

2020 School Counselor of the Year

Laura Ross is the 2020 School Counselor of the Year, Georgia school counselor of the year and the lead school counselor at Five Forks Middle School in Lawrenceville, Ga. Her team of one other full-time and one part-time school counselor provide school counseling services to the suburban school's 1,268 students, grades 6-8. "I believe in the importance of connecting students to their education and the critical role school counselors play in creating those connections," she said. "We are leading, advocating and collaborating to change a system so all students feel connected."



Ross's prior work as a counselor at an adult men's correctional facility fueled her passion for restorative justice in her current role at Five Forks. During the 2018-19 school year, Ross noticed male African American and Latino students made up 49 percent of all discipline referrals. "With referrals come consequences, such as in- and out-of-school suspension, disconnecting students from direct instruction," Ross said. After setting a goal to decrease referrals by 15%, Ross and her department developed a multitiered intervention plan for the entire school. Schoolwide programs on peer relations and positive behavior incentives were paired with targeted interventions that included strengths-based small-group sessions and weekly one-on-one advocacy and support coaching. Staff members received professional development on implicit bias, including weekly emails to reinforce ideas for teachers to cultivate culturally responsive connections to students. By the end of the school year, discipline referrals for African American and Latino males decreased 32%.

"Laura is a true hero when it comes to helping us grow as a school in building relationships with our students," said Christine Douthart, principal, Five Forks Middle School. "She is a school counselor who has the best interest of students at the heart of everything she does. When we come together to think about our mission as a school, Laura always asks, 'Are we making decisions for adults, or are we making decisions based on what is best for our students?'"

Described as a "true champion" for students, Ross has been a source of strength and comfort for Five Forks students and parents. Madeline Saluzzi, parent of a former Five Forks student, credits Ross with helping her daughter through very challenging moments during her final year of middle school. "It's difficult being a single parent to a troubled teenager," Saluzzi said. "Ms. Ross filled in the gaps of not having another parent to lean on. She helped not only my daughter out of crisis, but she also helped me." Ross supported the student as well as Saluzzi and connected them to community resources to provide additional help. She also assembled a school-based team to provide triage support to the student during the school day.

In addition to her school counseling responsibilities, Ross works with several programs to help create what colleague Jennifer Chapman describes as a "connectedness culture." Ross, the founding sponsor of the school's first Gay- Straight Alliance, is leading an effort to ensure Five Forks is supportive and responsive to LGBTQ students. She also serves as a cadre trainer for the Dove Self-Esteem Project, facilitating presentations about teen body confidence to educators. She also is the school district's Counseling Steering Committee middle school chair.

Ross received her education specialist degree in professional school counseling and her master's and bachelor's degrees in social work from the University of Georgia. She also holds Georgia educator certificates in school counseling and social work. She is a member of ASCA, the Georgia Department of Education Counselors Advisory Council and the Georgia School Counselor Association, where she is the metro director of the executive board and the leadership team social media editor.





2020 School Counselor of the Year Finalist

Amanda Jo Bustamante is a 2020 School Counselor of the Year finalist, Texas school counselor of the year and is in her first year as school counselor at Paso Del Norte School in El Paso, Texas. Prior to that, she was one of two school counselors at Hurshel Antwine Elementary School in El Paso, an urban school serving 1,031 students, grades PK-5. "Our team, because of our school counseling program, made decisions based on what is best for all kids," she said. "As a passionate school counselor with a true love for children, I could not ask for anything more."



Michelle Romero, former principal at Hurshel Antwine Elementary School, describes Bustamante as a powerhouse school counselor who unites content and data analysis with creative intervention strategies to provide invaluable support to students. In the 2018-2019 school year, Bustamante used her innovative methodology to spearhead a nonacademic learning opportunity to promote a kindness culture at her former school site, Hurshel Antwine. Bustamante collaborated with her school counseling colleagues and the school leadership team to launch the Kindness Kampaign, a community service project linking residents at a senior living community with Hurshel Antwine students to help educate students about the importance of relationships. These students, the Kindness Ambassadors, benefited from opportunities to learn about empathy, how to use effective cooperation and communication skills and demonstrate appropriate behaviors for different environments.

Bustamante is a fierce advocate for her students as well as the school counseling profession. "Amanda is deeply committed to her field of school counseling, by continually expanding her skills and knowledge through her own continued learning as well as sharing what she knows with others," said Amanda Paredes, a Socorro Independent School District parent. In addition to school-based advocacy initiatives such as quarterly newsletters, parent conferences and serving on the school counselor advisory council, Bustamante has also presented campus, district and national professional development sessions to colleagues to highlight school counselors' role and responsibilities. From topics such as positive behavioral interventions and supports, response to intervention for struggling students, multitiered systems of support and mental health awareness in schools, Bustamante remains dedicated to ensuring fellow educators and school administrators are aware that school counselors are a dynamic component to the school leadership team.

"I believe that through these staff development experiences, and with supporting outcome data, my campus colleagues understand school counselors are vital members of the school community," Bustamante said. "They value our school counseling program and all that it has to offer because they have seen the difference it makes in the kids we serve."

Bustamante is a certified school counselor and classroom teacher. She received her master's degree in educational psychology and counseling and bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Texas at El Paso. She is a member of ASCA and the Lone Star State School Counselor Association, where she has been the winner of the Silver and Bronze Counselor Award.

Jennifer Kline is a 2020 School Counselor of the Year finalist, Missouri school counselor of the year and a high school counselor at Festus High School in Festus, Mo. She and a team of two other school counselors provide school counseling services to the suburban school's 857 students, grades 9-12.



Festus High School principal Karl Shinger says Kline does not limit herself to just one idea or group of students. "She leads and serves on multiple building-level teams that address a multitude of issues ranging from truancy to the transition from middle school to high school," he said, noting Kline has developed and organized special events such as Freshmen Kick-Off, Parent Curriculum Night and the College Planning Night at the school. Kline spearheaded the first trauma-informed, suicide prevention and mental health training for the staff at Festus. "We have seen an increase in youth mental health issues and suicidal ideation, especially in a county with no adolescent psychiatrist," she said.

Collaborating with her school counselor colleagues, Shinger and local community agencies, Kline also has implemented programming to tackle this issue. In addition to several staff presentations on trauma awareness, she also has provided information sessions in all school health classes to help students understand the signs of suicide and self-harm. She also led a districtwide parent information night to provide families with important resources to help them

support students. Staff referrals to the school counseling office increased, and following the student sessions, more than 12% of students expressed that they would like to talk to someone about themselves or a friend.

Kline's passion for helping others led her to pivot from a potential career in athletic training to school counseling. "Because of that revelation, thousands of young people's lives have been enriched," said Amanda Esparza, school counselor, Festus High School.

Breanna Stephen says she and many other Festus High School students are inspired by Kline. "When I was in rough moments, she talked me through them. She was one of the people that helped me get back on track," said Stephen, who plans to follow Kline in her professional footsteps. "Because of Mrs. Kline, I hope to someday be a school counselor or social worker so I can work with students who have had similar backgrounds."

Kline is a certified K-12 school counselor and school psychological examiner. She has an education specialist degree in counseling from Southeast Missouri State University, a master's degree in counseling from Stephens College and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Lindenwood University. She is a member of ASCA and the Missouri School Counselor Association, where she serves as president of the Legislative Advisory Council and was Emerging Leader, 2015-2017, and is the former president of the Jefferson County School Counselor Association.

Julie Taylor is Ohio School Counselor of the Year and the school counselor at Starr Elementary School, a suburban school in Oregon, Ohio, serving 468 students, grades K-4. "I believe that one small action can lead to another, and that is how our school counseling program has become valued by students, staff and families," she said. "Our school counseling program has increased academic performance and attendance, improved school climate and decreased bullying incidents, all of which makes a difference for students."



Despite being Starr Elementary School's only school counselor, Taylor remains focused on providing individualized support to the 450 students she serves. Principal Tricia Soltesz says Taylor's tenacity, integrity and creativity make a difference in students' lives. "With the ever-changing needs of our student population, Mrs. Taylor has had to customize plans for students to gain success," Soltesz said. "She gives that individual attention to her students to be successful in the classroom, home and outside of school." Among other things, Taylor volunteers to teach art classes after school because elementary art educators are not employed by the Oregon City school district.

Second-grade teacher Debra Kowalski said Taylor's "progressive approach to implementing new programs that benefit all students is highly motivational for all, including our educators."

After reading Barbara Gruener's "What's Under Your Cape? Superheroes of the Character Kind," Taylor collaborated with Soltesz to create Starr School's Superhero Character Education Program. The all-inclusive program focuses on a different character trait each month, and students and staff members are nominated for superhero awards based on each month's theme.

"Teachers, aides, cafeteria staff, recess monitors and custodians have nominated students, and staff members have even nominated other staff members, parents and district personnel for the superhero awards," said Taylor, who was contacted earlier this year by another school seeking information on how to replicate the program in their classes. Taylor works with the school's families and local community leaders in planning college and career readiness programs such as Career Days and Career Cafés. More than 300 community members have participated in the events at Starr over the past several years.

Taylor is a frequent presenter at state and national school counseling conferences on topics such as incorporating children's literature and creative arts in school counseling lessons as well as strategies for supporting grieving students and creating grief-sensitive schools. She was selected to serve on the Ohio Department of Education's school counselor standards writing team, school counselor evaluation writing team and behavioral health and wellness education advisory group.

Taylor is an ASCA U Anxiety and Stress Management Specialist and a Grief and Loss Specialist. She also is a certified Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper. She has a master's degree in school counseling and bachelor's degree in music education from Bowling Green State University. Taylor is a member of ASCA, the Ohio School Counselor Association, the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International for Key Women Educators and the American Association of University Women.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Lee Acers is the Oklahoma school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Wilson Elementary School, an urban school serving 499 students grades PK-5 in Oklahoma City, Okla. "As an immigrant speaking English as my second language and working with students who in large part are also immigrants, I truly believe I am the students' role model and their success story partner," she said.



Acers has been a school counselor in Oklahoma City Schools since 2012. Prior to that, she served as a counselor at various nonprofit organizations in the Oklahoma City area and in Thailand. She served as a RAMP reviewer for two years. As she progressively implemented components of the ASCA National Model in her schools, her advocacy efforts kept her from being excessively diverted to non-school-counseling-related activities. This was especially critical when her caseload was spread over three schools, with a student-to-school-counselor ratio of 1200:1.

Acers's systemic change efforts have resulted in decreased discipline referrals; improved attendance; a safer, kinder learning environment; the schoolwide use of common language and more positive attitudes toward social/emotional learning.

With a background in counseling psychology, she takes a leading role in maintaining and promoting the physical and social/emotional well-being and self-care of her students, collaborating with community partners with expertise in these areas to provide programming such as grief support, personal safety, leadership training and substance abuse prevention. Acers adopted an idea from the Oklahoma School Counselor Association (OSCA) conference to use therapy dogs to promote a sense of calmness and happiness, and a local yoga studio brings mindfulness practices. Acers also shares social/emotional learning awareness with staff and equips them with trauma-informed school strategies. At the request of her principal and based on a needs assessment for more parental involvement, she revived a volunteer program for fathers and works to eliminate participation barriers for parents who may be undocumented immigrants. She promotes career development by offering a monthly career café featuring career path guest speakers.

Acers is a licensed professional counselor and a certified school counselor in the state of Oklahoma. She received her master's degree in counseling psychology from the University of Central Oklahoma. Acers also has a master's of social work from Thammasat University and a bachelor's degree in English from Srinakharinwirot University, both in Bangkok, Thailand. She is a member of ASCA and the Oklahoma School Counselor Association.

Lauren Alspaugh is the Indiana school counselor of the year and a school counselor and the director of guidance at North Putham High School, a rural school in Roachdale, Ind., serving 427 students. She provides school counseling services to students in grades 11-12 and fosters a collaborative environment. "As school counselors we could never do our job on our own. We must have collaborative help to truly meet our students' needs and help make a difference in their lives," she said.



She led the school counselors in her district through the Indiana Gold Star and ASCA RAMP processes, educating administrators, the superintendent and the school board and helping them better understand what school counselors truly do, how their time is spent and how they bring value to schools. This advocacy led her to a clarified job position and director title.

Alspaugh leads by example, modeling a positive mindset and keeping her language and attitude upbeat and professional throughout the day. Her school counseling program promotes multitiered systems of support, and she teaches staff about trauma and how to help students who have had traumatic pasts.

When data surveys showed a need for greater FAFSA completion and resume creation, Alspaugh held senior meetings, a seminar hosted by a local expert, a financial aid night and a guidance lesson video, which resulted in an increase in senior FAFSA and resume completion rates.

She holds half-day seminars for seniors to participate in small-group sessions, inviting community members to speak about life after high school including college, military trade/union, workforce, scholarships, FAFSA, job applications, interview tips and apartment life.

Alspaugh is a licensed mental health counselor and has her Indiana school services license. She received her master's degree in counseling, school counseling and community counseling, as well as her bachelor's degree in psychology, from Indiana Wesleyan University. She is a member of ASCA and the Indiana School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Candice Alvarez is Arizona school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Copper View Elementary School, a suburban school in Sahuarita, Ariz., serving 550 students grades K-5. “Every day I am working with my administration and teachers to assist my students. I really enjoy my relationships with the teachers and staff at my school and I feel like they truly understand my school counseling program,” she said.



Alvarez emphasizes the importance of getting to know her students and utilizes the True Colors personality assessment when developing relationships and working with students and colleagues. She also works to build trust and rapport with families, which she relies on to assist with advocating for them.

When she saw a recent increase in parents coming to the school with mental health concerns, Alvarez researched community resources and disseminated the information to parents. After a questionnaire revealed an assistance need for gifted students, she set up book studies for them, working with her district’s gifted teacher to find grade-appropriate books.

She has also focused efforts on helping the school with safety concerns and being a kind campus, coordinating with the local police department when dealing with students talking about hurting themselves or others. To help decrease behavior referrals, Alvarez trained as a schoolwide information system facilitator, which enabled the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Committee to track behavior referrals and make decisions based on the trends they were seeing. She also provides classroom lessons on making the school a kind and safe place to be, such as acting responsibly and respectfully.

For nearly 10 years, Alvarez worked with another school counselor to plan the annual Arizona School Counselor Symposium, bringing together school counselors, district administrators and community members to celebrate the profession and the dedicated work of school counselors.

Alvarez received her master’s degree in educational administration from Grand Canyon University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Northern Arizona University. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Arizona. She is a member of ASCA and the Arizona School Counselors Association, where she serves on the professional development committee.

Bethany Balderrama is Colorado school counselor of the year and one of four school counselors at Northridge High School in Greeley, Colo. The suburban school serves 1,200 students grades 9-12. “It is our best practice to ask students in every conversation to identify their trusted adult, and if they don’t know, we connect them with someone,” she said.



Balderrama worked to define the school counselor’s role at her school. After she shared the ASCA National Model with the administration, the school counseling department has spent less time on testing and “other” duties and more time focused on students’ academic, career and social/emotional needs. They reorganized their caseloads to better address the needs of STEM students and English-language learners. Balderrama also enrolled in an introductory Spanish class to improve her communication with the school’s large Hispanic population.

Mental health and social/emotional needs are a top priority for Balderrama, given that a significant number of her students live below the poverty level and have other elevated risk factors. In response, she helped develop a formal school counseling curriculum and coupled it with the schoolwide goal of forming an advisory period. She convinced the planning team to have school counselors rotate through the grade levels weekly to provide schoolwide social/emotional lessons. Data from pre-/pos-tests showed that the lessons made a positive impact on students’ awareness of topics such as suicide, social media concerns, healthy/unhealthy relationships, as well as an increase in self-advocacy and self-esteem. She also developed a crisis-response protocol that has since been adopted as the standard across the district.

Balderrama served on a district graduate initiative devoted to decreasing dropout rates and increasing on-time graduation. By identifying barriers to success and removing those roadblocks, the district’s dropout rate decreased by 41% and on-time graduation rates increased from 77.1% to 81.3%. She and her colleagues also implemented multiple postsecondary planning efforts, such as college and scholarship application days. As a result, the school’s postsecondary enrollment rate increased by 17%, and students participating in dual enrollment courses increased by 62%.

Balderrama has also participated in multiple advisory boards to provide the counseling perspective and to educate colleagues on ways the school counseling department can support students and the school as a whole. To build rapport and increase collaboration with teachers, Balderrama and her colleagues host a Soups for Staff event each fall to treat the staff to a home-cooked meal.

She received her master’s degree in school counseling from the University of Phoenix and her bachelor’s degree in psychology from Colorado State University. She is a member of ASCA and Colorado School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Joseph E. Batiano is Rhode Island school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Rhode Island School for the Deaf in Providence, R.I. The urban school serves 75 students grades PK-12.



Since arriving at the school, Batiano has focused efforts on shifting the school counselor role to align it with the ASCA National Model. "I am continuously striving to find new ways to see our school counseling program grow, expand and evolve to meet the growing needs of our students," he said. "I am proud to be part of the shift from being on the sideline to an integral and central part of each student's educational journey."

Batiano spearheaded efforts to develop, monitor and follow through on individual learning plans for middle and high school students, achieving a 100% completion rate. In doing so, he learned more about students' academic, social/emotional and career interests and potential setbacks/barriers, which opened up alternative pathways to explore such as vocational programs. Incorporating staff and student input, he also introduced schoolwide events focused on themes such as on unity, kindness, diversity and cyber-safety. Planning for the events allowed students to work together, brainstorm and gain interpersonal, problem-solving, time management, leadership and public speaking skills.

Batiano organized a task force to develop an effective protocol for dealing with students expressing ideations of suicide and for dealing with a suicide. He developed a draft protocol for submission to the Board of Trustees that included suicide assessments, a referral contact list of local counselors and social workers proficient in American Sign Language, and a safety plan.

Prior to becoming a school counselor, Batiano was a clinical therapist at the National Deaf Academy in Mount Dora, Fla. He has co-authored and authored articles as well as given presentations on a wide range of school counseling topics. He also supervised school counseling interns from several universities.

Batiano is a licensed mental health counselor. He received his master's degree in school counseling with an emphasis in mental health from Gallaudet University. He has a bachelor's degree in communications from Lenoir Rhyne College. He serves as vice president and member of the National Counselors of the Deaf Association and is an advisory board member for the Gallaudet University Summers and Online School Counseling Program. He is also a member ASCA, the Rhode Island School Counselor Association and the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association.

Amy C. Beal is Kentucky school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Donald E. Cline Elementary in Cold Spring, Ky., a suburban school serving 373 students grades PK-5 with 100% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.



Beal's school counseling program received RAMP designation in January 2016 and is part of the first RAMP-certified district in Kentucky. "I am so very proud of the data-driven, evidence-based comprehensive school counseling program I have created and continue to co-lead during my career at Donald E. Cline Elementary, and I am passionate about improving academic performance for all of my students," she said.

Beal works to effectively manage and facilitate a positive school climate with fair and equitable access. A cancer survivor, Beal incorporates beliefs about fostering grit, empathy and resiliency into her school counseling. She explores how to help students thrive in traumatic situations by creating positive learning environments shaped around relationship, responsibility, and regulation. Her learning around trauma-invested practices in schools has allowed her to synthesize her own traumatic experiences with the trauma many of her students face.

She advocated for intervention time for Tier 2 reading groups to be based on students' academic/equity/behavioral needs and for social/emotional learning interventions for struggling K-2 students, which resulted in a refinement of the school's response to intervention process and a 96% reduction in behavior referrals. This same group of students also had an average increase of 18.6 points on reading scores and 22.1 points on math scores. For the last six years, 99% of the student body consistently have had two or fewer discipline referrals each year, a direct result of providing equity, access and opportunities for success.

Through roundtable discussions, emails, forums and meetings with state legislators, Beal supported efforts to pass school safety legislation that included: increased training for school resource officers; the creation of trauma-informed school teams; improved access to mental health services; the employment of at least one school counselor in each school, with the goal of one for every 250 students; and school counselors spending 60% or more of their time in direct services to students. As a result, Kentucky now ranks as one of the top providers in the nation for school counseling services.

In addition to her school counseling responsibilities, Beal regularly participates in fundraising activities for nonprofit organizations supporting breast cancer survivors and their families. Beal received her master's degree in school counseling from Northern Kentucky University and her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Cincinnati. She is treasurer and governing board member of the Kentucky School Counseling Association. Beal also serves on the Comprehensive Model for Practice Advisory Council for the Kentucky Department of Education and is an adjunct faculty member at Xavier University. She is a member of ASCA and the Kentucky School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Hayden Belisle is Alabama school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Oak Mountain Elementary School in Birmingham, Ala., a suburban school of 750 students where she provides comprehensive school counseling services to grades PK-3. "Much like the foundation of a home, I believe that the single most important factor that gives me the ability to make a difference for students is strong, trusting relationships," she said.



Belisle educates parents on the services she offers to create awareness of how they can partner to help students be successful. She also has formed several beneficial partnerships with community organizations, which have provided food, clothing, toys and funding for students and families in need. She restructured the mentoring program to use high school mentors as accountability partners, increasing the number of third-grade participants from 75% to 100%. During visits they discuss student goals and progress, review leadership notebooks, practice student-led conferences, read with students, play games and complete special projects.

A drastic increase in disruptive behaviors led Belisle to implement a schoolwide positive behavior reinforcement system, which has since been implemented in a number of other schools. She also developed a faculty and staff mentoring program to pair adults with at-risk students.

When data showed attendance was suffering from students' struggles with anxiety, she formed a small group focused on anxiety and coping skills, and she reached out to parents to discuss concerns, share strategies and stress the importance of daily attendance. Overall, participants decreased their absences by 36%.

Partnering with a local animal-assistance therapy nonprofit, Belisle has used therapy dogs when working with students with issues anxiety, behavioral difficulties, difficult family situations, peer relationships, self-esteem, parent deployment, anger and apathy toward school. The weekly sessions have been transformative, and she considers it one of the most impactful things she has done for students.

At the state level, she served on task forces to revise and rewrite the Alabama counseling and guidance state plan and to develop a career development model and guide for school counselors throughout the state. She regularly speaks to graduate and undergraduate students on school counseling topics.

Belisle is a licensed professional counselor and maintains a part-time private practice. She received her master's degree in marriage and family therapy from the University of Montevallo, where she is also on the counseling advisory board, and her bachelor's degree in psychology from Auburn University. She is a member of ASCA, the Alabama Counseling Association and the Alabama School Counselor Association, where she serves on the Professional Development Committee and helps plan the Critical Issues Conference.

Kathryn S. Bitner is Utah school counselor of the year and a school counselor and department chair at Draper Park Middle School, a suburban school in Draper, Utah, serving 1,639 students grades 6-8. She works with two other full-time and one part-time school counselor.



After a particularly memorable professional development experience where she had to put her hands in snow, Bitner strives to get students to "feel" the lesson. "This has impacted my entire career as I continue to learn through listening, observing, teaching, presenting, sharing and, in the end, understanding," she said. "Now, when I work with students, individually or in a classroom, I try to get them to experience the conversation or lesson "hands in."

For eighth-grade students, Bitner created a college and career field trip, where each student is given the opportunity to attend a college and career site during the spring. Collaborating with a teacher at a neighboring elementary school, Bitner created a service learning class/program where her students provided tutoring to younger children, promoting career exploration and social/emotional learning.

Supporting sixth- to eighth-grade students who failed three or more classes, Bitner and a school counseling colleague met with students, taught study skills, identified personal challenges, collaborated with teachers and worked with families, resulting in a 42% decrease in baseline data.

When incoming sixth-grade students showed an increase in anxiety, the school counseling team taught coping skills and presented a parent workshop to reinforce the skills at home. They also worked to close an achievement gap between African American students and white students, providing mentoring and home visits if necessary. As a result, African American students' Scholastic Reading Inventory increased by 26%, and the reading achievement gap decreased by 16%.

Bitner and her colleagues offer Crepes with the Counselors for school staff, where they provide a homemade crepe breakfast and professional development on suicide prevention, behavior interventions, school counselor roles and other needed information.

Bitner received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Utah Association for Career and Technical Education Guidance Division in 2018. She has a doctoral degree in counseling psychology and a master's degree in counseling from Brigham Young University. She is licensed school counselor, psychologist and teacher in the state of Utah. She is also an adjunct faculty member at Utah State University, where she designed and teaches a course on collaborative classroom instruction, leadership and professional Issues. She is a member of ASCA and the Utah School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Deborah Blume is South Carolina school counselor of the year and the school counselor at A.J. Whittenberg Elementary School, an urban school of 542 students in Greenville, S.C., where she provides school counseling services to students grades K-5. "Be it in classrooms, with staff, PTA, neighborhood associations, legislators, national and local television or social media, advocating for best practices in school counseling is my heart, my privilege and my pleasure," she said.



Blume has developed strong relationships with school board representatives and neighborhood associations to help spread the word about what school counselors do. She recently spoke to a panel of South Carolina state legislators, requesting they meet with the school counselors in their region and give top priority to funding for mental health education. She has also advocated with her U.S. senators about improving school counselor ratios and at an NBC education summit and teacher town hall in Phoenix, Ariz., which was covered by her local television affiliate. District ratios improved the following year.

When a former student, now an Eagle Scout, approached Blume about designing and developing a project, she saw an opportunity to align the project with selected ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors. They designed and built self-reflective, problem-solving stations on the playgrounds, with visual cues to reinforce lessons on calming down, expressing empathy and compassion, reporting bullying, solving problems, recognizing similarities and learning ways to play fair. The dedicated spaces offered a location to practice tools with real-world applications and have resulted in significant schoolwide engagement.

After standardized reading and math scores showed a continued achievement gap with African American students, Blume wanted to help students connect math and reading to their future success. She launched a Life Path speaker series and invited prominent African American professionals from the community to speak to all of the fifth-grade students, resulting in extraordinary interactions with students. She also designed Life Path Career Inspiration Days for fifth-graders to learn about financial literacy, career exploration and the postsecondary paths many people take, which offset student perceptions that people did one job for most of their lives.

Blume received her master's degree in counseling and guidance and bachelor's degree in education from New Mexico State University. She is leadership chair and a board member for the Palmetto State School Counselor Association. She is also a member of ASCA and regularly presents at annual conferences.

Lindsay Carlino is Louisiana school counselor of the year and is in her first year as Class of 2023 school counselor at St. Joseph's Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school in Baton Rouge, La., where she counsels 245 students. Prior to her work at St. Joseph's, Carlino was freshman class counselor and counseling department chair at St. Michael the Archangel High School, a suburban school in Baton Rouge serving 567 students, grades 9-12, where she worked with three other school counselors. "We act as advocates on behalf of all students each year to help them become the most successful versions of themselves possible," she said.



At St. Michael's, Carlino led a grassroots effort that shifted administrators' view from an antiquated guidance department, where most duties were administrative, disciplinary and clerical, to the school counseling department that exists today. This enabled the school counselors to initiate many programs that made them more visible and approachable to students, many of whom had never interacted with a school counselor.

When an African American student approached her with a concern that the school's hair policy was discriminatory, Carlino was instrumental in updating the policy, allowing the inclusion of African American hairstyles and giving more freedom of expression to African American students, particularly young women.

When survey data showed that only 54% of students knew how to calculate their GPA, Carlino implemented working lunches, where freshmen assigned to small groups met twice annually to learn to calculate their GPA and create an academic resume. She also spearheaded a makeover of the school's Career Day program, strategically transforming it from a perceived inconvenience into a successful, collaborative effort among administrators, faculty, the school counseling department, alumni, parents and community stakeholders. The program allows students to attend four 30-minute sessions on a career of their choosing, delivered by 50-60 community speakers working in diverse settings.

Carlino serves as a court-appointed special advocate for adolescent girls in foster care. She is a licensed professional counselor in Louisiana. Carlino received her master's degree in counselor education with a school counseling concentration from Southeastern Louisiana State University and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Louisiana State University. She is the founding member and president of the Diocese of Baton Rouge Catholic School Counselors Association and is a member of ASCA, the Louisiana School Counselor Association and the Louisiana Counseling Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Rachel Catlett is Nebraska school counselor of the year and is one of two school counselors at Westridge Middle School, a rural school in Grand Island, Neb., that serves 681 students, grades 6–8. “Advocating for the school counseling profession has been a passion of mine from the moment I realized I wanted to be a school counselor,” she said. “When we truly occupy the school counselor role, we are able to make a systematic impact in the lives of students.”



By providing information through posters, social media, newsletters and presentations, Catlett and her school counseling partner worked to increase knowledge of the school counseling program for staff, parents and students, going from little or no knowledge of the school counseling program to full awareness of the school counseling program and its benefits. Outreach activities also included setting up a “Rolls and Goals” table for staff members, offering breakfast rolls and the chance for staff members to learn about school counseling department goals and appropriate duties.

Using data from the school counseling needs assessment to structure a schedule and lessons, she developed a 15-minute daily home-room class taught by teachers. Students went from zero lessons per week to five lessons per week on topics such as organization, grades, social skills, teambuilding and mindfulness.

To encourage more student participation and to help students feel better connected, Catlett increased the number of school clubs by 75%, including a walk-a-thon to raise money for students with special needs. They also introduced their community-based instruction (CBI) students to the rest of the student body, providing lessons about their strengths, challenges and hobbies. As a result, students became better educated on the challenges some of their classmates face every day, and the CBI students felt welcomed and encouraged.

Catlett has taken a leadership role in the district, pushing for change on how bullying is reported and paving the way for comprehensive wellness plans. As her school’s representative on the district wellness committee, she changed district policy to include mental health wellness. Passionate about cultivating mindfulness in the classroom, Catlett recently attended an eight-week course that included a day of silent retreat where participants practiced mindfulness through yoga and meditation. She now leads small groups and offers lessons on mindfulness and stress reduction.

Catlett received her master’s degree in school counseling from the University of Nebraska – Omaha. She also received a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction from Doane University and has a bachelor’s in criminal justice from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. She is a member of ASCA and the Nebraska School Counseling Association.

Karen S. Cole is Virginia school counselor of the year and the director of school counseling at Lee-Davis High School in Mechanicsville, Va. Cole leads a team of one part-time and three full-time school counselors to serve the suburban school’s 1,465 students, grades 9–12. “The choice to align our school counseling program with the ASCA National Model set the stage for systemic change to begin,” she said. “Reflecting on authentic changes that have occurred is affirming and energizing as we look ahead to imagine even more growth for our students.”



Cole led RAMP efforts at her school, beginning conversations with her principal and exploring alignment of the school counseling program with the ASCA National Model. Collaboration efforts with staff played a critical role as the school counseling team developed the framework for RAMP goal setting, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and completing the RAMP application. Lee-Davis is now a RAMP school.

With budgets tight and professional development opportunities scarce, Cole for years participated in a group of 10 school counselors, three school psychologists and one school social worker in an endeavor that provided support and enhanced understanding of their various roles and populations served. Participants took turns researching topics of interest related to mental health and educational issues and shared them with colleagues at their monthly meetings.

Cole has campaigned fervently in her county to reduce caseload numbers so school counselors can provide increased awareness, prevention and services to address the ever-increasing mental health needs of students. For students having difficulties with attendance and getting to class on time, Cole and her team offered small-group sessions on anxiety and stress management, resulting in attendance improvements of 55.5% when compared with the month before the group began. A month later, 33% had maintained their improved attendance.

Enabling first-generation students to achieve their academic goal of graduating from a four-year college, Cole and her team provided supports including an orientation session, testimonials from role models and workshops focused on financial aid and freshman year expectations. Outcome data revealed that 64% of first-generation seniors applied to at least one four-year college compared with 55% the previous year.

Cole is pursuing post-master’s work in the professional counseling program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She received her Virginia secondary school counseling licensure from the University of Virginia and her master’s degree in vocational and community counseling from the University of Louisville. She has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Georgetown College. She is a member of ASCA, the Virginia School Counselor Association and the Virginia Counselors Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Amanda DeWulf is Iowa High school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at Maquoketa High School, a rural school in Maquoketa, Iowa, serving 497 students, grades 9-12. "I feel blessed to be part of a school community that supports school counselors and the work we do with students," DeWulf said. "I know that we are seen as an integral component that is necessary to meet the needs of our students."



When she arrived at Maquoketa, DeWulf worked with stakeholders to change the reactive school counseling culture to one that ensured all students had access to a developmental, data-informed program that met their diverse needs. Having led a previous school's RAMP efforts, DeWulf is leading the charge once again and hopes to apply for RAMP designation for Maquoketa within the next two years. Her program initiatives have resulted in increases in attendance and graduation rates, along with decreases in overall failure and retention rates.

To address her department's goal of increasing FAFSA completion rates, DeWulf and her colleague organized and implemented a post-secondary planning week that included a variety of activities to promote a college-going culture, such as a campaign in which all senior students completed one or more college applications, apprenticeship applications, job applications or resumes, and a weekly scholarship club to help students complete scholarship applications. As a result, FAFSA completions rates have increased from 56% to 70%.

As a member of her district leadership team, DeWulf participated in efforts to bring trauma-informed care to the district, with professional development opportunities for district school counselors on topic areas such as mindfulness, stress management, self-regulation, restorative justice and the effects of poverty on the brain.

DeWulf has served in a variety of leadership roles for the Iowa School Counselor Association (ISCA), including president and president elect, which enabled her to lead the initiative to hire a lobbyist to support school counselors, develop an evaluation supplement for administrators to use to support their evaluations of school counselors, and change the name from guidance counselor to professional school counselor in the Iowa Code.

DeWulf holds National Board Certification as a counselor and teacher. She received her master's degree in school counseling, a master's degree in special education and a bachelor's degree in elementary education, all from the University of Iowa. DeWulf is a member of ASCA and ISCA. She also holds memberships in numerous professional organizations including the National Education Association, the Iowa Association of College Admission Counselors, the Iowa Talented and Gifted Association and the Council for Exceptional Children.

Annick Downing is Arkansas high school counselor of the year and the lead school counselor at Springdale High School, a rural high school serving 2,000 students grades 10-12 in Springdale, Ark. Downing leads a diverse team of four school counselors, each with complementing strengths. "My story is my team's story," she said. "We are more powerful today because we empower each other."



She championed a strong school counseling team focused on innovation, social justice, advocacy, leadership and, above all else, students. Each school counselor has assumed a leadership role on committees within the school, ensuring the school counseling program has a seat at the table with all departments heads and principals to help shape the decisions affecting the student body.

In bringing about systemic change to the school, Downing worked to increase the visibility of the school counseling office and improve access to mental health. She campaigned for the addition of district social workers so school counselors could reduce the amount of time dedicated to social work needs, which resulted in the increase of social workers and full-time mental health counselors on campus. She also teamed with administrators and superintendents to develop a hybrid house/academy model that gives each student the benefits of a small schoolhouse in a large school setting.

Downing spearheaded the school's career fair, designed to show students opportunities that exist in the community and act as a catalyst in preparing them for future employment. More than 70 community businesses participate, and all students and community members are invited to attend. In the weeks before the fair, Downing worked with advisory teachers to incorporate career skills into their daily curriculum so students could build resumes, strengthen their interview etiquette, practice soft skills and review appropriate dress.

Channeling a deep passion for scholarships and financial aid, Downing frequently engages in discussions with community leaders about the importance of providing scholarship dollars and career opportunities. She collaborated with school counselors from other high schools to reach out to community members willing to donate scholarships. This led to frequent interactions with Chamber of Commerce members and the use of multiple media sources such as text messages, social media and local news stories on English and Spanish stations to reach stakeholders.

Downing holds a master's degree in counseling education from the University of Arkansas - Little Rock and a bachelor's degree in business administration from Henderson State University. She is a member of ASCA, the Arkansas School Counselor Association, the Arkansas Counseling Association and the Arkansas Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Rachel Drake is Nevada school counselor of the year and the lead school counselor at Vaughn Middle School in Reno, Nev., where she leads a team of two other school counselors to serve the urban school's 680 students grades 7-8. "I tell people that one of the reasons I love being a school counselor is because I get to have my hands in everything with one goal - to enhance my students' personal, academic and career development," Drake said. "This stretches from systemic planning to individual support in the moment."



For three schools, Drake helped to implement a coordinated career and life exploration curriculum. At Vaughn, she worked with a team of teachers and administrators to restructure their current program. They launched a schoolwide intervention period with coordinated curriculum, crafting 45 lessons related to career exploration and life planning and offering a districtwide career expo where eighth-grade students could speak with professionals and educators from secondary and postsecondary programs.

Part of her department's planning efforts involve prioritizing the school counseling program's influence among the many initiatives in her building and district, keeping students' developmental needs at the forefront of any discussion. Her team has provided leadership in analyzing data to identify students and families struggling with barriers to school attendance, using the three-tier system to identify which students need small-group intervention and who might benefit from an individual plan of support. School counselors run regular meetings for the student services staff, deliberately looking for options to ensure families have access to necessary supports.

At the district level, Drake's school counseling department has chosen to influence wide-sweeping priorities such as attendance policy reviews, social/emotional learning initiatives, sexual health education curriculum and online program policy discussions.

Drake has participated in board meetings and work sessions for the Nevada Board of Examiners for Marriage and Family Therapists and Clinical Professional Counselors, advocating for the school counseling profession as the board restructured and revised legislation.

Drake is a multiyear winner of the Washoe County Schools Parent Teacher Home Visit Educator Award. She holds numerous certifications, including her Nevada Educator License: K-12 Guidance Counselor, Spanish, CTE Family/Consumer Science; Nevada Clinical Professional Counselor; National Certified Counselor; and National Certified School Counselor. She received her master's degree in counseling from Eastern Michigan University and her bachelor's degree in secondary education from Central Michigan University. She is a member of ASCA, the Nevada School Counselor Association, the Washoe Education Association and the National Education Association.

Loyce A. Ellingrod is Wyoming school counselor of the year and the school counselor at two rural schools in Clearmont, Wyo., the Clearmont School, which serves 85 students, grades K-12, and Arvada Elementary School, which serves 10 students, grades K-4. "We strive to reach out to each student and help them develop into lifelong learners and responsible adults," Ellingrod said.



In developing her school counseling program, Ellingrod has aligned all classroom and small-group lessons to Wyoming standards and the ASCA National Model. She uses data and needs assessments to develop curriculum, provide school counseling activities, lead small groups, sponsor school counseling-based field trips and implement special events. She supervises an extended-day program for at-risk students who need extra help after school. The program meets three nights a week and provides teachers to work with students in their academic areas of need. Ellingrod teaches the elementary program, providing students with enrichment activities.

As part of a rural school district, Ellingrod works to bring outside resources to increase students' exposure to career opportunities. She initiated a job shadow program for juniors, contacting employers from the largest town in her county and collaborating with the local Chamber of Commerce to help arrange the day. Ellingrod arranged food and transportation for each student and had students complete a survey and write an essay about the event. Positive feedback led her to expand the program and include sophomores and seniors. Last year, 100% of sophomores, juniors and seniors attended the events. By the time they graduate, students now receive four job shadow opportunities.

Ellingrod frequently participates in a variety of professional development activities, learning strategies and techniques to help her students and collaborating and networking with other school counselors around her region and state. She recently enrolled in a nine-month program to empower educators with the knowledge, skills and connections to lead successful open education initiatives that will benefit students.

Ellingrod is a Wyoming certified K-12 school counselor and a certified careers service provider. She is also an adjunct professor at Sheridan College. Ellingrod received her master's degree in developmental counseling and school counseling and her bachelor's degree in vocational home economics education from Chadron State College. She is a member of ASCA, the Wyoming School Counselor Association, where she serves as high school representative and has hosted webinars, the Rocky Mountain Association of College Admissions and the Wyoming ACT State Council, where she has served as secretary and chair.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Elizabeth J. Embree is North Carolina school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at St. Stephens Elementary School in Conover, N.C., a suburban school serving 681 students, grades PK-6, with 100% of the students on free or reduced lunch. "I treasure my position as an elementary school counselor, and I hope my work continues to bring about systemic change for this profession," she said.



Embree works diligently to create connections and has built sustainable relationships with stakeholders, resulting in a quality rapport with students, staff and families that allows her to better advocate and guide them toward attaining their goals.

Transitioning from a school where she was the only school counselor, Embree quickly learned to utilize the strengths of a multidisciplinary team of two school counselors, a school nurse and a school social worker. To serve lower-performing students from homes stricken by poverty, she took professional development courses to sharpen her focus in areas such as whole-brain engagement, toxic stress and resiliency to adverse childhood experiences.

She collaborates with the student services department to deliver highly engaged indirect services to staff, specialists, families and community agencies to ensure students receive high-quality support in return. For one indirect service, Embree wrote and received a \$5,000 grant to increase structured play options on the playground, decreasing office referrals due to disengaged youth from 70 to 15. She also leads the process to identify student deficits, establish interventions and request further evaluation when appropriate.

After the schools' data profile indicated a need to improve overall proficiency in reading, math and science, Embree and her colleague created the Own It Challenge to increase student accountability and ownership of their academic performance and reduce student apathy toward school. Collaborating with families, staff and community members, they developed student participation incentives, tracked performance data and percentile rank goals, conducted coaching sessions, created motivational videos, taught lessons on percentile ranks, goal setting and test prep strategies. They hosted a block party celebration for students who achieved their goals. As a result, proficiency increased from 53% the previous year to 61%, creating systemic change in student self-worth and academic independence.

Embree is certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and received her add-on licensure in school administration from Appalachian State University. She holds a master's degree in counseling and a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a second major in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is a member of ASCA and the North Carolina School Counselor Association.

Erica Germani is Pennsylvania elementary school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Robert D. Wilson Elementary School in Waymart, Pa. The rural school serves 284 students, PK-5. "I am continually striving to become a better counselor, professional and person," she said.



Her school counseling program received RAMP designation in January 2019, after Germani built the program from the ground up. She developed schoolwide programs, lessons and support groups, requiring extensive collaboration, advocacy and buy-in with teachers and the administrator. Throughout the process, she continued to share data, needs and student progress.

At the state level, Germani works to create awareness of the ASCA National Model and to gain legislative support in mandating a school counselor ratio for Pennsylvania, which does not currently mandate school counselors. She met with state senators to discuss new legislation that would mandate the recommended 250:1 ratio.

Recently, Germani was spending up to 30% of her time providing crisis response to three students, stemming from a lack of services for the school's emotional support programs. She met with stakeholders, offering realistic solutions such as increasing the amount of time the school social worker spent in the building, approving additional days for the school-based therapist and possibly restructuring or relocating the emotional support classrooms. Due in large part to her advocacy efforts, the emotional support classrooms were moved to another elementary school, and a behavior specialist was hired specifically for those programs, providing needed support for students and reducing Germani's time spent in crisis response to 2.3%.

Each year, Germani mentors a group of selected fifth-grade students who develop projects to spread kindness to the community. She also spearheaded and implemented a bully prevention initiative, targeting hotspots such as the playground and P.E. class. As a result, bullying on the bus was reduced from 41% to 29%; bullying on the playground decreased by 25% and in PE class by 86%. Bullying behavior among male students decreased by 39%. Students who reported they felt a sense of community/belonging in the school increased from 58% to 67%.

Germani received her master's degree in clinical psychology and her elementary school counselor certification from Marywood University. She received her bachelor's degree in biopsychology from Cedar Crest College. Germani has taught a graduate-level school counseling course at Marywood University, where she serves on the counseling program advisory council. She is a member of ASCA; the School Counselors of Northeastern Pennsylvania, where she serves as president elect; and the Pennsylvania School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Josh Godinez is California school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Centennial High School in Corona, Calif. Godinez is one of eight school counselors serving the suburban school's 3,150 students, grades 9-12. "I am excited to be working with a team that believes in the ASCA National Model and has consistently worked together to create a comprehensive, data-informed program," he said.



Godinez worked with team members to fine-tune their ASCA National Model practices, resulting in the department embracing a truly data-informed program where they look at data, design programs, run results reports and assess effectiveness. As he led the preparations for RAMP, Godinez coordinated the creation of an advisory council, overcoming initial uncertainty by stakeholders and increasing collaboration and communication with staff, parents, students and the community.

The new methods of data collection, evaluation and program modifications led to improvements in eighth-grade transition meetings; relations between staff and school counselors; and senior graduations checks, follow-ups and end-of-year checkouts. Using filing data and targeted campaigns, Godinez revamped the financial aid mindset on campus by helping students and families understand the benefits of financial aid, resulting in a 6% growth in filing the first year of the program.

Godinez helped found and coordinate the California School Counseling Association (CSCA) Policy, Advocacy, and Legislative Committee and works with lobbyists to support school counselors' work. He is also helping develop a statewide support framework for students, as well as working toward state initiatives to improve data-informed practices.

Godinez received his master's degree in education from Claremont Graduate University and his bachelor's degree in political science and administrative studies from the University of California - Riverside. He is a member of ASCA, the California Teachers Association and CASC, where he serves as president elect.

Nita Hill is Washington school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Woodland Elementary School in Puyallup, Wash., a suburban school that serves 760 students grades K-6. Hill's school counseling program is the only RAMP-recognized elementary school in the state of Washington, a statistic she's working to improve. "Over the years my belief in the importance of comprehensive counseling programs has led me to be a state-level trainer reaching dozens of school districts across our state," she said.



After district-level efforts to implement the ASCA Model stalled, Hill developed a school counselor professional development needs assessment survey, which indicated a desire to learn more about using data to set and monitor goals. Hill created an action plan that resulted in all 44 school counselors being able to write goals in SMART goal format.

Hill was part of a team that successfully sponsored a bill to statutorily define the role of a school counselor in the state. She also helped convince legislators to include school counselors as a distinct part of basic education within the state's prototypical schools model. When proposed funding cuts threatened area elementary school counseling positions, Hill's advocacy efforts inspired parents and administrators to speak out against, and prevent, the cuts. She intentionally cultivated a relationship with her district level supervisor to share research about the positive impact on student success with access to a full-time school counselor.

When data showed her district had a 20% chronic absenteeism rate, she advocated for a building-level focus on attendance. To reach targeted attendance goals, Hill built multitiered systems of support that meet state expectations and provide students and parents with interventions.

Hill is a National Board-certified teacher in the component area of school counseling and is an adjunct faculty member at City University, where she shares school counseling best practices with the next generation of school counselors. She also works as the elementary school coordinator to facilitate professional development and system support for school counselors in her district.

Hill received her master's degree in school counseling from City University and her bachelor's degree in human services from Western Washington University. She is a member of ASCA and the Washington State School Counselor Association, where she serves as chair of the Advocacy Committee.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Alicia Jackson is Kansas school counselor of the year and is in her first year as lead school counselor and career readiness facilitator for Olathe Public Schools in Olathe, Kan. Last year, she was lead school counselor at Olathe West High School, a suburban school serving 1,350 students, grades 9-12. "I am honored to advocate for our roles in schools and how school counselors are critical to the holistic development of students," she said.



As part of her advocacy efforts, Jackson has developed and implemented comprehensive programming to meet state counseling standards and has served on numerous district committees. In February 2018, she and some colleagues met the governor of Kansas for the signing of a proclamation honoring National School Counseling Week.

Using the ASCA National Model for guidance, Jackson collaborated with a K-12 school counseling team to develop districtwide school counseling program beliefs, mission and vision. The group effort of 86 school counselors created a common message for families and drives the district's work in school counseling programming.

As lead school counselor, Jackson's biggest goal is to establish the tone for her program, modeling hard work and flexibility. She strives to consciously attend to the strengths of her team when deciding who is going to spearhead topics, programs and standards. At Olathe West, a new, public high school, Jackson collaborated with staff to build an inclusive environment that embraced systematic change in traditional education. She located school counselor offices out in the building within grade-level communities, rather than off to the side, which resulted in greatly increased student access.

Her favorite collaborative program is Give-a-Hoot, a project-based learning lesson facilitated through a student-driven advisory program. Classes research philanthropies, local agencies and groups to determine areas of need and develop a plan of support and action. A schoolwide assembly includes community members, philanthropy contacts and district officials to share and celebrate experiences.

Jackson is a Ph.D. candidate in counselor education and supervision at Kansas State University. Also from Kansas State University, Jackson received a master's degree in school counseling as well as bachelor's degrees in family and consumer sciences education, and in family life and community services. She is licensed professional school counselor in Kansas and Missouri. She is a member of ASCA, the Kansas Counseling Association and the Kansas School Counselor Association, where she served as the 2019 president. She is a past member of the Missouri School Counselor Association and the 2012-2013 Missouri secondary school counselor of the year.

Natali L. Jones is Alaska school counselor of the year and the itinerant school counselor at six rural schools in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District: Homer FLEX High School (9-12), Nanwalek School (K-12), Nikolaevsk School (K-12), Port Graham School (K-12), Susan B. English School (K-12) and Chapman School (K-8). All students receive free or reduced lunch. "At my rural sites equity and opportunity are not comparable to that of larger communities," Jones said. "My students deserve all the opportunities that other students have; I believe it is a process that can eventually be attained with continued advocacy, leadership and collaboration in order to make a difference for students."



Flying to work three days a week and driving the other two, Jones travels to two Alaska Native village schools, a Russian Orthodox village school, a township school, an alternative high school, as well as one school on consult. In building a school counseling program to meet the specific needs of this diverse student population, she follows a multicultural and trauma-informed perspective that aligns with the community vision and framework.

With populations at high risk of suicide, Jones provides crisis responsive services in each location, including suicide threat assessments and self-injurious behavior assessments. She delivers training to destigmatize mental health challenges and fosters strong community relationships for times when these potentially life-threatening or other needs arise.

She and her administrator spearheaded a campaign to identify highly certified teachers in her district who were willing to provide classes live over video. With student input, they launched four courses offered at the high school level, allowing students to interact with peers across the district and receive content in science, language arts, math and social studies.

After addressing potential barriers with students and parents, she increased 9-12 grade participation in a full day of sexual health and wellness programming at Nanwalek, Nikolaevsk, Port Graham and Susan B. English by 37.15%. Jones facilitated classroom lessons on scholarships, resulting in seniors at Nikolaevsk increasing their Alaska Performance Scholarship eligibility by 87.5%. Partnering with an Anchorage-based nonprofit, she identified students in need and ensured that 100% of shoe requests were filled for K-12 students.

Jones received a master's degree in school/community counseling from the University of Fairbanks and a bachelor's degree in journalism and Spanish from the University of Oregon. She is a member of ASCA, the National Education Association and the Alaska School Counselor Association, where she served on the board for five years.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Tara Kierstead is Maine school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Hall-Dale Middle/High School, a suburban school in Farmingdale, Maine, that serves 684 students, grades 6-12. "I always strive to put my best face forward and make my profession proud," said Kierstead, "As I am certainly very proud to be able to wake up every morning and do this job."



To meet the challenges of implementing a comprehensive school counseling program while being the sole school counselor, Kierstead works to ensure her students come first. She attempts to be the embodiment of hope for her students, showing them they have the power to make their lives better, helping them find their path and letting them know someone at school is available to help them.

Collaborating with the middle school P.E. teacher and garnering community support, Kierstead established a 100% self-funded snack pantry and weekend backpack program for both the middle and high school, providing 3,000 snacks a year and sending home approximately 200 food bags a year. Parent volunteers pick up the food, and student groups unload the food and pack the bags. The school holds several holiday food drives to benefit the program, and multiple student groups help raise funds yearly.

Kierstead wrote the newly passed school board policy for supporting students who are transgender and gender expansive, after consulting with local and national-level lawyers and LGBTQ organizations. She is tasked with training all 500+ staff in her district on the policy and how best to support students. The inclusive policy is the most comprehensive in the state and is being considered for adoption by other districts. As a result of her advocacy efforts, she was awarded Maine's 2018 LGBTQ Youth Educator of the Year.

Kierstead has her Maine school counselor certification and is a National Certified Counselor. She received her master's degree in school counseling from the University of Southern Maine and her bachelor's degree in child development and family relations from the University of Maine. She is a member of ASCA and has served on several committees. She is also a member of the Maine School Counselor Association, where she has been a board member since graduate school.

Jill Marie Kuppel is New Jersey school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Estell Manor School, a rural elementary school in Estell Manor, N.J., serving 184 students, grades K-8. "I wholeheartedly believe in the positive effects that a comprehensive school counseling program has on student achievement and overall development," she said.



Kuppel's program received RAMP designation in 2018, just a few years after she began collecting data that reflected the impact of her school counseling program and advocating with the superintendent to evolve her part-time teacher/part-time school counselor role into a full-time school counselor position. She recently assisted with ASCA's first RAMP Fair, answering questions from schools actively pursuing the RAMP designation.

She has led a number of initiatives to create systemic change at Estell Manor, such as using data to implement a schoolwide SEL program; establishing a school counseling advisory council; revising the school counselor's schedule to include periods designated for school counseling; and developing clear goals to address gaps in achievement, attendance and behavior. Kuppel also chairs several stakeholder committees for her school and district, including the School Counseling Advisory Council, the School Safety/Climate Team for Bullying Awareness and Prevention, and Intervention and Referral Services.

When the advisory council set a goal to promote responsible digital citizenship, Kuppel launched an effort with her neighboring school district to build a cyber-safety and social media awareness program. The advisory council and administration put an action plan in place, including researching a variety of digital citizenship programs that would reach all stakeholders involved, previewing programs, requesting multi-district funding, inviting stakeholder participation and organizing a schedule.

Kuppel holds numerous certifications, including New Jersey director of school counseling services standard, New Jersey principal certificate of eligibility, New Jersey supervisory standard certificate and New Jersey student personnel services standard certificate. She received a master's degree in student personnel services from Rowan University and her bachelor's degree in social work from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association and the Cape Atlantic School Counselor Association, where she serves as president.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Jamie Metcalf is Idaho school counselor of the year and the secondary counselor at Rimrock Jr. Sr. High School, a rural school in Bruneau, Idaho, serving 180 students, grades 6-12. "My voice is heard because I have built trust with the administration, school board, community members and our students," she said. "With our positive culture and climate shift and intentional system change we are encouraging students to have hope and plan for successful futures."



When she started at Rimrock, Metcalf discovered the importance of school counseling had been lost among stakeholders due to high turnover of school counselors. She worked with the high school principal and district superintendent to completely rewrite the secondary school counselor job description, which has since been approved by the school board and is the model of direct and indirect student services for future school counselors.

To combat a common belief that students in her rural school weren't college material or couldn't achieve beyond a rural community, Metcalf stressed the importance of meeting state personal learning plan requirements and for the overall importance of student achievement and goal setting. She updated the school's student information system to better track student data, including test scores, graduation requirements and extracurricular activities, all of which helped students advocate for themselves. She has also led efforts to write a district college and career mentor plan, including curriculum choices and ways to appropriate the budget. The plan focuses on self-awareness, exploration, analysis, goal-setting and planning.

Using her background in criminal justice, Metcalf has gained a professional platform to work with students who are facing the criminal justice system. Having studied chemical dependency counseling and worked with at-risk youth and adults, she advocates in front of the school board on behalf of students, expressing her understanding of behaviors due to addiction. Additional student advocacy efforts include interventions for at-risk populations, dropout prevention and special education support.

Metcalf is an Idaho state certified k-12 school counselor and an ASCA U Legal and Ethical Specialist and Bully Prevention Specialist. She earned her master's degree in school counseling from Long Island University, a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from the University of New Haven and has completed credits toward an associate degree in chemical dependency counseling from Westchester Community College. She is a member of ASCA and the Idaho School Counselor Association.

Sandra Mortensen is Minnesota school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Oak Grove Middle School in Bloomington, Minn. Mortensen works with one other school counselor serving the needs of the suburban school's 805 students, grades 6-8. "My counseling program is flexible, responsive and invites change based on current research and best practices," Mortensen said. "It calls on me to lead and grow and to share my learning with others."



She has advocated for numerous school counseling initiatives, including program funding; professional development opportunities for school counselors; and a districtwide, systematic review of school counseling standards, which led to the implementation of the ASCA National Model.

Mortensen helped unify the school counseling programming in the district's three middle schools, with 100% of students receiving school counseling classroom instruction. To align with Minnesota state law regarding college and career programming, Mortensen collaborated with stakeholders to create a districtwide, comprehensive curriculum. An advocate for the learning, health and well-being of students and staff, Mortensen co-authored and implemented grant-funded programming related to wellness opportunities and mindfulness strategies, including staff-led restorative practices such as yoga, a monthly coffee bar and simple strategies to promote stress relief.

Serving on multiple district task forces, workgroups and committees, Mortensen addresses student needs such as assessing available programming and transitioning to postsecondary education. She has led state Department of Education training sessions on intervention strategies and providing curriculum and resources designed to address anxiety and depression and executive functioning deficits in gifted students.

Mortensen is a licensed school counselor. She received her master's degree in school counseling from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls and a bachelor's degree in secondary education from the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. She is a member of ASCA and the Minnesota School Counselor Association, where she serves as vice president for the middle school and junior high division and is a member of the Professional Development Committee.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Angie Niforos is Michigan school counselor of the year and a school counselor and department chair at Brownell Middle School in Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich. She works with a part-time school counselor to serve the needs of the suburban school's 551 students grades 6-8. "Building relationships with my students and collaborating with my colleagues to ensure that students have their academic and social/emotional needs met is my top priority," Niforos said.



After implementing the ASCA National Model at Brownell, Niforos coordinated her program's application for RAMP designation and has implemented data-informed practices to strengthen districtwide school counseling practices and programs. She is also a RAMP reviewer and a guest lecturer at Oakland University, presenting RAMP practices and the application process to graduate students.

She has implemented restorative practices in the school and takes preventive actions to identify struggling learners and provide interventions to improve academic achievement. Niforos collaborated with administrators and teachers to launch the school's first career day, which featured 30 guest speakers on a variety of career paths. She and her school counselor colleague facilitate groups focusing on new students, girl empowerment and academic study skills.

Niforos actively attends community lectures and forums on topics involving mental health, social media, cyberbullying, crisis management and suicide prevention. She also participated in several weeks of mindfulness training to help students develop coping techniques. As her district reconfigures its middle schools from a 6-8 model to a 5-8 model, including some school closures, Niforos provides input from the school counseling perspective, especially addressing students' social/emotional needs.

Niforos is a licensed professional counselor. She holds a doctorate in counseling from Oakland University. She received her education specialist certification and master's degree in guidance and counseling from Eastern Michigan University. She also has a master's degree in educational psychology and a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Michigan. She is a member of ASCA, the Michigan School Counselor Association and several Greek Orthodox philanthropic organizations.

Raemie N. Pagaduan is

Hawaii school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Nānākuli High and Intermediate School in Waianae, Hawaii, on the island of O'ahu, where she works with six other school counselors to serve the rural school's 1,032 students grades 7-12. "Throughout my professional career, my mission has been to be the advocate for the minority and marginalized and hopefully put them in places of power," Pagaduan said. "This will effect change, and these are the voices we need to be sitting in high places making decisions and changing the world."



Pagaduan worked to increase scholarship award amounts for students by advocating for computers they could use to complete college and scholarship applications and by making many of the scholarships available online and downloadable. She held financial aid nights and participated in a statewide campaign to increase FAFSA completion rates. With her college partner, Pagaduan created a group that brings together all high schools, programs and colleges that service the Waianae community to focus on financial aid efforts. Pagaduan also collaborates with scholarship organizations to provide college funding to students.

To assist students with college enrollment, many of whom would be first-generation college students, Pagaduan implemented a college application week for students and parent nights. She advocated for and coordinated early college and dual credit programs with area colleges, including offering classes on campus and summer programs. She also created a website that assists students with early college enrollment. Her efforts resulted in an increased early college enrollment from 3% to 18%.

Pagaduan teaches breathing and calming techniques to students in need of coping mechanisms. Taking inspiration from the Hawaiian phrase, "E Aloha Kekahi i Kekahi," which is a call to do everything in love, Pagaduan participates in the "choose love" initiative on campus. She is also enrolled in a program to help students create peaceful resolutions to problems in their lives and the world.

Pagaduan earned her master's degree in counseling psychology from Chaminade University, a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and an associate degree of liberal arts from Leeward Community College. She is a member of ASCA, the Hawaii School Counselor Association and the National Association for College Admission Counseling.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Jennifer Reuchlen is Wisconsin school counselor of the year and a school counselor and the department chair at Burlington High School in Burlington, Wis., where she leads a team of three other school counselors to serve the rural school's 1,084 students, grades 9-12. "I am proud of my team and our school counseling program in serving all students," she said. "Whatever the situation, I am foremost an advocate for each student."



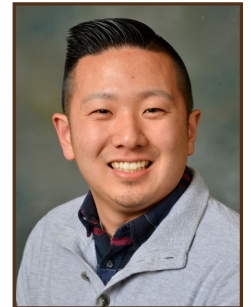
As department chair, Reuchlen mentors new school counselors and cultivates a sense of ownership by all. She leads the team's RAMP efforts, with a submission goal of October 2020. Since becoming department chair, she has requested and been granted funding for her school counselors to attend the Wisconsin School Counselor Association (WSCA) annual conference, cover ASCA dues and complete organizational tasks. Her department conducts academic and career planning conferences to build rapport, recognize student strengths and interests, provide resources for high school success and build connections with families. Each student receives a four-year pathway of study related to a career cluster of interest and entry requirements, enabling pragmatic connections to postsecondary goals.

Reuchlen and her team have been instrumental in providing equitable services for transgender students, including developing disclosure policies and advocating that a set of accessible staff bathrooms with unisex signage be allocated for use by all students. They have also worked closely with district personnel to procure on-site access to mental health counselors and have partnered with a virtual school to provide online learning opportunities for students experiencing severe anxiety or other medical conditions making attendance difficult.

Reuchlen spearheaded the completion of the Wisconsin School Counseling Program Accountability Report, a continuous improvement document sponsored by WSCA highlighting student outcome data and school counseling program goals. As part of WSCA's Afternoon on the Hill, Reuchlen met with state legislators to discuss the role of school counselors and the allocation of state funding.

Reuchlen has Wisconsin licensures as a professional educator, Pre-K-12 school counselor and PDP team member - pupil services peer in Wisconsin. She has a master's degree in counseling with a specialization in school counseling and a bachelor's in psychology and theology from Marquette University. She is a member of ASCA, the Ripon College Admissions Office Advisory Council, the Wisconsin Association of College Admission Counseling and WSCA.

Michael P. Ryan is West Virginia school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Mountainview Elementary in Morgantown, W.Va. He is one of two school counselors at the urban school that serves 700 students, grades K-8. "I honestly believe that the school counselor position is the heart and soul of the school," Ryan said. "The school goes as the school counselor does."



In advocating for school counseling, Ryan makes sure parents are involved and understand the things that are being done within the school counseling program, helping them to see the difference between the guidance counselor they grew up with and the school counselors of today. As an integral part of the school's leadership team, Ryan utilizes professional development opportunities to bring new and innovative ideas to make his school better and help students in the best ways possible, such as sharing knowledge about how the brain functions, the effects of trauma and poverty on students and their development, and how students struggle with emotional regulation.

To identify student needs and help determine appropriate interventions, Ryan has teachers complete whole-class screeners on students. The data collected from the screeners helps Ryan advocate for changes that need to be made or the supports that need to be put in place for students. He used the data to support the idea for a universal schoolwide data wall that will look at the whole student academically and socially/emotionally.

Ryan also spearheaded a mentoring program at Mountainview, sitting down with the leadership team to discuss students' need to have more positive individuals in their lives. He reached out to the school's feeder high school and worked out a mentoring program where students would learn ways to build positive relationships, empathy and compassion. Based on student biographies, he paired high school mentors with at-risk students selected from school counselor screener results. Mentors spent 30-40 minutes with students twice a month for a year. Because of the mentoring they received, students became more confident and outgoing and had fewer issues in the classroom and fewer office referrals.

Ryan is a nationally certified counselor and has his K-12 school counseling certification in Pennsylvania and Virginia. He also has a sports counseling certification. Ryan received his educational leadership certification degree from Salem International University. He also has a master's degree in education from California University of Pennsylvania and a bachelor's degree in psychology from West Virginia University. He is a member of ASCA and the West Virginia School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Monica S. Sawyer is New Hampshire school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Gilford High School, a rural school in Gilford, N.H., serving 497 students, grades 9-12. She works with one other full-time school counselor and a half-time school and college readiness coordinator. "My passion is using mindfulness techniques in schools," Sawyer said. "The impact has been scientifically proven that practices such as yoga, guided meditation and breathing exercises can have on emotional regulation."



As a long-time member of the community, Sawyer has forged deep relationships with parents, students and community members. When she became a school counselor after being a foreign language teacher, she developed a mantra that she would earn respect one individual at a time, researching innovative programming and seeking to understand the individual needs of every student. Her son's battle with cancer made her more acutely aware of how each student deserved dignity and respect and someone who would advocate for them. Delivering the keynote graduation speech just two weeks after she finished her own chemotherapy while working full-time, Sawyer demonstrated that she was a role model of strength and endurance for her students.

Sawyer has introduced positive psychology and mindfulness to all students during advisories and empowered students with an understanding of neuroplasticity and their ability to emotionally self-regulate. When the school suffered a tragic loss due to suicide, the school counseling department became involved in suicide prevention efforts, with Sawyer spearheading an initiative to obtain grant money to run a wellness fair during which many outside practitioners came to the high school to promote healthy lifestyle choices and practices. The fair was such a success that Sawyer expanded it and implemented Wellness Wednesdays, where more than 200 students learned healthy coping strategies, such as the benefits of yoga, guided meditation and other methods of bringing the mind back into the body. She also created a wellness center where she teaches yoga and meditation each week during lunch and before school for students and staff, working with the special education department and occupational therapist for input on how to make the center accessible and comfortable for those with sensory issues.

Sawyer has New Hampshire certification in the areas of school counseling and German. She has gained national certification as a yoga instructor. She is also a mindfulness educator through the National Psychotherapy Association and a registered mindfulness-based stress reduction teacher. She has a master's degree in school counseling from Notre Dame College, a Spanish certification from the Universidad de Salamanca in Spain and a bachelor's degree in economics and German from Clark University. She is a member of ASCA and the New Hampshire School Counselor Association.

Jim Shaw is New York school counselor of the year and a school counselor and department chair at Hudson Falls Middle School, a rural school in Hudson Falls, N.Y., serving serves 551 students, grades 6-8. "I dare say that there is not a committee in the school district that does not rely on a school counselor's insight, advocacy and relationships with the student body," Shaw said. "Our current administration supports the role of the school counselor and has made us a visible and equal voice in the decision-making process."



Until recently, Shaw's school district did not recognize the school counseling department the way they recognized other departments. He vigorously championed for a chairperson to advocate for student mental health needs and school counselors, working hard to make connections and show how important the work of the school counselor is to the students and community. The administration recognized the importance of the social/emotional needs of students and Shaw was named department chair. He now serves on various district leadership teams and committees, providing input for students needs and representing school counselors. His current advocacy efforts include adding more school counselors and support staff to increase student access to a social and mental health professional. Shaw and his colleagues regularly evaluate their school counseling programs and practices to demonstrate program effectiveness in measurable terms using immediate, intermediate and long-range data to show the impact on students and student performance. These results are also used to inform the ongoing evolution of the school counseling program.

Shaw completed a regional teacher leadership program that helped develop his leadership style and organization and communication skills, which proved invaluable as he endorsed and advocated for his school counseling department and students. Workshops and training on the effects of trauma and poverty have been especially worthwhile and relevant to his work as a school counselor, allowing him to keep pace with the evolving emotional and mental health issues of the school community.

He collaborated with an invested committee of school counselors, building administrators, the assistant superintendent and teachers to launch a responsive program to meet the specific needs of ninth-grade students identified as at-risk through behavior, academics and attendance concerns. As some students had endured various stages of trauma where a traditional high school experience was not appropriate, they designed a special delivery model. The program resulted in reduced school referrals and increased attendance and credit accumulation, with many students now on track to graduate.

Shaw is a national certified counselor and has his New York state permanent certification in school counseling K-12. He is also an ASCA U Trauma and Crisis Management Specialist. Shaw received his certificate of advanced study in school counseling, master's degree in education and bachelor's in psychology from SUNY College at Plattsburgh. He is a member of ASCA and New York School Counselor Association



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Dina Sibilia is Massachusetts school counselor of the year and a school counselor at West Springfield High School in West Springfield, Mass. She is one of eight school counselors who serve the suburban school's 1,234 students grades 9-12. Nicknamed "data Dina," Sibilia encourages colleagues to delve deeper into data to support their school counseling initiatives. "I am always pushing data within the department," she said.



When data showed her school did not have a strong school counseling culture, she successfully advocated for change on how school counselors were viewed and utilized at her school. She presented to the Massachusetts School Counselor Association (MSCA) conference on how to develop relationships with administrators, be accepted into classrooms and become a leader in the school.

To decrease dropout rates, she provided data showing the positive impact of outreach programming, resulting in alternative pathways to getting a diploma such as evening school, programs with community colleges and support for students with social/emotional needs. She implemented strategies for improving the attendance rate for a cohort of at-risk students from 89% to 93%. She also developed strategies for decreasing the retention rate in ninth grade from 30% to less than 10%.

Sibilia holds numerous ASCA U Specialist credentials, including College Admissions, Career Development, Closing the Achievement Gap, Cultural Competency and Bullying Prevention. She has a master's and bachelor's degree in psychology from Westfield State University. She is a member of ASCA, MSCA and the Western Massachusetts Counselors Association, where she serves on the board as recording secretary.

Tracey L. Spain is Maryland school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Hilltop Elementary School, a Title 1 suburban school serving a diverse population of 700 students grades PK-5 in Glen Burnie, Md., with 80% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. "The amazing students and families I serve are children of migrants, students who are first-generation Americans, low income or, unfortunately, homeless," she said.



Spain strongly advocates that all of her students have equal access to educational opportunities, regardless of economic status. To assist low-income families, she organized a backpack program so students could obtain school supplies. She also partnered with a local agency to increase the funding for a school social worker from a part-time to a full-time position.

Recognizing that many of her students had the potential to be first-generation college students, Spain launched a career and college week to give parents and students ample opportunities to hear about various careers from guest speakers. She provided computer lab access so students transitioning to middle school could complete online magnet school applications.

Her school counseling program received RAMP designation in 2013. She serves as a site supervisor for eight interns, mentors new school counselors in her cluster and regularly shares insights with other elementary school counselors, teachers and administrators on topics such as incorporating social/emotional learning practices. She serves on the school's leadership team, providing needs assessment results and data to help drive decisions.

Spain holds a master's degree in school counseling from Loyola University Maryland and a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Bowie State University. She is a National Board certified teacher and has an administration certificate from McDaniel College. Spain is a member of ASCA and the Maryland School Counselor Association, where she serves as vice president of elementary school counselors.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Joy Squitieri is Connecticut school counselor of the year and a school counselor at John Read Middle School in Redding, Conn. She works with one other school counselor to serve the suburban school's 386 students grades 5-8 and demonstrate the vital role of school counselors in the lives of students. "Any opportunity for a school counselor to present and share their work with the greater school community is an opportunity to prove the importance of the school counselor and advocate for the profession," Squitieri said.



Through Squitieri's efforts, the school counseling program is now embedded throughout her school. She created a website, Instagram page and Twitter account to ensure school counseling initiatives can be readily shared. She has also presented at education conferences and to administrators and the PTA about the role of the school counselor. By revamping transition programs into and out of middle school, Squitieri tripled the number of orientation activities for incoming sixth-grade students and created opportunities for eighth-grade students to have access to more high school transition programs.

Squitieri spearheaded and secured funding to implement a student-led social/emotional program, developed by a parent who lost his son at Sandy Hook Elementary School, that selects leaders to deliver experiential learning to all students and create a positive school climate. She participates in a regional crisis team that shares useful resources in the wake of national news-making school crises. She has also championed restorative practices at the school, resulting in students being able to remain in the classroom rather than automatically being sent to the office.

She has professional school counseling and intermediate administration certifications in Connecticut and her New York permanent school counseling certification. Squitieri received her sixth-year degree in educational administration and supervision from the University of Bridgeport, her master's degree in school counseling and development from Long Island University and her bachelor's degree in applied economics and management from Cornell University. She is a member of ASCA and the Connecticut School Counselor Association.

Megen Stair is Florida school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Park Vista Community High School in Lake Worth, Fla. She and a team of five other school counselors serve the suburban school's 3,090 students grades 9-12. "We are advocates for our students, our program and our profession," Stair said. "Our office is open to students every day before school, during lunch and after school, with no appointment necessary."



Stair prepared the school counseling department's RAMP application, resulting in the program achieving RAMP designation and drawing community attention to the important work of school counselors. A technology proponent, Stair designed and manages the school counseling department's website and social media accounts, enabling her to showcase programs, such as tweeting seniors "signing" their intentions for after high school and tagging stakeholders. When Stair planned lessons on how to read a report card and how GPA is calculated, she delivered them to all freshman simultaneously through a live feed and later posted to YouTube for parents to access.

With her colleagues, Stair offered targeted interventions to help students understand graduation requirements, the importance of college and career readiness, and strategies for success, resulting in graduation rates improving from 95.2% to 98.8%. She also helped students see accelerated curriculum as attainable rather than exclusive, resulting in more students completing college preparatory work, graduating with dual enrollment coursework and scoring higher on college entrance exams.

In response to a rise in students affected by stress and anxiety disorders, Stair completed the ASCA U Anxiety and Stress Management Specialist course. She also became a certified clinical educator to host practicum and internship students. Stair received her master's degree in counseling psychology with a school guidance specialization from Palm Beach Atlantic University and a bachelor's degree in social science with a secondary education certification from Stetson University. She is a member of ASCA and is a RAMP reviewer. She is also a member of the Florida School Counselor Association and the Palm Beach School Counseling Association, where she serves as advocacy co-chair and was recently named high school counselor of the year.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Ron Swier is South Dakota school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Avalon School District 4-1, a rural school in Avon, S.D., serving 240 students, grades K-12. "I am grateful for having the opportunity not only to guide my students' development in fulfilling their best academically but more importantly by working with each one of my students to encourage a lifelong character foundation that focuses on trust, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship," he said.



Inspired by a Martin Luther King Jr. quote about the function of education, Swier strives to help his students develop a positive character that will last a lifetime as well. To decrease the number of negative behaviors, Swier teaches an educational program with first- through sixth-graders that focuses on building character. After discussing each character pillar, students watch motivational videos and then discuss personal experiences of how they exhibited each specific positive behavior. Classroom activities follow. By year's end, teachers and staff reported a marked improvement in overall student behavior. For high school students, Swier initiated a student-of-the-quarter contest, calculating the award on GPA and attendance for the quarter. The winner receives a designated school parking spot along with a poster with the student's photo displayed in the school lunchroom.

To inform students and their families about financial aid, scholarships and future employment opportunities, Swier has organized annual financial aid nights and career fairs. He also provides one-on-one career counseling sessions. During the 2018-2019 school year, 10 students in a class of 15 received higher education scholarships totaling \$270,000. Three of his students were chosen over 1,000 applicants nationwide as three of 365 recipients to receive the Build Dakota Scholarship, which funds tuition and fees to enter a critical needs workforce.

Swier was a finalist for the South Dakota Governor's Volunteer of the Year Award. He has a master's degree in educational administration and a master's degree in counseling from South Dakota State University. He has a bachelor's degree in education from South Dakota State University. He is a member of ASCA, the South Dakota School Counselor Association and the South Central Cooperative Counselors' Chapter.

Amanda Szaraz is Illinois school counselor of the year and the school counselor at A.N. Pritzker School, a diverse urban school in Chicago serving 735 students, grades PK-8. "Perhaps the magic that lies within our multidimensional, multi-tiered school counseling program is that I have been able to and been supported to be an advocate, leader and collaborator to bring about truly amazing systemic change in my school and across our entire district," she said.



In just a few years' time, the positive effects of Szaraz' school counseling efforts are evident. Attendance rates at Pritzker have exceeded 95%, the percentage of students who are on-track is on the rise, detentions and suspensions are down while the use of restorative practices is up, and for the first time in her tenure, they have a 100% eighth-grade graduation rate.

Prior to implementing a data-informed school counseling program, Szaraz discovered 75% of her time was spent on case management. She helped found the Chicago Teachers' Union School Counselor Committee, drafting contract proposals, meeting with district-level staff and attorneys to align the school's evaluation framework with the ASCA National Model and advocating to systemically change the culture of school counseling in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). A historic accomplishment was gaining the right for school counselors to work directly with students, resulting in a 62.8% reduction in the number of CPS elementary school counselors serving as case managers. Szaraz now spends about 75% of her time providing direct school counseling supports.

After data showed that black students in third and eighth grade were struggling academically, more so than their white and Latinx peers, Szaraz and her intern championed a closing-the-gap project. They developed targeted interventions and mentoring to improve students' grades and achieve established goals. At the end of the intervention, off-track rates and the numbers of D's/F's decreased by at least 50%. No students were required to attend summer school to be promoted to the next grade.

Szaraz recently earned her Chicago equity and access credential. As a result, she has created transition and persistence events, worked with school administration to facilitate parent workshops regarding attendance, grades and CPS on-track metrics, and guided tier 2 and 3 interventions for chronically absent and truant students.

Szaraz has twice received CPS' Office of School Counseling and Post-Secondary Advising Elementary School Counselor of the Year Excellence Award, having served as master school counselor and vetting district initiatives and policies. She has her professional educator license and received her master's degree in counseling and bachelor's degree in psychology from Boston University. She is a member of ASCA and the Illinois School Counselor Association.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Jordan Tatom is Tennessee school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Liberty Elementary, a rural school in Shelbyville, Tenn., serving 751 students, grades K-8. "As a counselor and leader, I strive to unleash the potential in the people around me by being patient, aware, communicative and resolute," he said. "I must bring clarity and calm amidst the storm. As a rainbow, I must remind others that all will be okay in the end.



Tatom continues to position himself in the school and county education system to influence the perceptions of school counselors, working with administrators, faculty and staff to close the gap on their understanding of the school counselor's role versus that of a guidance counselor, especially in rural Tennessee. Through collaboration, Tatom challenges teachers to think beyond the content assigned to them and into the lives of their students. He encourages them to see the social/emotional and career-related connections and life lessons that can be made beyond purely academic lessons.

Learning early on that meaningful change takes time, Tatom focuses on the destination not the speed when advocating for school counseling initiatives. He tries to make positive changes through conversations with administrators and teachers, along with thoughtful social media postings and sharing. His advocacy efforts are enhanced through building strong professional relationships, modeling servant leadership and treating others the way he would want to be treated.

Tatom intentionally puts himself in situations to lead and make positive changes, helping make influential decisions that relate to students' social/emotional well-being. In applying and being accepted to become a Tennessee Transformational Leadership Alliance Fellow, Tatom has learned how to have more effective hard conversations. As a leader in the school, he strives to listen first and act second.

Spearheading a new endeavor, Tatom is guiding the implementation of a social/emotional learning program for his K-6 students designed to foster communication, connection and community both in and outside the classroom. He also recently rolled out a smartphone-based anonymous reporting system that enabled 3-8 students to report inappropriate behavior such as bullying, smoking and conflict.

In addition to his school counselor and educator roles, Tatom is also a preacher at Flatwoods Church of Christ. He is pursuing his education specialist certification in educational leadership from Lipscomb University. He has a master's degree in school counseling and a bachelor's degree in the Bible and communication from Freed-Hardeman University. Tatom is a member of ASCA, the Tennessee School Counselor Association and the South Tennessee Counseling Association, where he serves as president.

Tammy Taylor is Delaware school counselor of the year and the school counselor at South Dover Elementary School in Dover, Del., a diverse suburban school serving 584 students, grades K-4, where 100% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. "I firmly believe out of everything I do as a school counselor, I feel the most important thing is to teach children the importance of being kind," she said.



When school data showed students were not being very nice or kind, Taylor implemented a bucket filling challenge to increase student kindness toward one another. She provided classroom lessons on how to document their kind acts and the school goal they needed to reach. As a result, students performed 1,000 acts of kindness, and school climate data showed increases in student-to-student relationships.

Taylor is spearheading a new initiative with teachers to implement a schoolwide social/emotional learning program at the school. She also implemented a peer mentoring program to help students build social skills, relationships, coping skills and self-esteem. Students in fourth grade complete an application and attend a 45-minute training to become a peer mentor to a younger student. K-2 students are referred to the program by teachers or parents or based on attendance, academic or behavior data.

Taylor co-led a team to get the school's positive behavior support system (PBS) back on track. Looking at school and climate data each month to drive decisions, they worked to rebuild the Tier 1 system. Among other activities, they modified the PBS matrix, aligned the system with the district's strategic intent and incorporated student input about rewards and incentives. Taylor also co-leads her school's Tier II behavior intervention team, helping design the Tier II support and intervention framework.

Taylor has fought to educate numerous administrators about the role of the school counselor and how a school counselor's time is best spent. Through regular conversations with her administrator about her school counseling program, she is able to protect the use of her time delivering direct services. She is also forming an advisory council at her school, the first in district.

While serving on the Delaware Department of Education Counselor Advisory Committee, Taylor helped revise state regulations for Delaware school counselors. She works with district lead school counselors to help with goal setting, data collection and implementing a school counseling plan.

She received her master's degree in elementary school counseling and bachelor's degree in behavioral science from Wilmington University and an associate degree in applied science from Delaware Technical and Community College. She is a member of ASCA and the Delaware School Counselor Association, where she is committee chair for the Professional Recognition Committee.



2020 State School Counselors of the Year

Patricia Tomashot is Vermont school counselor of the year and the school counseling director at Stowe High School, a rural school in Stowe, Vt., serving 242 students, grades 9-12. "Understanding each student's situation and providing to them the support they need is most important for our work as school counselors," she said. "At the same time, we must understand the importance of equality and equal access."



Tomashot helps students plan their academics, feel safe at school, explore career interests and plan for postsecondary education. Relying on advisory boards for program development, management and evaluation, Tomashot has been able to reach out to students and their families, administrators, faculty and the school community. She believes in starting small and building relationships that will eventually make a larger impact at a larger level.

An ASCA RAMP reviewer, Tomashot led her previous school counseling program to become the first school in Vermont to achieve RAMP designation. She is now implementing many of the processes and procedures at Stowe as well, with the goal of moving toward a second RAMP opportunity. To promote the school counseling program, she designed and maintains a new department website. She also provides weekly communication through announcements. As a member of several boards for the Vermont Agency of Education, Tomashot has reviewed licensure requirements for acquiring a Vermont school counselor endorsement, relying on ASCA National Model for recommended competencies. Tomashot has influenced statewide initiatives such as flexible pathways, which promote personalized learning plans (PLPs) that include work-based learning, dual enrollment and early college programs. This has led to setting PLP implementation policies and defining critical elements of these state-mandated plans for all Vermont students. To help students map out their postsecondary plans, Tomashot conducts workshops on writing college essays, college interviews, financial aid basics and completing the Common Application. She also coordinates an annual college fair, with more than 80 colleges participating from across the U.S. and Canada.

Tomashot is an adjunct faculty member and a volunteer internship site supervisor at the University of Vermont, where she facilitates a school counseling graduate course that she revamped to include the ASCA National Model. She is a licensed school counselor and licensed school administrator in Vermont and holds certificates in college admissions and college counseling from UCLA and global career development facilitator from the University of Wisconsin. She has a master's degree in counseling from the University of Vermont and a bachelor's degree in dietetics from Eastern Illinois University. She is a member of ASCA, the Vermont School Counselor Association, the National Association for College Admission Counseling and several other national, regional and state organizations.

Christy Nicole Wheeler is Oregon school counselor of the year and is in her first year as a school counselor at Benson Polytechnic High School, an urban high school serving 1,100 students grades 9-12 in Portland, Ore. Prior to that she was a school counselor at Sellwood Middle School, also in Portland. "Kindness and empathy are at the root of what I do daily," she said. "I try to encourage and empower the students I work with."



Having worked in five very different school counseling environments spanning elementary, middle and high schools, Wheeler has designed multiple school counseling programs to meet students' specific needs. For each school she has served, building trusting relationships has been the core of her school counseling practice.

As her school district, the largest in the state, reorganizes and restructures its schools, Wheeler has been an outspoken advocate for school counselors, ensuring she is seen and heard as a leader in the community. She speaks at administrator meetings, attends professional development sessions, facilitates parent workshops, volunteers in her community and writes letters to Congress asking for more school counselors. When district talks veered toward more school resources officers, Wheeler advocated for systemic school counselor interventions and supports instead of reactive crisis responses.

Wheeler has completed professional development and certifications in priority areas such as suicide intervention, trauma-informed and inclusive practices and restorative justice. She has worked with administrators to reduce punitive responses to discipline and to embrace a more holistic approach that empowers students to see their future as successful members of society. Resulting restorative practices have helped reduce suspensions and expulsions.

She delivered suicide prevention counseling guidance lessons to grades 6-8 to increase student knowledge about how to report concerning behavior such as a peer who may be at risk for suicide or self-harm. All students in attendance received information on how to use an online reporting system. Wheeler also facilitated a 10-week dropout prevention small group. Each participant received 10 lessons on life skills such as decision consequences, peer pressure, academic challenges and resilience. As a result, 92% of students had zero discipline incidents while participating in the group and 83% improved their grades.

Wheeler received her master's degree in school counseling from Lewis & Clark College and bachelor's degree in sociology from Portland State University. She is a member of ASCA and the Oregon School Counselor Association.