



Laura Ross Named 2020 School Counselor of the Year by the American School Counselor Association



ALEXANDRIA, VA – Laura Ross, a school counselor at Five Forks Middle School in Lawrenceville, Ga., has been named the 2020 School Counselor of the Year by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).

A graduate of The University of Georgia, Ross has served as a school counselor for nine years. She has been at Five Forks Middle School since 2014.

The School Counselor of the Year award honors professionals who devote their careers to advocating for the nation’s students and addressing their academic and social/emotional development and college and career readiness needs.

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 was selected based on her ability to create lasting change within the profession through leadership, collaboration and advocacy. She, along with the three School Counselor of the Year finalists, will be honored and formally recognized at a black-tie gala in Washington, D.C., Jan. 30, 2020.

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About the American School Counselor Association

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) professional organization based in Alexandria, Va. ASCA promotes student success by expanding the image and influence of school counseling through leadership,

advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide their students toward academic achievement, career planning and social/emotional development to help today's students become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. Founded in 1952, ASCA has a network of 50 state and territory associations and a membership of more than 36,000 school counseling professionals. For additional information on the American School Counselor Association, visit www.schoolcounselor.org.