwide and grade-level tactics that reinforce the value of a high school diploma, promote a college and career-ready future and instill an individual commitment from each student to graduate from high school.

"I love being a school counselor and I am extremely passionate about helping my students, educators and other school counselors," Magee-Dorsey said. "I doubt there is another career that could fuel my passion for helping and serving students. The ability to truly see the impact I make in the lives of the students I serve is the ultimate reward."

Magee-Dorsey is a member of ASCA, the Magnolia State School Counselor Association (board member and assistant chair), the Mississippi Association of Middle Level Educators (vice president), the Mississippi Counseling Association and the Mississippi Association for Career and Technical Education. Twitter: @drmageedorsey, Instagram: @thepassionateschoolcounselor



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Ryan Pattison Marshall

School Counselor
South Salem High School
Salem, Ore.

A school counselor since 2013, Ryan Pattison Marshall has a bachelor's degree in speech communications and a master's degree in school counseling, both from Whitworth University.

Marshall's accomplishments include the RAMP designation for South Salem High School; co-authoring the district crisis response manual; coorganizing the Annual DeStress Fest; coordinating a grief and loss small group; acting as an adviser for the suicide prevention club; and creating an innovative calm room.

Marshall sees helping students discover their most authentic selves while navigating some of life's most formidable challenges as the most rewarding aspect of his work as a school counselor.

Marshall is a member of ASCA, the Oregon School Counselor Association and the Salem Keizer Education Association. Twitter: @ryan_marshall

Alison G. Memoli

School Counselor
John H. Fuller Elementary School
North Conway, N.H.

A school counselor since 2007, Alison G. Memoli has a bachelor's degree in communications from St. Andrews University, a master's degree in social work from the University of South Carolina and a second master's degree in education—school counseling from South Carolina State University.

“One particular program accomplishment that I am proud of included a collaborative team approach with local stakeholders to create virtual career days in both 2020 and 2021,” Memoli said. “Since arriving in the district in 2009, education and promotion of the career domain has been an area that I have worked to add into the school counseling program at John H. Fuller Elementary School.” With the onset of the pandemic, Memoli was able to collaborate with the elementary school counselors, faculty and administrators to execute a successful virtual career day in 2020 for three local schools. With this success, she worked with a group of counselors to create a virtual career day comprising nine schools in 2021. The ability

to synthesize team ideas, ensure that the needs of each respective population were represented and roll out this event on the same timeline were factors of this collaborative effort. The actual career day consisted of a virtual assembly, prerecorded career videos, in-person presenters, writing extensions and exit surveys. The students, staff and administration reported via survey that the day was a success as shown by the quality of the presenters, the logistics and student verbalization at more than 95%.

“Personally, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is the ability to build and foster relationships with students, staff and the community,” Memoli said. “Establishing connections within my school community as students learn, grow and thrive continues to be both rewarding and motivating aspects of the profession.”

Memoli is a member of ASCA, the National Education Association, the New Hampshire School Counselor Association and the Pequawket Foundation.

Kristina Meyers

School Counselor
Mingus Union High School
Cottonwood, Ariz.

Kristina Meyers, a school counselor since 2013, has a bachelor's degree in psychology and Spanish and a master's degree in counseling and student personnel (K-12 school counseling emphasis), all from Minnesota State University-Mankato.

Meyers is the Arizona School Counselor of the Year and one of four full-time school counselors at Mingus Union High School, where she serves nearly 400 students in the class of 2025. In her school community, she has developed several new programs and initiatives, including expanding the core curriculum and planning new campuswide events such as the Commit to Graduate ceremony and Signing Day. Some of her other notable accomplishments have included fostering data-driven practices in her counseling department, implementing her Bitmoji Virtual Counseling Office during COVID-19 closures and becoming a certified instructor for Youth Mental Health First Aid to train others in supporting students. On campus, Meyers has been involved in a number of school leadership teams, including the site Action Team, Equity Committee and, most recently, the Educator Book Club, which she launched with a colleague to enhance the professional development opportunities available to district staff. Meyers is bilingual in Spanish and passionate about breaking down barriers to success and



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

helping all students see their potential. Through her work with the Equity Committee and countless hours assisting the district with translation and interpretation services, she helped see through the hiring of a Bilingual Parent Liaison, a new position, to create stronger family and community partnerships on behalf of her students.

“I love working within the ASCA National Model to deliver services in support of students’ academic, career and social/emotional development,” Meyers said, “and I am so fortunate to have a career that provides me with such diverse experiences and requires me to consistently be sharpening my skills in counseling techniques and program delivery.”

Meyers is a member of ASCA, the Arizona School Counselors Association, the Rocky Mountain Association of College Admissions Counselors and the Arizona College Access Network. Twitter: kristy_meyers, Instagram: superiornoodle

Kara Patricia Miller

High School Counselor
Powell High School
Powell, Wyo.

A school counselor since 2015, Kara Patricia Miller has a bachelor’s degree in education from Carroll College and a master’s degree in counseling from the University of North Dakota.

At her school, Miller worked closely with the team in her building to successfully implement a schoolwide SEL program using the ASCA Student Standards. The team paired this curriculum with the overarching goal of maintaining and supporting the positive school culture and structured student mentorship program for which she is a student adviser. Miller serves on the SAMHSA Mental Health Grant Advisory Committee for her district as the high school representative and helped develop and advocate for change in the risk assessment protocol. She helped facilitate training for all staff in ACE studies and trauma-informed practices and collaborated with community entities to promote student mental health and the work of counselors in the Powell schools and Wyoming communities. She helped foster connections with the state licensing board, department of education and career/technical education, and she served as a mental health resource and represented school counselors at the administrator’s Trauma-Informed Education conference. Miller has a passion for expanding and connecting mental health supports and reducing stigma in her rural state with the highest suicide rates per capita.

“I am forever honored to be able to share in the responsibility of helping students navigate their world and find how to both be comfortable in their own skin as well as thrive in the adversity and pivotal moments that life may throw them,” Miller said. “My hope is that through working alongside students in this journey they can grow in the confidence that they, too, have the ability to impact their world to be a safer, more empathetic place for all.”

Miller is a member of ASCA, the Wyoming School Counselor Association and the Wyoming Counseling Association. Instagram: karapjanemiller

Lysa Mullady

Elementary School Counselor
Deauville Gardens East Elementary
Copiague, N.Y.

A school counselor since 1990, Lysa Mullady has a bachelor’s degree from the State University at Oneonta and a master’s degree in school counseling from Long Island University.

Through the years, Mullady has developed many schoolwide initiatives to promote student success, with a special emphasis on character education. She focused her creativity on the effort and began by crafting a curriculum of monthly lessons, before moving on to writing plays, poems and songs that were performed by students at a town hall-style assembly each month. Through the shutdown, Mullady pivoted to ensure all students continued to feel connected and had access to learning by creating slides that included videos about each character trait. Additionally, she followed her passion to make sure each of her students was given the tools to face the emotional toll of distance learning. She launched a program that started by teaching teachers techniques to be trauma-centered, and her school practiced a simple but effective framework she created, Peace Week. Throughout the year, each day was dedicated to mindful activities within the classroom to support the mental health needs of all students.

To Mullady, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is seeing the results of her efforts in the data, increased student achievement and improved attendance, while observing students advocating for themselves and others using skills she taught.

Mullady is a member of ASCA and the Western Suffolk Counselors’ Association. Twitter: @lysamullady, Instagram: liza jane



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Sarah Mullard-Dickman

School Counselor
Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency
Portage, Mich.

A school counselor since 2004, Sarah Mullard-Dickman has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counselor education from Western Michigan University.

When Mullard-Dickman and a previous colleague determined students needed strategies to manage the high levels of stress they were experiencing, they designed classroom lessons and activities to introduce mindfulness and self-care and allow space and time for students to practice these skills. Their goal was to give students a variety of tools to cope with the ongoing challenges of the pandemic in the hope they would find what worked best for them. Through guided meditation, sensory activities and nutrition lessons, as well as gratitude and goal setting, post-assessment surveys found the majority of students were using at least some of the skills and reported feeling stressed fewer days a week. "These tools will continue to serve students as they go into the next phase of their lives, whether it be college, trade school, apprenticeship, military service or going directly into the workforce," Mullard-Dickman said. Additionally, practicing mindfulness and self-care strategies in the classroom allowed instructors to see the benefits, and many of them participated along with students in the lessons and activities. Many of the instructors adopted some of the strategies, such as soothing music, lower lighting and sensory breaks, as part of their daily classroom routine.

"Working with young people to help them discover their unique strengths and passion is an amazing opportunity," Mullard-Dickman said. "Partnering with students to find what drives them, what they have to offer to the world and how that translates into a career path is truly fulfilling, and to have even a small part in that self-discovery is extremely rewarding."

Mullard-Dickman is a member of ASCA and the Michigan School Counselor Association.

Keira Oscarson

School Counselor
Northern Cass Public School
Hunter, N.D.

Keira Oscarson, a school counselor since 2014, has a bachelor's degree in English education and a master's degree in counseling, both from North Dakota State University.

One of Oscarson's accomplishments as a school counselor was helping to found a high school SEL elective class. "In the class, we bring in other experts and train the high school learners to facilitate restorative circles," she said. "We have developed a curriculum based on the CASEL competencies, while embedding content on areas of well-being, vulnerability and courage; the Nurtured Heart Approach; empathy and authenticity; and student leadership." The class trains students and includes a core educator in a systemic effort to arm all of their educators with the experiences and tools to embed SEL into all areas. "Each day," Oscarson said, "I feel like those learners teach me as much (or more) than we teach them."

"I love that I get to work with learners from sixth to 12th grade," Oscarson said. "The growth I get to bear witness to is amazing. The most rewarding part about being a school counselor, though, is being a witness to each student learning about themselves and then growing in ways that help them feel enriched, empowered and self-aware."

Oscarson is a member of ASCA and the North Dakota School Counselor Association.



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Ma. Blessa Balan Ramos

High School Counselor
Simon Sanchez High School
Yigo, Guam

A school counselor since 2009, Ma. Blessa Balan Ramos has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Guam and a master's degree in human relations from the University of Oklahoma.

"One of our school's successful school counseling programs," Ramos said, "is increasing the graduation rate by teaching the ninth-grade students the high school requirements to help them succeed in high school and graduate on time." Each year, incoming ninth grade students view a presentation designed to help them smoothly transition to high school. They are taught about the high school requirements and skills that they need to develop to be successful. The students are given pre- and post-assessments to help the school counselors determine the needs of the students and improve the lessons and activities to meet those needs. The school counselors provide academic counseling to individual students to keep track of their progress and provide referrals to credit recovery programs, when necessary. The constant communication with the students, parents, teachers, administrators and staff provides tremendous help toward the students' success. Continuously monitoring the student's progress in school contributes to their improvement. In addition to academic counseling, they are also provided career and social/emotional counseling to help them prepare for their post-secondary options after they graduate. The students complete the ASVAB test to help them learn about careers that best fit their skills. A virtual calming room is created to aid in the student's social/emotional development.

Ramos has found helping students succeed and graduate from high school is the most rewarding thing about being a school counselor.

Ramos is a member of ASCA, the Guam Association of School Counselors and the Guam Federation of Teachers. Instagram: blessbr

Denise S. Reddinger

COSA - High School Assistant Principal
Hanford High School
Richland, Wash.

Denise S. Reddinger, a school counselor since 1995, has a bachelor's degree in social science from Washington State University and a master's degree in education specializing in school counseling from Heritage University.

The accomplishment Reddinger is most proud of is helping to implement the ASCA National Model, from her school building to the entire state of Washington. "Our amazing team has accomplished a five-year transition to a data-driven comprehensive school counseling program based on the ASCA National Model," she said. "We have taken what historically had been a reactive school counseling response serving some students and transformed it into a program serving all of our students in a multitiered, multidomain system of supports." Additionally, her district has developed a transition plan to implement a comprehensive school counseling program in all schools. Also, as an elected board member of the Washington School Counselor Association, Reddinger is proud of the legislative advocacy work her association has been engaging in since 2010 when the association hired a lobbyist. This advocacy work has led to the passage of Senate Bill 5030, which requires all school districts to implement a comprehensive school counseling program based on the ASCA National Model. "When I retire in a few years," she said, "I will leave knowing the state of school counseling is progressing and in a better place than when I started in 1995."

"The most rewarding thing about being a school counselor," Reddinger said, "is supporting students as they grow into young adults who contribute positively to their communities after high school. Further, as I am in the twilight of my career, I find I am mentoring other school counselors to be holistic in their approach to the needs of their students, as well as their staff, their family communities and their district."

Reddinger is a member of ASCA, the Washington School Counselor Association (president-elect), the Association of Washington School Principals, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Washington State University Alumni Association and the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Foundation (WA), where she is the secretary. Instagram: de_nise2015



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Nancy Reyes

School Counselor
North Plainfield High School
North Plainfield, N.J.

A school counselor since 2007, Nancy Reyes has a bachelor's degree in history from the City College of New York and a master's degree in counseling from Long Island University.

To address the planning needs of a diverse student population after high school, a college and career room was developed at Reyes' school. The program began as a resource to help students explore post-high-school pathways, completing college, financial aid and scholarship applications, as well as registration into gateway programs such as Dual Enrollment, which allows students to receive college credits from the local community college. The tuition for all of the participating students is supported by the North Plainfield School District. As students' needs were assessed, more services were offered to further support first generation, Latinx and English-language learner students and their families. These services included workshops, college visits, college and career fairs, a summer college bootcamp and evening presentations in English and Spanish. Over time, the program grew to include internship opportunities in partnership with local businesses, agencies and regional chambers of commerce that enable students to explore careers in the medical, legal, law enforcement, education, business, technology and finance fields. The program also includes career readiness services such as resume writing, interviewing and soft skill development.

For Reyes, the most rewarding thing about being a school counselor is the ability to listen to and validate students and provide all students opportunities and empower them with knowledge to realize their dreams and improve their circumstances.

Reyes is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association, the Somerset County School Counselor Association and the New Jersey Association for College Admission Counseling.

Rebecca Schmidt

School Counselor
Lander Elementary School
Mayfield Heights, Ohio

A school counselor since 1992, Rebecca Schmidt has a bachelor's degree in early childhood and elementary education from the University of Texas at San Antonio and a master's degree in guidance and counseling from Tarleton State University.

"The Lander staff and I felt it was important to help our students develop the skills of empathy, working together and supporting one another," Schmidt said. "Through several kindness initiatives, I have seen my students develop these skills, resulting in systemic change." This schoolwide change has made a profound difference to students and staff and even allowed students to use their skills to reach outside of their building. After a hurricane devastated the town of Humble, Texas, Schmidt wanted to help the students in Mayfield Heights empathize with children who were displaced from their school and homes. Most of the students in Schmidt's community had not experienced a similar natural disaster, so they began discussing what these students were experiencing during their classroom morning meetings. The students began feeling empathy for the community in Humble through these discussions and used their developed skills to think of ways to help fellow students. "I am proud to say that kindness is evident in every corner of Lander Elementary School," Schmidt said, "and the students have taken the skills they've learned and are applying them in the real world."

"The very best part of my job," Schmidt said, "is being able to develop genuine relationships with children and staff members. It is so rewarding to help students be happy and successful, and it is equally as rewarding to help staff members feel the same. If you ask a student at Lander Elementary School what my job is, they will say, 'It's to make kids happy!' That is exactly why I would not want to do any other job."

Schmidt is a member of ASCA, the Ohio School Counselor Association, the National Education Association, the Ohio Education Association and the Mayfield Education Association. Twitter: @rebecca71467077, Instagram: rschmidt333



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Eboni N. Simpson-Hodge

School Counselor
Legacy High School
North Las Vegas, Nev.

A school counselor since 2008, Eboni N. Simpson-Hodge has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern University and A&M College and a master's degree in educational psychology from the University of Nevada.

In the past 15 years, Simpson-Hodge has worked in several school settings and accomplished some important things for and with her students. One particular highlight: A 100% college acceptance rate for the Class of 2017 at West Preparatory High School. "I collaborated with GEAR-UP and our college and career specialist to achieve this goal," Simpson-Hodge said. "With their support, I cultivated a college-going mindset. Every conversation with a student included a dialogue on getting accepted into college." They prioritized data collection and tracked seniors' activities on a spreadsheet - FAFSA completion, applying to colleges, college acceptances, scholarship applications and awards - and followed up with students to keep them progressing toward the goal. As a longtime college and career counselor and one of two school counselors for seniors at Legacy High School, Simpson-Hodge's goal is to set students up for postsecondary success and make sure they are "enrollable, enlist-able or employable." The school counselors use career and personality assessments to gauge students' interests, which helps them tailor their involvement and support. All students complete a career plan survey and are encouraged to participate in activities that support their future goals and meet with career coaches, military recruiters, mentors in their fields of interest, college recruiters and professionals in the community to help them build a support network for successful postsecondary transitions.

Simpson-Hodge said the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor is celebrating with her students during school activities, graduation and even life after graduation.

Simpson-Hodge is a member of ASCA and the Nevada School Counselor Association and is the local chapter president of the Southern University Alumni Federation. Twitter: @wphscounselor, Instagram: @counselor_mrshodge

Carrie Marie Skeens

School Counselor
Thomas Edison Elementary School
Colorado Springs, Colo.

Carrie Marie Skeens, a school counselor since 2013, has a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a master's degree in counseling and human services, both from the University of Colorado Colorado Springs.

Skeens said, "I am proud of building a brand-new comprehensive school counseling program from scratch at a site that never had a school counselor in the past. This allowed me to advocate for appropriate school counseling duties and ensure my program met the current needs of our school population." Skeens is most proud of the work she's done to bring college and career awareness to a Title 1 school where many students would be considered first generation college students. The culture at her school is full of college swag where staff display their university pennants, facilitate conversations about the importance of K-12 education to fuel postsecondary success, Tier 1 college and career lessons and an annual community event with career speakers called Chasing Your Dreams. She is also proud of the relationship she's built with her administrator, which is harmonious and trusting. "We are often looked at by other counselors in my district as the gold standard for a school counselor/administrator relationship and were asked to present at a state conference on that topic," Skeens said.

"The most rewarding thing about being a school counselor," Skeens said, "is when I get to see students use strategies we've worked on."

Skeens is a member of ASCA and the Colorado School Counselor Association. Instagram: carries_caffeinated



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Brian Stewart

School Counselor, Department Chair
Catonsville High School
Baltimore County, Md.

A school counselor since 2014, Brian Stewart has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Nazareth College and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Rochester.

"Targeting opportunity gaps for our underrepresented students has been a focus of my career," Stewart said. "Beyond ensuring the equitable access to our school counseling curriculum, I believe my responsibility extends to addressing any systemic barriers that may undermine student ambitions." Over the years, this work has included extra programming to connect undocumented students with financial aid opportunities, initiatives to increase college matriculation for low-income and minority students and steps to ensure that students have more access to their school counselor when needed. Stewart said, "As counselors, we know that building a strong and trusting relationship with students is the backbone of any intervention. Of course, incorporating multiple measures of student data allows us to be more strategic with the delivery of key supports." When these metrics highlighted disproportionality in CCR outcomes and course enrollment across certain racial groups, the school's counselors immediately began exploring which internal processes may influence student access. Examining their implementation of BCPS's School Counseling Curriculum helped drive adjustments to bolster the impact of Tier 1 and 2 level supports. "By using data to indicate which students may need an extra push, we started to observe measurable improvements within a single year," Stewart said.

The most rewarding part of Stewart's job as a school counselor — the kids. He said, "I have worked with so many awesome kids who, with just a little bit of support, are able to springboard to the next level. It's a privilege to witness their sense of personal accomplishment once they've made that jump."

Stewart is a member of ASCA, the Maryland School Counselor Association, Chi Sigma Iota (alumni) and Theta Chi. Instagram: [brian.d.stew](#)

Tessica Taylor

School Counselor
Luther Elementary School
Luther, Okla.

A school counselor since 2012, Tessica Taylor has a bachelor's degree in political science from Baylor University, a master's of business and science degree from the University of Phoenix and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Central Oklahoma.

"Over the past two years, I have worked to create and implement a comprehensive school counseling program that includes multiple tiers of support for our students," Taylor said. Biweekly classroom lessons, character trait development, a PBIS initiative and the school's own therapy dog are schoolwide supports that work to support all of the students in her building. "Small-group counseling, lunch meetings, behavior contracts and a peer mentoring program are great initiatives to help students that need a few more supports to be successful," Taylor said. The school offers a backpack program to send food home with students in need to ensure they have food for the weekend. Recently, Taylor has been able to expand that program to include some clothing and hygiene items. Every Christmas, the school partners with the community to provide Christmas presents and dinners for less fortunate families.

"The kids are the most rewarding thing about being a school counselor," Taylor said. "I love watching them learn and grow."

Taylor is a member of ASCA, the Oklahoma School Counselor Association, the Oklahoma Counseling Association and the American Counseling Association. Twitter: [@taylortessica](#), Instagram: [@tess2411](#)



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Christina Anne Tillery

School Counselor
Highland Springs High School
Richmond, Va.

A school counselor since 2017, Christina Anne Tillery has a bachelor's degree in history and secondary education from The College of William & Mary and a master's degree in school counseling from Virginia Commonwealth University. She is currently working toward a doctorate degree in counselor education and supervision from Virginia Commonwealth University.

"Throughout my school counseling career, I have intentionally created safe spaces for girls of color in the school environment," Tillery said. "My most impactful method has been through small-group counseling." Two of Tillery's efforts, the GLOW sister circle and book study groups, were formed in collaboration with other counselors and scholars. The GLOW sister circle aims to increase participants' self-efficacy through creative collaboration and sisterhood. The founding affirmations of the GLOW sister circle are giving ourselves grace, loving ourselves unconditionally, opening ourselves to joy and wishing ourselves peace. "The first cohort of GLOW shared that they felt safe to talk about their experiences and supported by the other girls," Tillery said. The book study group employs the tenets of bibliocounseling, and for teenage girls of color, bibliocounseling can provide an opportunity to read literature that mirrors their lived experiences. The first group read "Grown" by Tiffany D. Jackson, and the students processed the various themes throughout the novel, such as healthy relationships, trusted/safe adults and friendship. These small groups allow Tillery to work with girls of color in an intimate and caring environment.

"Being a resource to my students and their families is the most rewarding thing about being a school counselor," Tillery said. "They know I may not always have the answer, but I will work diligently to figure it out. That level of trust means so much to me."

Tillery is a member of ASCA, the Virginia School Counselor Association (Research and Graduate Student Engagement Committee member), the American Counseling Association, Richmond Area Counselors Association (social media chair) and the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. Twitter: @tillerycounsels, Instagram: @tillerylives

Layla Touchet

School Counselor
Prairie Elementary School
Lafayette, La.

Layla Touchet, a school counselor since 2019, has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling and school counseling, both from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She is currently working on a doctorate in counselor education and supervision at the University of Holy Cross.

One of Touchet's favorite programs she has implemented is her Neurodiversity Initiative, which included educating staff, teachers and families on neurodivergency, especially ADHD and autism. "I started this program after looking at our 504 data and realizing that ADHD and autism made up 75% of the diagnoses for the plans in place," Touchet said. She's helped teachers and families better understand how this affects students and strategies they can implement at home and in the classroom to help them, and implemented small groups catered to executive functioning and social skills to help this population. "The other program I am proud of," she said, "is the Mindfulness Initiative that we had implemented and still continue. All of my students learn what a mindful body is and how/when to use it." Touchet runs small groups specific to mindfulness and gives classroom lessons on different mindfulness strategies, such as mindful body and progressive muscle relaxation. The parents are informed, as well, so they can practice it at home, and teachers have mindful body posters and use them in their classrooms.

"Watching my students learn and grow is the most rewarding thing," Touchet said. "Watching a student who struggled to regulate emotions or even verbalize them transform into a student who is now using strategies, can name emotions and is interacting better with peers and teachers is amazing to watch."

Touchet is a member of ASCA, the National Board for Certified Counselors, the Louisiana Counseling Association, the Louisiana School Counselor Association, the Lafayette Parish School Counseling Association, Evergreen Certifications (ADHD-CCSP, CASDCS), Chi Sigma Iota and the Louisiana Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. Instagram: @theneurodivergentcounselor



2023 State School Counselors of the Year

Jeanette Vyhanek

School Counselor
Paul & Sheila Wellstone Elementary School
St. Paul, Minn.

A school counselor since 2017, Jeanette Vyhanek has a bachelor's degree in art history and Spanish language and culture from Syracuse University and a master's degree in counseling and student personnel psychology from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities.

Between 2017 and 2021, Vyhanek worked at a school that was less than a mile from where George Floyd was murdered. On the first anniversary of Floyd's murder, Vyhanek, with the support of other district school counselors, shared lessons for staff and students to participate in and held space for students during lunch if they wanted to process more with her and the school social worker. "I worked to create safe and open spaces for our LGBTQ+ youth to feel seen and heard, and I worked to be a social justice advocate in the school to create spaces that let students develop and discover their identities," she said. At the district level in Minneapolis, Vyhanek was part of a small team that revised and enhanced the district's college and career curriculum for their middle school students. She also took a lead role in ensuring that the college and career curriculum was accessible and meaningful for non-native English-speaking students.

For Vyhanek, seeing student growth from year to year is the most rewarding aspect of her job as a school counselor. "I also love being a witness to students connecting the dots and growing more than they could've imagined," she said.

Vyhanek is a member of ASCA and is the middle level vice president of the Minnesota School Counselor Association.

Brenda A. Wiederholt

School Counselor, Department Chair
Liberty High School
Liberty, Mo.

A school counselor since 1993, Brenda A. Wiederholt has a bachelor's degree in secondary education from Northwest Missouri State University and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Wiederholt has worked to increase awareness of diversity, inclusion and equity in her building and has sponsored the LHS Diversity Council since 2008. The council has participated in a variety of events throughout the years. "We have provided students a safe and welcoming place to express concerns related to diversity and equity by facilitating regular meetings," Wiederholt said. "Our students have created multiple campaigns, such as poster campaigns and lunch time education presentations, to increase student and staff cultural knowledge." The council branched out to the community by performing essential community service, including renovations at The Garrison School, one of the first schools for African Americans in Clay County, Mo. Also, they have spent time volunteering at one of their elementary schools, reading diversity-themed books and discussing the themes with the students. Wiederholt was also a co-founder and a current co-lead of The Point, a staff-led group designed to promote professional development to increase awareness and foster an environment for critical reflection and conversations about identity. The group holds monthly Tuesday Talks on a variety of topics relevant to classroom teachers, including equity versus equality, how to address microaggressions and the paradigm of social identity.

"I enjoy helping students problem solve and discover their strengths," Wiederholt said. "I love creating and implementing a comprehensive counseling program with my team."

Wiederholt is a member of ASCA, the Greater Kansas City School Counselor Association, the Missouri School Counselor Association and the Missouri State Teachers Association.