



2025 School Counselor of the Year

Carmen Larson, Ph.D.

School Counselor
Sarasota Middle School
Sarasota, Fla.

A school counselor since 2002, Carmen Larson, Ph.D., currently works at Sarasota Middle School in Sarasota, Fla. She received a bachelor's degree in dance from St. Leo University and has a master's degree in school counseling and a doctorate in counselor education and supervision, both from the University of Florida.



"Her passion for and extensive knowledge in school counseling are remarkable," said Jennifer Nzeza, Sarasota Middle School principal. "Dr. Larson is calm, centered, possesses strong foundational beliefs and maintains a passion for child advocacy, which guides everything she does. She is articulate, intelligent and keenly able to connect with colleagues, parents and community members."

As a school counselor, Larson leveraged her advocacy and leadership skills to help create systemic change throughout her school district. Beginning in 2021-2022, she collaborated with district leaders to head a two-year action research

project that led the school board to reduce ratios and remove inappropriate duties from the school counselor's role. She then led the Sarasota County school counselors in implementing comprehensive, data-informed programming at all schools. Notably, the same year, Sarasota County Schools improved 49 points on the Florida Department of Education's overall district accountability metric for learning gains. Larson was recognized in 2022 for her impact in the school community and awarded a Ripple Effect Award by the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation. She received \$5,000 to spend on professional development to help her continue innovative school counseling practices. With the money, she purchased and trained a Goldendoodle named Winston to become a school therapy dog and then took courses and earned the Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist Certification. Through the therapy dog program she created, Larson provides canine-assisted interventions with students to decrease symptoms of anxiety, alleviate crisis situations and promote a positive school culture.

For Larson, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is watching students overcome obstacles and build their self-confidence. "I value the relationships I build with students and their families and feel so inspired when I see students realize their potential," she said.

Larson is a member of ASCA, the Florida School Counselor Association and the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals. X: @carmenlarsonphd; Instagram: @larson.carmen



Illinois

Lisa Delgadillo

School Counselor
William G. Hibbard Elementary
School
Chicago



Lisa Delgadillo has been a school counselor since 2013 and currently works at William G. Hibbard Elementary School in Chicago, Ill. She received a bachelor's degree in photography from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a master's degree in counseling psychology from Adler University and a professional educator license with the school counseling endorsement program from the Northern Illinois University School Counselor Institute.

In 2023, Delgadillo collaborated with her school's social worker to spearhead a Five Senses Coping Skills unit, which was designed for classrooms with a high percentage of students new to the country. "We focused on supporting social/emotional needs and helping them build community with one another and with us," Delgadillo said. "We led engaging activities using all five senses in coping strategies, such as listening to relaxing music, visualizing peaceful settings, working with clay to create artistic expression and mindfully tasting different flavors." They incorporated community building with game playing and a field day. On the last day, students received Five Senses Coping Skills kits (sketchbooks, scented pencils, sour candy, bubbles) with reminders about the lessons. To measure the unit's efficacy, they looked at the rate of referrals and administered Mindsets & Behaviors surveys. Both data sets showed that the intervention was effective and led to a dramatic decrease in referrals and a meaningful increase in students' understanding of ways to cope with stress.

As the sponsor of the school's Student Leadership Council, she supported students with projects that were important to them, including writing letters to elders in the neighborhood and creating welcome kits for new students. One activity the students were excited about was celebrating Pride month. They created posters with positive messages, wrote morning announcements, visited classrooms to talk about what Pride means to them and passed out rainbow pins to staff and students. Based on this enthusiasm, a Gender and Sexuality Alliance was created at Hibbard, and they plan to have a school Pride parade this year.

Delgadillo is a member of ASCA and the Illinois School Counselor Association. Instagram: [counselorlisad](#)

Kansas

Hanna Kemble-Mick

Elementary School Counselor/USD
437 Dean of Elementary Counseling
Indian Hills Elementary School
Topeka



Hanna Kemble-Mick has been a school counselor since 2015 and currently works at Indian Hills Elementary School in Topeka, Kan. She received a bachelor's degree in advertising and a master's degree in counseling and student development, both from Kansas State University.

One of Kemble-Mick's proudest accomplishments as a school counselor was creating the Junior Coaches program. Initially, the program was established to address a specific issue with two students struggling with aggressive behavior and bullying on the playground. The program, which focuses on teaching leadership skills and conflict-resolution strategies, allowed the students to channel their energy in a positive direction and eventually see themselves as role models for their peers. Their behavior improved significantly as they learned to manage their emotions and assist others in resolving conflicts. The program's success is evident in the data: one student's office discipline referrals decreased by 71%, while another saw a 77% reduction. The program's impact extends beyond Kemble-Mick's school as other school counselors have adopted her training manual to create their own Junior Coaches program. "Seeing this transform from a targeted intervention for two students into a program that empowers a dozen young leaders in my school has been incredibly rewarding," she said. "It's a powerful reminder of how the right support and opportunities can help students grow into confident, compassionate leaders."

What Kemble-Mick finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is witnessing students develop empathy and a sense of community through hands-on, project-based learning. An example is the Paws and Claws group she led, which was inspired by her school's therapy dog and designed to build students' life skills while giving back to the community. "Seeing the students build teamwork skills, support each other, take pride in their projects, develop social skills in a real-world context and show heartfelt compassion for the animals was inspiring," she said.

Kemble-Mick is a member of ASCA, the Kansas School Counselor Association and the Kappa Delta Alumnae Association. X: [@counselorkemble](#); Instagram: [@counselorkemble](#)



2025 School Counselor of the Year Finalists

North Carolina

Stephanie Leibowitz Nelson, Ph.D., ACSC

School Counselor
Garner Magnet High School
Garner



A school counselor since 2007, Stephanie Leibowitz Nelson, Ph.D., ACSC, currently works at Garner Magnet High School in Garner, N.C. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology from the State University of New York at Oswego and a master's degree in school counseling from Syracuse University. She has a doctorate in educational leadership, policy and human development with a concentration in counseling and counselor education from North Carolina State University.

Creating and taking on the role of RAMP leader within her school's student services department is the program accomplishment Nelson is most proud of. During their data collection year (2022-2023), Nelson joined the school improvement team to be more intentional about aligning the school's goals with school counseling program goals to increase the graduation rate from 75% to 90% by the end of the 2023-2024 school year. Recognizing their lowest performing subgroup was Latino males, they focused their interventions for male Latino seniors who were failing one or more of the courses required to graduate. The students were given individual counseling each month, and participated in small groups and classroom instruction. Those with limited English proficiency, which prevented their success in the regular classroom, also received strategic scheduling in an online credit recovery format. "All 25 of the students we identified graduated, and our school's graduation rate has increased by 13% since 2021-2022," she said.

To Nelson, helping ensure all students feel seen and heard in a safe and welcoming environment that encourages them to reach their full potential is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. She initiated a daily morning walking program to give students an opportunity to walk with intention while they talk, practice mindfulness and gratitude and get energized for the day ahead. "Meeting up with students each morning for Walking with Intention and engaging with them outside of my office is one of my favorite parts of the day," she said.

She is a member of ASCA, the North Carolina School Counselor Association (Professional Development Committee) and the Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International.

Texas

Rosie Rodriguez

School Counselor
Chester E. Jordan Elementary School
El Paso



A school counselor since 2013, Rosie Rodriguez currently works at Chester E. Jordan Elementary School in El Paso, Texas. She received a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Texas at El Paso and a master's degree in school counseling from Sul Ross State University.

Social/emotional learning (SEL) has been the foundation of Rodriguez's efforts to ensure all students achieve academic success and attain lifelong interpersonal skills. Since advocacy for the curriculum's implementation is crucial, at Rodriguez's school, SEL time has been embedded into teachers' daily schedules, and each week teachers deliver lessons created to focus on SEL components. Initially, teachers had concerns about dedicating instructional time to SEL, but they quickly recognized the benefits, and it became a vital tool to support academic progress, improve behavior and enhance the positive learning environment on campus. "After witnessing the positive impact and improved campus culture, it was important to share this information with other school counselors," Rodriguez said. "I have presented my SEL plan to school counselors from my district and at the Lone Star State School Counselor Association conference." On multiple occasions, the program's impact has been recognized at the state level with the Lone Star Bronze, Silver and Gold Awards and at the national level with RAMP® from ASCA.

For Rodriguez, one of the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor is the profound impact a school counselor can have on a child's life. "You might be the only person to give them a hug, greet them warmly, cheer them on and genuinely believe in them," she said. "Having someone who believes in them can be an important influence in children's lives and can provide the encouragement and support they need to thrive."

Rodriguez is a member of ASCA and the Lone Star State School Counselor Association. X: @counselor_cjes



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Alabama

Stephen W. Watts Jr.

School Counselor
Citronelle High School
Citronelle

A school counselor since 2016, Stephen W. Watts Jr. has a bachelor's degree in secondary education - English/language arts and a master's degree in school counseling, both from the University of South Alabama. He also has an education specialist degree in school counseling from the University of West Alabama.

As a high school counselor in a community where college enrollment has historically been viewed as unnecessary or unattainable, Watts recognized the need to change the culture among his students. Working with a colleague, Watts launched a comprehensive program focused on college awareness and accessibility. Watts worked to connect students with local and state college representatives and trade professionals, expanded access to dual-enrollment courses to his students and focused instruction on accessing scholarships and completing the FAFSA. As a result, the dollar amount of scholarships grew to twice what had previously been awarded to the school's students. This achievement not only empowered students with the resources necessary for postsecondary education but also cultivated an environment where pursuing further education became a shared expectation. Today, the school's graduates are better equipped for their futures, whether that means attending college, enrolling in career technical training programs or exploring other postsecondary options. The shift in mindset within the school community is a testament to the potential that lies within each student when given the right support, encouragement and expectations.

Watts has found the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is working privately to help a student and then seeing that student succeed publicly in spite of the difficulty or barriers the student faced. When he worked with a student who was struggling academically and at risk of not graduating, he got to know the student and the student's mother, worked to understand the student's challenges and supported him through a personalized graduation plan. "My work helped him succeed," Watts said, "but his work ensured he graduated. Seeing students reach their potential is what makes my work so meaningful to me."

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

Alaska

Gianna Giusti

Elementary School Counselor
Hermon Hutchens Elementary School
Valdez

Gianna Giusti has been a school counselor since 2014 and has a bachelor's degree in communications/performing arts and a master's degree in teaching, both from the University of Alaska Southeast (Juneau). She also has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Giusti publishes weekly virtual assemblies for her school, a Tier 1 intervention where she uses technology to promote common language dealing with SEL topics schoolwide. In addition to this important work, she enjoys using the students' talents to create movies for the entire school.

To Giusti, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is being the grown-up she needed when she was younger.

Giusti is a member of ASCA, the Alaska School Counselor Association, the Providence Foundation, the Sound Wellness Alliance Network, Advocates for Victims of Violence, the International Reading Association and the Valdez Literacy Council. Instagram: [g_juice_tea](#)

Arizona

Britney Griffith

School Counselor
Esperero Canyon Middle School
Tucson

A school counselor since 2011, Britney Griffith has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Arizona and a master's degree in school counseling from Northern Arizona University.

When Griffith began working at Esperero Canyon Middle School, she noticed a room next to the student services area and immediately saw the space as an opportunity to develop an additional resource to serve her students. "My vision was to repurpose this area as a multipurpose counseling center," she said. "The center would serve as a safe space where students could regulate their emotions, learn coping skills and receive support from the school counseling team. It would also provide a venue for small groups and meetings." With support from her team, she secured a grant for a couch, fidgets and other self-



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regulation tools and differentiated seating. She reached out to families and received many heartfelt messages thanking the school for serving the whole child and prioritizing mental health. When the room, dubbed “the Counseling Canyon,” was ready for its grand opening, the school counselors held their first Coffee with the Counselors and gave parents and staff a tour. Since then, the Counseling Canyon has been used daily for a wide variety of purposes, but most important, students know the Counseling Canyon is a safe space. “Its creation is a testament to our school’s collaboration with the community and its willingness to dedicate resources to best serve students,” Griffith said.

To Griffith, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is having the honor to watch and support her students as they learn who they are.

Griffith is a member of ASCA and the Arizona School Counselors Association.

Arkansas

Cherri Byford

School Counselor
William O. Darby Middle School
Fort Smith

Cherri Byford has been a school counselor since 2001 and has a bachelor’s degree in physical science from Arkansas Tech University and a master’s degree in school counseling from the University of Central Arkansas.

For years, emotional regulation has been identified as an important need for middle school students and teachers. Because research shows that mindfulness is an effective way to help students and staff regulate emotions, Byford introduced mindfulness in a small physical education class at her school and got buy-in when she showed clips of LeBron James and other celebrity athletes practicing it before, during and after games. Byford began collaborating with teachers to lead mindfulness and yoga in their classrooms, and the initiative spread as other buildings in the district reached out for training. In 2022, she started Mindful Mondays during the morning announcements. “Teachers love the activity, and students are no longer nervous and giggly, they readily participate,” she said. Each year teachers asked Byford to continue Mindful Mondays, so her school added three minutes to the bell schedule to incorporate the practice. “This has been one of my most successful efforts collaborating with teachers, administrators, students and other building leaders in neighboring schools and districts,” she said.

For Byford, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is identifying students who have a gap in services, determining the root cause, implementing an intervention and then celebrating with them when they see a difference in their lives because of her work. “Whether it’s achievement, behavior or attendance, when students begin to shine it’s the best feeling in the world,” she said.

Byford is a member of ASCA, the Arkansas School Counselor Association, the Association for Career and Technical Education and a school-based health center advisory board. Instagram: @schoolcounselorcherry

California

Alexis Goddard

School Counselor
Centennial High School
Corona

A school counselor since 2014, Alexis Goddard has a bachelor’s degree in communications from California State University, Fullerton, and a master’s degree in educational counseling from the University of La Verne.

As a school counselor at Centennial High School, she led efforts to align the school counseling program with the ASCA National Model. The school counseling program received RAMP® distinction in 2023. At Centennial High School, she supports students through her data-informed mindset, efforts that helped to increase graduation rates to 99.1% schoolwide, including a 98.9% graduation rate for students with disabilities who are English learners. Her experience spans elementary, middle and high school settings across California, and she has shaped school counseling policies as a board of directors member for the California Association of School Counselors. Passionate about supporting others, Goddard taught as an adjunct faculty member at the University of La Verne, and she has supervised interns for nine years.

Goddard has found that the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the impact she can make on individual lives by helping students grow as individuals and discover their next steps into adulthood. “I can be the support for my students that I wish I had growing up,” she said. “Coming from a single-parent home as a first-generation college student, there were a lot of unknowns. Now I can help students make informed decisions about their future path and help alleviate some of their hesitation and fears about taking that next step in life.”



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Goddard is a member of ASCA, the California Association of School Counselors, the Western Association for College Admission Counseling and the California Teachers Association. Instagram: msalexisgoddard

Colorado

Madeline Riley Francis

School Counselor
James Monroe Elementary School
Colorado Springs

A school counselor since 2019, Madeline Riley Francis has a bachelor's degree in dietetics from the University of Northern Colorado and a master's degree in school counseling from Adams State University.

Francis is proud of her work incorporating heart rate watches into her emotional regulation small groups. The watches change color when the students' heart rates increase, which can provide a visual cue that they need to engage their coping skills. The watches help students make the mind-body connection more tangible as they develop the skills to help them regulate and make smart choices with their emotions and behaviors in school and life.

Helping students build the social/emotional skills to help them be successful throughout life is what Francis finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. Whether it is building social, conflict resolution or emotional regulation skills, Francis believes watching students mature, find their voices and become leaders within the school community is incredible, and she is proud to play even a small part in that process. "I also love eliminating barriers students or families may have, such as food insecurity or clothing," she said. "Helping to meet those needs so students can feel confident at school is incredibly rewarding."

Francis is a member of ASCA and the Colorado School Counselor Association.

Connecticut

Laura Kelley

Elementary School Counselor
Maple Hill Elementary School
Naugatuck

Laura Kelley began her work as a school counselor in 2019. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary special education from the University of Hartford and a master's degree in

counselor education with specialization in school counseling from Central Connecticut State University.

When Kelley incorporated an annual schoolwide career day within her school's counseling program, she achieved a goal she had wanted to work toward since she became a school counselor. The project required many hours of collaboration with community members to organize schedules, materials and ongoing communication so the vision of the project was clear to all involved. Through the program, students' family members, as well as community helpers from the town and surrounding towns, volunteer time to talk about their careers with students to help them dream big about their futures. "We have over 25 presenters speak about their various professions," Kelley said. "To see the students engaged and asking questions, their faces lit up with inspiration, is an incredible feeling."

Being a strong advocate for students and their families is what Kelley finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. Students' basic need for safety and connection must be fulfilled to unlock their full educational potential. At the beginning of the year, Kelley has minute meetings with each student to help connect with them, make them aware of the school counseling program and let them share their thoughts and concerns. More often than not, these meetings create opportunities for her to advocate for students' needs, which may entail communicating and collaborating with the student's teacher, family or community services. "I work closely with our families each day to address student concerns and put proactive practices in place to best support the students," she said.

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

Delaware

Mindy Adams

Elementary School Counselor
Milton Elementary School
Milton

Mindy Adams has been a school counselor since 2004 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from University of Maryland, College Park, and a master's degree in school counseling from Loyola College of Maryland.

One of Adams' biggest accomplishments as a school counselor was transitioning to Cape Henlopen School District in 2019 as the district's first and only elementary school counselor. "The new position presented a few



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challenges, but having the chance to create, develop and implement my own school counseling program from the beginning has been an amazing experience,” she said. “It has been refreshing to build a comprehensive school counseling program that is focused on student success.”

At Milton Elementary School, Adams is able to focus solely on her role as a school counselor and stress the need for school counselors in schools. “My program is data driven and we provide targeted interventions to support students,” she said. “We are constantly assessing what is working well and what is not working.” As a result of the success of her school counseling program in its first year, the district provided funding to have elementary school counselors at all district elementary schools the next year.

Adams finds the connections and relationships she established through the years the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. “There is nothing more rewarding than having a former student reach out to you years later to share their successes,” she said. “Whether they are making the high school soccer team, getting their first job or being accepted into college, they understand and value that I am here for them while they are in elementary school, but they also remember my support is infinite. I will be there for them in the future, as well.”

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

Guam

Lynnette Perez Quitugua

School Counselor

Lyndon B. Johnson Elementary School
Tamuning

A school counselor since 2004, Lynnette Perez Quitugua has a bachelor’s degree in business from Seattle University and a master’s degree in counseling from the University of Guam.

One particularly effective collaborative effort Quitugua led was coordinating the Red Ribbon Campaign at the Lyndon B. Johnson and Tamuning Elementary Schools, where she worked with administrators, faculty, parents and the community to promote drug awareness and prevention. The campaign included presentations, a wall-decorating contest, a drawing competition, the Red Ribbon pledge and a Red Ribbon Day spirit celebration. The campaign educated students about the importance of a drug-free lifestyle, encouraged schoolwide participation and fostered community pride. Quitugua also spearheaded her school’s

Annual Career Week, inviting parents, family members and community members to share their careers with students, giving them the opportunity to explore personal interests, learn about different career paths and connect their learning to the real world. Additionally, she coordinated the Families and Schools Together (F.A.S.T.) parent workshops and presented one of four modules aimed at empowering parents to engage in their children’s education. To further support these initiatives, Quitugua delivered SEL presentations during staff meetings, created a school counselor website in 2020 with resources for families and developed monthly character projects to promote positive values. These efforts have enhanced student engagement, supported family involvement and fostered a positive school culture centered on character development and career awareness.

For Quitugua, one of the most rewarding aspects of being an elementary school counselor is building meaningful relationships with students, families, teachers and fellow school counselors. “The collaborative environment fostered by knowledgeable and supportive colleagues is invaluable, and seeing students grow socially, emotionally and behaviorally is incredibly fulfilling,” she said. “Knowing that I can make a difference in their journey makes this role even more meaningful.”

Quitugua is a member of ASCA, the Guam Association of School Counselors and the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla in Guam.

Georgia

Gabrielle Shenice Brundidge

School Counselor

Lee Roy Myers Middle School
Savannah

A school counselor since 2016, Gabrielle Shenice Brundidge has a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies from Auburn University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Troy University.

Brundidge was a fellow for Ruling Our Experiences, where she has been able to mentor more than 50 students. She is an ASCA BIPOC School Counselors Affinity Group leader and, as a school counselor, she has helped Myers Middle School win awards, such as the Georgia Department of Education’s Family-Friendly award. “I have helped my school start a garden through Big Green,” she explained, “and we are also a Be the Voice and No Place for Hate School.”



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To Brundidge, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is finding her “why,” which drives her to be the best school counselor she can be.

Brundidge is an ASCA member and president-elect of the Georgia School Counselor Association. X: @ms_brundidge; Instagram: @miss_b_counseling

Hawaii

Noelani Butcher

School Counselor
Chiefess Kamakaha Middle School
Lihue

A school counselor since 2010, Noelani Butcher has a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in education, both from the University of North Texas, and a master’s degree in psychology and school counseling from the University of Texas A&M.

Middle school can be awkward as students navigate the terrain, experience personal growth and build relationships. To address their needs, Butcher implemented two specific programs: Da Gameroom and The Needs Closet, which consists of food items, as well as hygiene and school supplies to meet students’ needs. Da Gameroom is a safe space where all students are welcome to play, meet new people and have fun during recess. The school hosts different tournaments, such as air hockey, ping pong and pool, throughout the school year to increase social opportunities for students and give them events to look forward to. For the Needs Closet, Butcher partnered with the community food bank to provide free snacks for all students. Her goal was to strengthen the school’s academic achievement by providing nutritious snack options and encouraging healthy eating. Since the daily deliveries of fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy snacks for students began, teachers have reported that students are more attentive in class and ready to learn.

For Butcher, helping students reach their potential and providing them with support and guidance at school is the most rewarding part of her job. “Hearing students talk about how they overcame a personal challenge and see a positive future because of guidance I gave them is the reason I am so passionate about school counseling,” she said. “I love having former students tell me they still remember a lesson I taught them years ago or that I helped them during a challenging time in their lives. I feel really blessed that I can be an adult in their lives and have a positive impact.”

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

Idaho

Rachelle Haag

School Counselor
Orchards Elementary School
Lewiston

Rachelle Haag began work as a school counselor in 2017 and has a bachelor’s degree in social work from Lewis-Clark State College and a master’s degree in social work from Boise State University.

When Haag’s school decided to pursue becoming a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) school in 2021, she was selected to be the lead facilitator. She worked with the school’s PBIS team to implement two schoolwide behavioral support systems that would reach 80% of the school population, encourage a more positive school climate and improve upon positive behaviors. One intervention she helped put in place is called the Bubble Gum Club Party, which takes place monthly and celebrates students who have shown themselves to be leaders by meeting behavior expectations. For the party, they get together in the gym or outside and have parties with bubblegum, glow sticks, balloons, bubbles, and even a paper “snow ball” fight in December that has become a tradition and a hit at the school. The second schoolwide event is the Golden Spatula, which encourages positive behavior in the cafeteria during lunch by having students follow the common behavior matrix displayed in the cafeteria for lunch time. Each grade can earn points weekly, and the classes with the most points get to have a popcorn party on Fridays. They also get a golden spatula trophy to put on display in their classroom.

For Haag, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is walking into a classroom to get students for one-on-one check-ins or small groups and seeing their faces light up because they are going to work together. “I love the relationships I have made with all students and feel so rewarded to have a chance to make a difference in their lives,” she said.

Haag is a member of ASCA and the Idaho School Counselor Association. Instagram: @rachelle.haag



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Indiana

Monica D. Anderson

School Counselor
Franklin Community Middle School
Franklin

Monica D. Anderson began work as a school counselor in 2001 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Franklin College and a master's degree in school counseling from Butler University.

One of the accomplishments Anderson is most proud of is the mentoring program she created, Cubs to Grizzlies, a partnership between the middle school and the high school. The program was born out of a need she noticed in students transitioning from middle school to high school. When she arrived at Franklin Community Middle School there was very little transition programming between the middle and high school levels. Students without a lot of adult support at home needed a resource and connection to the next step in their educational journeys. Through grant funding and collaborating with the high school, Anderson was able to implement a one-to-one mentoring program between select eighth grade students and high school juniors or seniors. The program met the transition programming need for specific students, and the mentors were able to provide a positive and stable role model for the middle school students.

"Regardless of the ages of students, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is the connections and relationships I've had the pleasure of forming," Anderson said. "Being able to have a positive impact on the life of a young person is the most rewarding thing in the world." Helping students see their potential while guiding and supporting them through the hard things in life is her favorite part of being a school counselor.

Anderson is a member of ASCA and the Indiana School Counselor Association.

Iowa

Melissa A. Murphy, Ed.D.

School Counselor
Springville Secondary School
Springville

A school counselor since 2008, Melissa Murphy has a bachelor's degree in sociology from Iowa Wesleyan College and master's degrees in English from Western Illinois University and school counseling from the University of

Iowa. She also has a doctorate in educational policy and leadership studies from the University of Iowa.

At the middle school level, Murphy collaborated with core teachers to create SEL Friday, in which students spend a class period every other Friday practicing fundamental SEL skills. Students share recent accomplishments they are proud of and practice a moment of mindfulness before core teachers present a main activity that Murphy designed or adapted. "When students are with me for our weekly SEL lesson, we identify the competency and related skills we are learning about, but Friday activities are much truer to life and demand that students demonstrate multiple SEL competencies," she said. "Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making and their related skills are rarely mentioned before the final reflection, but the activity itself demands them." At the high school level, one of the district's goals is to graduate life-ready students. Working toward this goal, Murphy and classroom teachers retooled their seminar system to regularly deliver grade-level-specific lessons on postsecondary readiness topics. "Teachers can be a valuable source of postsecondary information for students," she said. As they prepare for and deliver these lessons, teachers themselves can learn much about postsecondary readiness beyond their subject areas."

To Murphy, no matter how routine she thinks any particular task is, it is rewarding to know that her effort matters to students and families. "When students or families thank me for something, it's easy to think, 'I'm just doing my job,'" she said. "While that's true, the phrase denigrates the courage it can take to seek and accept support."

Murphy is a member of ASCA, the Iowa School Counselor Association and the Iowa Association for College Admission Counseling. Instagram: @mmurph_ig

Louisiana

Emily Williams

School Counselor
Brentwood Elementary School
Lake Charles

A school counselor since 2010, Emily Williams has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in school counseling, both from McNeese State University.

Throughout her career, Williams has had multiple opportunities to help advocate for her profession. Knowing the amount of loss children experience today, she developed her district's Crisis Response Team. With support from the



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superintendent and a local counseling agency, she helped train and develop protocol for the team, which is called upon several times each year to support schools after the death of a student or faculty member. In 2019, she was part of the process to implement Erin's Law within her district. "As a team, we were able to develop protocol for our parish to educate students, teachers and families to prevent sexual abuse," she said. "Any opportunity I have been given has been a chance to improve the school counseling profession in Calcasieu parish. I do not look at these opportunities as a waste of time or effort but as opportunities to see school counselors grow and provide support and services to all students within our district."

To Williams, one of the most rewarding experiences she's had as a school counselor is when students use something they have learned through a classroom lesson or a small group. "I love it when students come to me and can show me how they have incorporated a coping skill," she said. "When students remember something I taught them, I remember why I love my job."

Williams is a member of ASCA, the Louisiana School Counselor Association, the Louisiana Counseling Association and the Calcasieu Counselors Association. Instagram: emilywilliams1023

Maine

Jessica Weatherbee

School Counselor
Manchester School
Windham

A school counselor since 2013, Jessica Weatherbee has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in school counseling, both from the University of Southern Maine.

Minute meetings are one aspect of Weatherbee's school counseling program she is really proud of. "I work in a fourth and fifth grade school, so I meet with each and every fourth grader individually to get their thoughts and feelings about their new school," she said. "I ask questions to gauge students' sense of belonging, friendships, strengths and positive adult connections within the building." Not only does this allow Weatherbee to make an individual connection with each student but she can also provide support or interventions based on the data she collects. For example, if students report they don't feel like they have friends at school, she works to create opportunities for them to make positive peer connections. "Also, I want students to feel like they have more than one positive adult

at school they can go to if they need support, so I work with the fourth-grade professional learning community to ensure students are consistently making positive connections with multiple adults across the building. My ultimate goal is that all students feel connected to the school and know they are important members of the school community."

"One of the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor is that I get to support the success and growth of each student in my school," Weatherbee said. "I get to play a role in students feeling comfortable, safe, welcomed and an important part of our school community. It is an important piece of their academic and social success."

Weatherbee is a member of ASCA and the Maine School Counselor Association. Instagram: 207schoolcounselor

Maryland

Rhonda Waller

Educational Associate of School Counseling
Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove
Baltimore

Rhonda Waller began work as a school counselor in 1999 and has a bachelor's degree in sociology from Western Maryland College and a master's degree in guidance and counseling from Bowie State University.

As a vital member of her school's attendance team, Waller created an attendance survey that the team used from 2011-2021 to identify the root causes of the school's poor attendance rate. She partnered with Get Schooled, a nonprofit school app that focuses on attendance initiatives through a point system challenge with the Baltimore City Public Schools district. In 2014, they tackled teen pregnancy, a crucial community issue affecting students' attendance. Waller helped to decrease the dropout rate by working closely with their partner United Way to create the Family Center at Ben Franklin High School, which allowed teen parents to bring infants or toddlers to school while they pursue their high school diploma. By 2016, as the school focused on their low graduation rate, Waller recognized that summer school sites were not easily accessible to students in South Baltimore, so they did not attend. Working closely with the United Way, she secured a three-year grant worth \$250,000/year (and renewed for three more years) that allowed the school to offer a summer school credit recovery program for their students.

To Waller, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is watching a student receive a high school diploma after witnessing the student's personal struggles,



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lack of support at home or life's obstacles. "I had a student who wanted to drop out of school, and I had several meetings with him and his mother to keep encouraging him to finish," she said. "He finally graduated in the summer of 2021, and it was a blessing to see him walk across the stage."

Waller is a member of ASCA and the Maryland School Counselor Association. X: wnba233; Instagram: wnba233

Massachusetts

Colin Moge

School Counselor
West Springfield High School
West Springfield

A school counselor since 2019, Colin Moge has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling, both from Westfield State University. Also, Moge earned a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in educational leadership from American International College.

Through Moge's work with district- and building-based equity teams, the students at his school were surveyed over a period of years about their high school experience. The survey focused on areas related to the building's climate and culture. In a review of that response data, school connectedness was identified as an opportunity for growth. As a result, Moge, his department chair and a classroom teacher began planning and implementing a peer mentoring program for ninth grade and transfer students, two focal points identified from the survey data. Over the past two years, they built a program with more than 20 11th and 12th grade mentors who help transition students to their building. While providing mentorship, they help others build connections within the campus community, introduce them to after-school clubs and organizations and act as liaisons between the students and their school counselor. Watching this program create tangible effects for students has been a highlight of Moge's young career and one that he is tremendously proud of.

Moge has found establishing collaborative relationships with students, families and caregivers to be the most rewarding aspect of his work as a school counselor. His ongoing conversations with students and their families provide insight into barriers they may be encountering and how the school can best address them. He advises several programs that provide students and families with items ranging from basic needs to connections to community resources. "While

our data identifies areas of need, the relationships with the people behind those data points are the reason we hold the roles we do," he said.

Moge is a member of ASCA, the Western Massachusetts Counselors Association and the Massachusetts School Counselors Association. Instagram: @colinmoge

Michigan

Elizabeth Conroy

School Counselor
Mason High School
Mason

A school counselor since 2007, Elizabeth Conroy has a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in counseling, both from Michigan State University. She is currently working on a doctorate in educational leadership at Western Michigan University.

Last year Conroy attended the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals' student mental health summit with a group of students. The students were so moved by the summit that they wanted to start a student group to promote mental health awareness and asked Conroy to be their advisor. "I was able to elevate the student voice through my advisor position, and my students not only created a mental health board but were successful in promoting a week of mental health awareness," she said. "I was able to get them an audience with our central office administration where the students are advocating for districtwide change."

For Conroy, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is making a difference in her students' lives. "Whether I am introducing a student to a new career path, helping them mediate a conflict, teaching them the skills to advocate for themselves or helping them with mental health, knowing that I am here and making a difference is the ultimate reward," she said.

Conroy is a member of ASCA and the Michigan School Counselor Association.



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Minnesota

Sydney Piras

School Counselor
Stillwater Area High School
Stillwater

Sydney Piras began work as a school counselor in 2014. She has a bachelor's degree with a double major in psychology and gender & women's studies and a master's degree in school counseling, all from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She also has a master's degree in athletic management from Ohio University.

"I helped bring together a coalition of school psychologists, nurses and social workers to pass more than \$100 million in student support aid to hire more of us," she said.

For Piras, seeing students accomplish their goals is the most rewarding part of being a school counselor. "Whether students set goals to pass 90% of their classes, earn their diplomas or get into a certain college – I love it all," she said.

Piras is a member of ASCA and the Minnesota School Counselor Association. Instagram: sydney7556

Mississippi

Jonathan Colter Barnes

School Counselor
Water Valley High School
Water Valley

A school counselor since 2006, Jonathan Colter Barnes has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counselor education, both from the University of Mississippi.

Over his 19 years as a school counselor, Barnes has focused on college and career readiness and found ways to incorporate it into all grade levels. At Water Valley High School, he increased the college and career activities to celebrate every student's individual path to future success. "We initiated a college- and career-themed week that included college application days, financial aid and scholarship days, as well as speakers representing all career clusters. "We celebrate each senior with a signing recognition for the future path they each choose to take," he said. "We have been named a premier school and school of excellence for our endeavors, and I am excited about my role on our state organization's board of directors and other state and regional task forces."

Barnes enjoys all aspects of his job and the role he plays in helping students become well-rounded in their academics and social/emotional well-being and watching them navigate the process of exploring colleges or careers. "I have numerous students who have graduated and still maintain contact with me," he said. "At a recent career day for middle school students, 70% of the speakers and volunteers were former students of mine who came back to give their time to our school."

Barnes is a member of ASCA, the Magnolia State School Counselor Association (board of directors), the Ole Miss Alumni Association and the University of Mississippi School Counselor Student Panel. He is also the University of Mississippi school counselor internship site supervisor.

Missouri

Rachel Reeves Hagelin

School Counselor
Belton High School
Belton

Rachel Reeves Hagelin began work as a school counselor in 2001 and has a bachelor's degree in English and secondary education from Drury University and master's degrees in education from MidAmerica Nazarene University and in school counseling and guidance from the University of Missouri – Kansas City.

The two programs Hagelin is most proud of as a school counselor are the multitiered system of supports (MTSS) and the comprehensive school counseling program. She has been the MTSS lead at Belton High School since 2020 and has had the honor of working with teachers, administrators, central office administration and consultants to create a strong system at the school. To Hagelin, nothing is more important than working with the school community to support students' academic, career and social/emotional success. Recently, the Belton High School counseling team earned the Nationally Recognized Missouri Program, which is given to school counseling programs that reach a high level of implementation. "I led the team through this process with a lot of help from area school counselors and the leadership of the Missouri School Counselor Association," she said. "Our team learned so much about analyzing data to determine needs, then looking at more data to determine appropriate interventions and getting to see firsthand how a comprehensive school counseling program improves student outcomes."



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What Hagelin finds most rewarding as a school counselor is intangible but “being a school counselor is like being a big heart with ears for students,” she said. That connection to humans fills her with joy. “Now, as my career has evolved, the connection with families, administrators, teachers and school counselors is most rewarding,” she said. “I love collaborating with adults with the success of students in mind. My heart just keeps getting bigger.”

Hagelin is a member of ASCA, the Missouri School Counselor Association and the Greater Kansas City School Counselor Association. Instagram: rthagelin

Montana

Elizabeth M. Clark

School Counselor

Irving Elementary School and Bozeman Charter School
Bozeman

Elizabeth Clark began work as a school counselor in 2016 and has a bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of San Diego and a master’s degree in school counseling from Montana State University.

One of Clark’s key accomplishments as a school counselor was designing two comprehensive student support systems, one of which was tailored for a school that is primarily online. Recognizing the unique needs of students in both traditional and virtual settings, she developed initiatives that addressed academic development and social/emotional well-being. For the online school, she introduced virtual Tier 1 lessons and digital resources to ensure students feel connected despite the physical distance. The positive impact of these programs was demonstrated through improved student engagement, enhanced academic performance and a noticeable increase in the use of mental health resources. By collaborating with teachers, families and community members, the programs fostered more inclusive, supportive environments, helping students feel connected and prepared for the challenges ahead. The success of these initiatives reinforced the importance of proactive, comprehensive school counseling strategies in promoting student well-being and academic success.

Clark finds the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is having a meaningful impact on students’ lives. “Supporting them through personal, social and academic challenges, nurturing their mental health and helping them reach their goals is deeply fulfilling,” she said. “Knowing I played even a small part in their bigger journey fills me with pride and reminds me of the lasting impact of this work.”

Clark is a member of ASCA and the Montana School Counselor Association. Instagram: @school_counselor_emy

Nebraska

Cami Oelsigle

School Counselor

Humphrey Public School

Humphrey

A school counselor since 2016, Cami Oelsigle has bachelor’s degrees in math and computer science and in secondary education from Midland University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Walden University. She is currently working on a doctorate in educational leadership at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Incorporating and adopting the MTSS model for school counseling within her school and establishing and evolving the HWY 91 Career Day are the accomplishments Oelsigle is most proud to have developed and executed as a school counselor. Initiating the MTSS process included establishing and completing a schoolwide SEL screener. The data collected from the screener informs decisions about which students need Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. While advocating for hiring a licensed mental health professional to serve their students and assist with Tier 3 interventions weekly, she was able to initiate and lead numerous Tier 2 interventions, such as small-group counseling, check-ins and check-outs, peer mentoring and lunch with littles. “I was one of the catalysts in developing a collaborative effort with neighboring schools where more than 100 local community members and business owners came together to share career opportunities with sophomores, juniors and seniors,” she said. The event gave 350 students the opportunity to learn from keynote speakers, small-group presentations, mock interviews and job-keeping skills and provided students in small rural communities with previously unavailable job shadowing and career opportunities.

The most rewarding part of Oelsigle’s work as a school counselor is building and maintaining close relationships with her students. “Witnessing their growth when facing daily challenges, watching them learn to handle it and eventually succeed, not only warms my heart but also serves as a constant reminder of the life-changing difference I get to make every day,” she said.

Oelsigle is a member of ASCA, the Nebraska School Counselor Association, the Nebraska State Education Association and the American Volleyball Coaches Association.



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Nevada

Claire Lustumbo

School Counselor
Andrew J. Mitchell Elementary School & Harry Reid
Elementary School
Boulder City and Searchlight

Claire Lustumbo began work as a school counselor in 2017 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology from SUNY Brockport and master's degrees in inclusive education from Nazareth College and school counseling from the University of Nevada – Las Vegas.

One of Lustumbo's accomplishments as a school counselor has been beginning a formal behavioral response to intervention (RtI) system at every school where she has worked as a school counselor. "I found that, while the focus on academic RtI was crucial to success, many of our students who were being referred really needed behavioral interventions, not academic interventions," she said. "I created a data-led process that taught teachers to take nonbiased and trauma-informed data on the behaviors they saw in class and bring them back to the team in an objective manner." The process helped in presenting the correct interventions needed for student success, as well as reframing how the staff looked at some of these unwanted behaviors in the classroom.

Lustumbo finds the connections she makes with families to be the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. "For me, it is easy to make connections with the students as I'm with them over seven hours a day, but I have a goal to connect more with families to get a better idea of the whole child," she said. To meet this goal she created Coffee with the Counselor, a monthly event (or "Cookies with the Counselor" in the afternoon for swing-shift parents/guardians). As a result, she meets with families every month to talk about her comprehensive school counseling program and listen to them talk about what's going on outside the school.

Lustumbo is a member of ASCA and the Nevada School Counselor Association. Instagram: @clairethecounselor

New Hampshire

Julie E. Lichtmann

Director of School Counseling (retired)
Windham School District
Windham

A school counselor since 2002, Julie Lichtmann has a bachelor's degree in business from New Hampshire College and a master's degree in psychology/school counseling from Notre Dame College (Manchester, N.H.). She also has a certificate of advanced graduate studies in educational leadership.

Of the many programs Lichtmann has worked on over the years, she may be most proud of her work to have her school district become a trauma-informed school district. "I was responsible for four schools within our district, and I was instrumental in hiring a mental health counselor in each building, providing a wellness center for students and training all of our counselors to be trauma-informed," she said. "I scheduled our leadership team in every building to receive training on trauma and its impact on students and staff. Also, I was certified with my dog to become a therapy team and brought that program to my district." The district now has a therapy dog in each building and three other school counselors have since become certified.

"I have loved being a school counselor over the last 24 years," Lichtmann said. "I love helping others and empowering them to believe in themselves and helping students realize their potential and gain the confidence to shine."

Lichtmann is a member of ASCA and the New Hampshire School Counselor Association.

New Jersey

Cynthia Povall

Director of School Counseling
Hillsborough Township Public Schools
Hillsborough

Cynthia Povall has been a school counselor since 1992. She has a bachelor's degree in history from Rutgers University, a master's degree in counseling from Kean University, and she is currently working on a doctorate in counseling and supervision at Kean University.



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Povall uses her education, knowledge and experience to uplift and motivate others in many ways. One of her particular strengths is helping others develop a greater understanding of and implement the ASCA National Model, as well as understand what a comprehensive school counseling program should look like. She is also adept at modeling, educating and supporting a trauma-informed approach with the students, staff and community she serves. Her gentle, warm, authentic and calm demeanor allows her to connect with those around her in a meaningful and supportive way. Povall leads with this demeanor and extends acceptance and compassion to everyone she interacts with to help them reach their full potential, regardless of where they are in their journey. She has even been known to help someone take on a more active role in the profession.

To Povall, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor and school counseling leader is helping students and staff grow and find their best selves.

Povall is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association, the Somerset County School Counselor Association and Chi Sigma Iota. X: @cindypovall; Instagram: @cindypovall

New Mexico

Angel Brown

School Counselor
Vista Grande Elementary
Rio Rancho

A school counselor since 2015, Angel Brown has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling (clinical mental health and school counseling), both from the University of New Mexico.

Increasing SEL for all students K-5 is one of the main focuses of Brown's program, and it has helped create a positive and supportive environment at Vista Grande Elementary School. Using consistent language and training staff has helped them build a strong, unified approach, which has been beneficial for students and teachers. "Vista Grande Elementary strives to have a supportive and warm culture, and using common language around emotional identification has helped us achieve that," Brown said. Students and staff at the school are finding value in identifying feelings and using strategies to support themselves. "This kind of self-awareness is key in SEL," she said. "It has been amazing to watch our students notice that they are able to identify their feelings and use techniques

such as breathing and grounding exercises as useful tools for their self-regulation."

"I feel like I hit the jackpot when I was hired out of graduate school to be an elementary school counselor at Vista Grande," Brown said. "I feel like this is the best job, and I am so grateful to come to work every day."

Brown is a member of ASCA and the New Mexico School Counselor Association.

New York

Carla Young

School Counselor
Bethlehem Central Middle School
Delmar

Carla Young has been a school counselor since 2004. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology from SUNY Plattsburgh and a master's degree in school counseling from Russell Sage College.

One of Young's most significant accomplishments as a school counselor was developing a comprehensive program on relationships, consent and preventing sexual misconduct in response to students' requests for more curriculum in those areas. With the district's support, she interviewed students, researched national data trends, gathered resources and crafted meaningful lessons. Young created direct and indirect programming for students, staff and families addressing essential topics such as healthy relationships, personal boundaries and responsible social media use and ensured the program included staff training and family resources to build a communitywide support system. "Guided by our ethical standards, I've delivered these lessons to hundreds of students, creating a safe space for open, critical discussions," she said. "This initiative has become a cornerstone of our program, empowering students to be actively involved in shaping a more informed and supportive school environment." To strengthen the program's outreach and resources, she also partnered with impactful organizations, such as the Hance Family Foundation, Ruling Our Experiences and the Albany County Safe Harbour program.

To Young, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is witnessing her students' growth and empowerment. "I feel deeply fulfilled when I see students build confidence, resilience and a stronger sense of self as they navigate challenges and work toward their goals," she said. "It's especially gratifying to see students actively engaged in discussions about critical topics like



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relationships, consent and personal boundaries and to know that our work together equips them with tools to make informed choices.”

Young is a member of ASCA, the New York State School Counselor Association and the Capital District Counseling Association.

North Dakota

Christopher James Potter

School Counselor
West Fargo Community High School and Alternative Middle School Program
West Fargo

Christopher J. Potter has been a school counselor since 2018 and has a bachelor’s degree in recreation management and a master’s degree in counseling and student affairs, both from Minnesota State University Moorhead.

“Serving students in alternative education means meeting unique needs for high-risk learners,” Potter said. “One of the more unique programs we piloted was a partnership with the F5 Project, a community-based organization that focuses on helping adults who have struggled with addiction find employment, housing and purpose.” Through a partnership with F5’s youth development program, his school offered weekly small groups for boys and girls focused on finding purpose in life, setting goals, increasing self-awareness and self-efficacy and providing adult mentorship. The credit-bearing group is a quasi-book study that runs throughout the school year.

For Potter, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the relationships formed with learners and the impact dedicated staff have on resetting the life trajectories of the most at-risk students. “One of our former students, a victim of gang violence, was shot four times in a drive-by shooting,” Potter said. “He survived, enrolled at our school and became one of our most successful mentors and students. He was named North Dakota’s Alternative Education Student of the Year, served as a keynote speaker at local youth recognition events and is committed to family, school and his community.”

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

Ohio

Susan Monticelli

School Counselor
Claymont Middle School
Uhrichsville

A school counselor since 2015, Susan Monticelli has a bachelor’s degree from Kent State University and a master’s degree from the University of Akron.

One of Monticelli’s greatest accomplishments was implementing grounding techniques and mindfulness in her building. “We start each morning with two to three minutes of mindful music so students can practice the grounding techniques they are taught as sixth graders,” she said. “New grounding techniques are then introduced in seventh and eighth grade classroom lessons.” When students are sent to the office for disciplinary issues, the administration first has the students ground themselves so they can have a rational conversation. Also, the PBIS team uses a midday mindful music break to reduce the disciplinary infractions that seem to occur more often at that time. The data collected after the techniques were implemented proved the effectiveness of students being able to ground themselves.

What Monticelli finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is breaking cycles in her community. “It doesn’t happen with every situation,” she said, “but on those occasions where I see a change in the pattern of behavior for a given family, I feel a sense of relief. I feel like I am making a difference.” For example, an eighth-grade student whose normal response to a trigger was patterned after the family normalcy of physical fighting now uses grounding techniques to calm himself and then uses his words to seek out support for the situation.

Monticelli is a member of ASCA, the Ohio School Counselor Association and the Florida School Counselor Association.

Oklahoma

Ann Elizabeth Mills

School Counselor
Shawnee Middle School
Shawnee

A school counselor since 2011, Ann Elizabeth Mills has a bachelor’s degree in communication arts education from the Oklahoma Baptist University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Emporia State University.



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Many things were different when Mills and her students returned after the COVID-19 lockdown: students had a variety of schedules, faces were hidden behind masks, and students could not meet in large groups. To share important information and announcements with students, Mills created Mondays with Mills, weekly five-minute vlogs. “Students grew to know me by seeing my face and hearing my voice, offering comfort and familiarity,” she said. Monthly Moments with Mills vlogs continued beyond the COVID era. The school also had begun using Dr. Chan Hellman’s work on the science of hope to improve attendance, academic performance and behavior. After small groups of students worked through goal-setting lessons based on his definition, “Hope is the belief the future can be better than today and you have the power to make it so,” the students’ Hope Scale scores increased by more than 10%.

As a middle school counselor, Mills finds the day-to-day conversations with students the most rewarding aspect of her job. One example stems from a conflict resolution conversation between two girls who had a classroom incident regarding a specific racial word. “My young African American student was patient and eloquent in explaining her background and how certain words elicited strong emotions,” Mills said. “My young Caucasian student asked questions and shared her own emotions and lack of understanding. Both walked away from that conversation with such a profound change in their outlooks and understanding that I am sure they shared it with their peers. It was the most honest and beautiful conversation I’ve ever witnessed.”

Mills is a member of ASCA and the Oklahoma School Counselor Association. Instagram: @bkelleymills

Oregon

Angie Chown

School Counselor
Sage Elementary
Redmond

A school counselor since 2011, Angie Chown has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Pacific University and a master’s degree in counseling from Oregon State University – Cascades.

One impactful resource Chown created and supervised at her school is a problem-solving/sensory room, which is staffed during school hours by two educational assistants that the school counselors supervise. “The Owl’s Nest is a place for students to reflect, take sensory breaks and solve problems,” she said. During the 2022–2023 school year, the Owl’s Nest had 6,347 visits (5,310 were positive and 652 were for redirection). In addition, for the past 12 years,

Chown has partnered with the Oregon State University – Cascades master’s in school counseling program, where she has directly supervised 16 interns and has been a site supervisor for more than 55 practicum students. “I helped establish and implement a Professional Development Schools practicum training model in partnership with OSU – Cascades,” she said. “The model includes an average of six practicum students on campus one day a week over winter and spring term who meet with individual students, conduct small groups, teach school counseling lessons in the classroom and do peer observations.” In January 2023, she became an associated faculty member, and that April she was recognized by OSU as the Community Partner for the College of Education. In July 2024, Chown taught her first graduate-level course as an adjunct professor.

What Chown finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is helping children and families by teaching them skills and supporting them on a social/emotional level. “I also enjoy supporting the whole school and partnering with other staff to meet the needs of our students,” she said.

Chown is a member of ASCA and the Oregon School Counselor Association.

Pennsylvania

Kelsey Davis

School Counselor
Brecknock Elementary School
Mohnton

A school counselor since 2017, Kelsey Davis has a bachelor’s degree in human development and family studies from the Pennsylvania State University and a master’s degree in pre-K-12 school counseling from West Chester University.

“Bringing Start with Hello Week to my school every year has been a huge accomplishment because it supports the Sandy Hook Promise Organization and has really helped foster and grow our positive school climate,” Davis said. “We have participated for seven years, and students, families and faculty look forward to it every year.”

To Davis, seeing her students grow and show what they are learning is the most rewarding part of her job as a school counselor. “When I see a student who has really struggled with peer interactions and self-regulation practices use appropriate “I” statements in the middle of a conflict, it feels like I just won a peace prize,” she said. “I live for those little wins.”

Davis is a member of ASCA and the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association. Instagram: @kelsadav



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Rhode Island

Russell Paone

Guidance Chair
North Providence High School
North Providence

Russell Paone began working as a school counselor in 2007. He has a bachelor's degree in social studies and a master's degree in counselor education, both from Rhode Island College.

In his district, Paone spearheaded a particularly effective collaboration that created a smooth transition process for eighth graders in the two middle schools that feed into his high school. Each year, the process begins with a well-planned open house in November at which school tours, academics, CTE programs, co-curriculars, athletics and support services are thoroughly explained to attendees. One month later, Paone visits each feeder school to answer questions from students and begin to assist the middle school counselors with the scheduling process for the following year. From then on, he is the sole point of contact for future students, families and school counselors. Each week, Paone averages a minimum of 15 to 20 middle school emails and 15 phone calls to aid in the transition process. "I place students in appropriate academic courses for their freshmen year of high school, and the very first day of our academic year is only for the new ninth-grade students," he said. For his efforts, Paone has received consistent praise from his school district's administrative team.

As a school counselor, Paone is most proud of the efforts he takes to help reluctant learners meet the rigorous demands of the school's diploma system. "We have an extremely high graduation rate as well as acceptance rate to formal education beyond high school," he noted.

Paone is a member of ASCA and the Rhode Island School Counselor Association.

South Carolina

Courtney Pfeiffer

School Counselor
East North Street Academy
Greenville

Courtney Pfeiffer, who began her work as a school counselor in 2018, has a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology and a master's degree in counselor education, both from Clemson University.

Throughout the school year, Pfeiffer organizes "SEL-ebtrations" to allow students to experience SEL in impactful and meaningful ways. "Our school has a monthly focus, such as kindness, acceptance and diversity or bullying prevention, so I have created a SEL-ebtration to align with each month's focus and deepen our students' knowledge and skills related to that focus," she said. In February, when the school's focus is acceptance and diversity, they have a Random Acts of Kindness Day. Pfeiffer and the other school counselor dress up as secret kindness agents and deliver secret kindness missions to each class, who are then tasked with doing something kind for an ancillary staff member at the school. Students must deliver evidence that their mission has been completed to the secret agents. Through this SEL-ebtration, students practice the social/emotional skills of demonstrating kindness and consideration of others. Other SEL-ebtrations Pfeiffer has organized are a Career Fair, Coping Skills March Madness and a Boo! to Bullying day.

The most rewarding part of Pfeiffer's career as a school counselor is the lasting relationships she has developed with her students. "One of my former elementary students emailed me annually through her high school years to let me know that she made it to another year in her education and to thank me for believing in her at a young age," Pfeiffer said. "Those emails meant more to me than the student could imagine because they provided validation that my impact on students is lasting."

Pfeiffer is a member of ASCA and the Palmetto State School Counselor Association. Instagram: @counselingcourtney

South Dakota

Amanda Bender

School Counselor
Lead-Deadwood Elementary School
Deadwood

A school counselor since 2011, Amanda Bender has a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Black Hills State University and a master's degree in counseling and human resource development – school counseling from South Dakota State University.

As a school counselor, Bender supports students and families in a few essential ways: providing grief support and advocating for LGBTQ+ students and school counselor rights. She is a key part of crisis response and supports families in their first, most vulnerable days following a loss. Through family surveys, she developed student supports, including grief groups where students can express their emotions alongside peers with similar experiences. Also,



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she spearheaded community initiatives and secured local partnerships to fund Camp Connection, a therapeutic grief camp that uses play-based activities to help students navigate grief and build meaningful connections beyond camp. Simultaneously, she advocates to protect student and school counselor rights within her district. “When LGBTQ+ affirming displays came under attack, I collaborated with stakeholders, wrote letters and spoke at board meetings stressing the importance of trusted adults for at-risk students,” she said. Though the board enacted a policy that used ASCA guiding documents, she successfully advocated for them to include a key provision: “School counselors will be permitted to display signage in their office aligned with ASCA standards.”

What Bender finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is the relationships she builds with students and families. “School counselors play a unique and crucial role in supporting mental health within our communities,” she said. “We are accessible to students every day, and parents don’t need to make appointments, arrange transportation or struggle with insurance coverage. We also help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health support.” After tragedies, Bender often meets families at their homes to explain how the school will support their children through the grieving process. “These moments, where parents trust me with their child’s emotional well-being during some of their darkest times, mean everything to me,” she said.

Bender is a member of ASCA, the South Dakota School Counselor Association, the South Dakota Counseling Association and the Association for Play Therapy. Instagram: [abender106](#)

Tennessee

Jacquelyn R. Patterson

School Counselor
Rockvale Middle School
Rockvale

A school counselor since 2019, Jacquelyn R. Patterson has a bachelor’s degree in education from Indiana University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Liberty University.

Patterson’s school counseling program encompasses a range of programs designed to meet the diverse needs of her school’s student body. One program, the RAVEN’s Rise initiative, focuses on character building and restorative practices. To provide targeted support, Patterson collects data from parents, along with student and faculty needs assessments, and facilitates five to seven small groups

throughout the year that focus on grief, anxiety and social skills for neurodivergent students, among others. Patterson also implemented the monthly All the R.A.V.E. Saturday series for families, which brings in guest speakers from the community to address mental health topics. The Coffee with the Counselor program compliments All the R.A.V.E. by offering quarterly seminars on topics of interest selected by families. A Bibliotherapy Parents Book Club, set to begin in 2025, aims to equip parents with the knowledge and tools to better understand and support their children through reading and discussions. “In addition to these programs,” Patterson said, “I’ve spearheaded the I.M.P.A.C.T. fundraising initiative. It raised approximately \$6,000 for our school counseling department and enabled us to provide essential items for students in need.”

For Patterson, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the look on students’ faces when they realize they can trust her. “Through the years I’ve heard from students that felt unseen, unimportant or hidden behind a mask,” she said. “Creating a rapport that provides an atmosphere of safety, trust and value changes the trajectory of our relationship, allowing for empowerment, respect and authenticity.”

Patterson is a member of ASCA, the American Counseling Association, AACC, Tennessee School Counselor Association (membership committee), AKA Sorority Inc., Pi Nu Omega Chapter of AKA, Society for Collegiate Leadership & Achievement, Chi Sigma Iota/Rho Eta Sigma chapter, Tennessee School Counselor Advisory Council and the TSCA Race & Equity Committee. X: [@cpa2academy](#); Instagram: [thrive_wellness2024](#)

Utah

Danie Natter

School Counselor/Department Head
Taylorsville High School
Taylorsville

Danie Natter has been a school counselor since 2014 and has a bachelor’s degree in sociology/secondary education teaching from Southern Utah University and a master’s degree in psychology (emphasis in school counseling) from Utah State University.

As the population of Natter’s school and district changed, data showed a need for more intentional and specific student college and career planning meetings that include not only plans for graduation but also the future. “I have implemented a culture in which all of the programs we use as a counseling center, and many as a school, support our



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goal of leading students to a clear and intentional plan for the future,” Natter said. The school created programming that uses the YouScience program to identify CTE pathways for students and schedule accordingly. As the head of her department and a school counselor leader in her district, Natter worked to create a college- and career-readiness program that is being modeled by her district and in many other districts in the state. “I have also worked with my school, district and state to partner with the American College Application Program to create a Utah College Application Week program that has been implemented in all high schools in Utah,” she said.

Natter finds meeting students where they are and helping them become the best versions of themselves to be the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. “I have always been focused on solutions, but the further I get in my career I thoroughly enjoy analyzing data and finding a way we can better serve our students and community,” she said. “I love advocating for the career of school counselor and mentoring those coming into the career.”

Natter is a member of ASCA, the Utah School Counselor Association (board member), the Utah Association of Career and Technical Education (board member) and the Granite School Counselor Association (current president).

Vermont

Ian Trombulak

School Counseling Director
Lamoille Union High School
Hyde Park

A school counselor since 2017, Ian Trombulak has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Middlebury College and a master’s degree in school counseling from the University of Vermont.

One of Trombulak’s accomplishments has been building a mentoring program between his high school students and elementary students in his district.

To Trombulak, the most rewarding part of his job is the opportunity to make a difference in a student’s life, big or small. “It’s a privilege to be part of their journey and see the many ways their identity takes shape in the teenage years,” he said. “I love knowing that the work we do as school counselors ripples out into the world as our students graduate and begin their adult lives.”

Trombulak is a member of ASCA and the Vermont School Counselor Association.

Virginia

Sheila Barnhart-Ramirez

School Counselor
Kenmore Middle School
Arlington

A school counselor since 2000, Sheila Barnhart-Ramirez has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Christopher Newport University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Old Dominion University.

Two primary initiatives that have been instrumental to Barnhart-Ramirez’s work as a school counselor were increasing support for the LGBTQ+ community and integrating play therapy into her lessons, small groups and individual sessions. To better meet the needs of a small handful of identified students, Barnhart-Ramirez established a GSA club that would meet during the school day to protect students’ privacy and alleviate issues related to equitable access. To her surprise, more than 40 students showed up at the first meeting, and the organization continued to grow. Her strong desire to support this vulnerable population led to her dissertation research on “The Impact of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations on Safety, Acceptance and Inclusion for LGBTQ+ Middle School Students: A School Counselor’s Perspective.” Additionally, she has delivered numerous presentations at the school, division and state level to educate and advocate. The second initiative that has greatly enhanced her work is the use of play therapy techniques, particularly sandtray. “Students below the age of 10 and those who have been impacted by trauma may struggle to engage in talk therapy as it may be challenging to access the linguistic part of their left brain,” she explained. “Play and sandtray connect with the right brain, providing students with an alternative tool to explore, express and process their thoughts, feelings and experiences. In the words of Carl Jung, ‘Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain.’”

The opportunity to witness changes in students over time is what Barnhart-Ramirez finds the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor.

Barnhart-Ramirez is a member of ASCA, the Virginia School Counselor Association, the International Association for Sandtray Therapy and the Association for Play Therapy.



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Washington

Fondra Magee

School Counselor
Stevens Elementary School
Spokane

Fondra Magee, a school counselor since 1992, has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Union University and a master's degree in school counseling from Southeastern Louisiana University.

Developing student leaders has always been a backbone of Magee's comprehensive school counseling program. One initiative she created and implemented is the Eagle Squad, a fourth- and fifth-grade student leadership team designed to develop students' leadership skills and provide service opportunities. Through the Eagle Squad, student leaders are trained and serve as puppeteers for the school's S.O.A.R. Puppet Troupe, created by Magee to teach SEL skills through classroom puppet shows and schoolwide assemblies. They have performed at nursing homes and community events, as well. The Eagle Squad also created an annual Kindness Drive in which students pull wagons full of supplies they collected to the nearby Family Promise homeless shelter. As a result of its positive impact on the school and community, in 2023 Steven's Eagle Squad received the city's highest youth honor, the Chase Youth Leadership Award.

For Magee, one of the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor is helping students overcome barriers to learning. Poverty, trauma and homelessness are prominent in the inner-city schools, where she currently works and the barriers to learning are daunting. "Helping students learn a process they can use when barriers develop and fostering a belief in them that they can overcome those barriers is rewarding work," she said. "When barriers are out of their control, advocating for my students has been one of the fiercest fights of my life," she said.

Magee is a member of ASCA, the Washington School Counselor Association (advocacy committee), the Washington State Association for Play Therapy (board operations manager), the Association for Play Therapy (SB-RPT task force) and the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International. X: @fondramagee; Instagram: @fondramagee

West Virginia

Jodi G. Williams

School Counselor
Opequon Elementary School
Martinsburg

A school counselor since 2008, Jodi G. Williams has a bachelor's degree in paralegal studies from the University of Maryland Global Campus and master's degrees in rehabilitation counseling from West Virginia University and school counseling from American Public University.

One of Williams' accomplishments is the college and career readiness program. Each year, she teaches and participates in College Application Exploration Week (CAEW), where she teaches the students the foundation of what college is and how to get there. "I explain that college is a word that means high-quality education or training after high school and that there are six types (technical and professional certifications, career and technical school programs, apprenticeships, military service, two-year degrees and four-year degrees)," she said. "We talk about the grades they must complete before going to college, then we play the game of CAEW Trashketball, which is played somewhat like the game show Family Feud." She divides the students into two teams, asks them foundational college questions, does a little mental math about how old they will be at different stages, etc. This also piggybacks on the school's Veterans Day Program, as she includes questions about the military. The kids love this game. CAEW is followed up in the spring with her annual Career Day, in which families and community members sign up to talk about their careers, and students are prepared ahead of time to ask meaningful questions.

What Williams finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is watching the students' growth and development and working with them and their families. "When students are struggling with behaviors and academics, I can ease the parents' angst and gain their trust to accept our recommendations for interventions," she said. "I can link the parents with community resources to help them access mental health counseling for the student and themselves, parenting classes, housing, food, etc."

Williams is a member of ASCA, the West Virginia School Counselor Association and the National Education Association.



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Wyoming

Kaylena Paige Rasmussen

School Counselor
Anderson Elementary School
Cheyenne

Kaylena Paige Rasmussen has been a school counselor since 2021 and has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Montana State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Chadron State College.

Two years ago, when Rasmussen joined Anderson Elementary School, they did not have a comprehensive school counseling program in place, which was both daunting and exciting to her. "I knew I had the opportunity to build a robust comprehensive school counseling program," she said. "Through my initial observations with students, it quickly became apparent that many students were struggling with self-regulation skills." To address this need, she used Tier 1 instructional data and conducted a thorough needs assessment to identify specific areas where students required additional support. Based on the findings, she initiated small, focused groups dedicated to teaching self-regulation skills. The groups provided targeted interventions and strategies to help students

manage their emotions and behaviors more effectively. She also integrated self-regulation instruction into her Tier 1 curriculum, ensuring that all students received consistent and comprehensive guidance on developing these skills. This dual approach allowed her to address the needs of individual students while also fostering a schoolwide culture of self-regulation and emotional well-being.

To Rasmussen, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the opportunity to advocate for the well-being of staff, students, families and the entire community. "Advocacy is not merely a professional obligation for me," she said. "It is a deeply personal mission that I am passionate about." She champions the importance of school counseling within the school, at the district level and to the broader community, where she engages with local organizations and stakeholders to build a network of support for students and their families. On a state platform, she is a vocal advocate for the profession and participates in initiatives and discussions that shape the future of school counseling.

Rasmussen is a member of ASCA and the Wyoming School Counselor Association.