



2026 School Counselor of the Year

Danielle R. Crankfield

Department Chair, School Counselor
Crofton High School
Gambrills, Md.

A school counselor since 2010, Danielle R. Crankfield works at Crofton High School in Gambrills, Md. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Temple University and a master's degree in counseling (concentration in school counseling) from Johns Hopkins University.

"Danielle represents the very best in professional school counseling from her commitment to her students' academic, college/career and social/emotional success, to her reputation among her peers as Crofton High School's 'North Star,'" said Molly McCloskey, School Counselor of the Year Selection Committee member. "Her excellence is not only in what she does, but in the way she does it –authentically and with an eye toward meaningful, measurable results."

In her school's founding year, Crankfield disaggregated course enrollment data to determine whether the school had a course access gap, particularly in honors and Advanced Placement courses. The data showed that Black and Hispanic students were disproportionately taking standard-level courses rather than honors and Advanced Placement classes. To address this access gap, she created articulation guidelines for middle and high school teachers



to use when making core course recommendations. In addition, she collaborated with the testing coordinator and department chairs in several content areas to promote higher level courses and honors and Advanced Placement electives that met students' interests. "The school counseling department and I encouraged open access, which allows students and parents to request honors or Advanced Placement courses by choice, even when students are recommended for a different course level," Crankfield said. "Over time, the course access gap decreased. Today, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to take at least one honors or Advanced Placement course before graduation."

"She is a natural leader who advocates not only for her students' and families' needs, but also for systemic changes to break down the entrenched barriers that have resulted in students of color not receiving the same access to educational opportunities, said Daniel Kassel, assistant principal, Crofton High School. "Although this work is difficult, frustrating and exhausting at times, Ms. Crankfield is always upbeat and positive and has a unique way of making all who interact with her feel comfortable and heard. She is genuine and passionate about her profession and the crucial role a school counselor has in the life and future of a child."

To Crankfield, connecting with students and helping them achieve their goals is the most rewarding aspect of school counseling.

Crankfield is a member of ASCA and the Maryland School Counselor Association.



2026 School Counselor of the Year Finalists

Hawai'i

Leka Pua Anitema

Post High (College and Career) Counselor
Maui High School
Kahului

A school counselor since 2020, Leka Pua Anitema works at Maui High School in Kahului, Hawai'i. She received a bachelor's degree in TESOL and linguistics education from Brigham Young University – Hawai'i and earned advanced licenses in school counseling 6-12 and school leadership from the Hawai'i State Department of Education.

As the sole post-high school counselor at the state's largest neighbor-island high school, Anitema's everyday mission is to ensure all students in Maui County schools have the resources and support to pursue a successful future, independent of background or circumstance. Her work expands student access to every postsecondary pathway, from college and the trades to military service and the local workforce. She transformed her school's resource space into the Maui High Post High Center and secured statewide approval for an innovative postsecondary planning platform previously reserved for private schools, which gave students across Hawai'i seamless access to personalized planning support. Anitema pioneered the county's first state-based college fair, and she built relationships with community partners and spearheaded Maui County's first Senior Hiring Event, successfully linking students from three islands with dozens of local employers offering living wages.

The most rewarding part of Anitema's work is empowering students to see possibilities they never knew existed. She works to ensure all students believe in a powerful future and a path to success, guides students with no family history of college through the unfamiliar and often-daunting application process and helps them secure a financial pathway and support system. "Watching their confidence ignite upon receiving that first acceptance is truly transformative," she said.

Anitema is a member of ASCA; the Hawai'i Association for College Admission Counseling Executive Board, Maui County Representative; the Hawai'i School Counselor Association; the National Association for College Admission Counseling; the Maui High School Foundation Scholarship and HME Inspiration Tour Committee Chair; and the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.



Louisiana

Summer Royale Whittington

School Counselor
Ernest Gallet Elementary School
Youngsville

Summer Royale Whittington has been a school counselor since 2018 and currently works at Ernest Gallet Elementary School in Youngsville, La. She received a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a master's degree with a double major in clinical mental health counseling and school counseling, all from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.



To address concerns about student behavior, teacher morale and the need for a more trauma-informed environment, in the 2023-2024 school year Whittington participated in the leadership team that developed a Behavior and Culture Team. Their goal was to empower teachers with tools to manage behavior in developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways to create stronger relationships and fewer discipline referrals. Also, she helped implement a new campuswide SEL curriculum, CORE Essentials, and introduced the curriculum through professional learning communities, showing an alignment with positive behavior supports and school improvement goals. "I created monthly implementation guides and digital resource libraries, and I co-led First Friday assemblies to introduce each month's core value and celebrate students demonstrating positive character," she said. By year's end, they achieved a more than 50% reduction in major office referrals and a measurable increase in teachers' confidence in managing behavior. "Most importantly, our school culture transformed," she said.

For Whittington, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is knowing that every barrier she helps to remove creates space for a child to thrive. Watching students walk a little taller because someone believed in them or seeing a family connect with the help they've long needed, reminds her that advocacy is the heart of a school counselor's job.

Whittington is a member of ASCA, the Louisiana School Counselor Association, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the American Counseling Association and the Louisiana Counseling Association. She is also a member of the Lafayette Parish School System counselor advisory committee, president of the Lafayette Professional School Counselor Association and a licensed professional counselor with a supervisor designation in her state.

2026 School Counselor of the Year Finalists

North Carolina

Annie Goldberg, ACSC

School Counselor
Broadview Middle School
Burlington

Annie Goldberg, ACSC, has been a school counselor since 2017. She currently works at Broadview Middle School in Burlington, N.C., and has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in school counseling, both from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



With the increase in community violence after the pandemic, Broadview Middle School experienced a rise in physical aggression, peer conflict and fighting, especially in the Black and Hispanic male populations. Building upon knowledge she gained in the ASCA U Cultural Competency Specialist training, Goldberg became an ASCA U Trauma Specialist. With the principal's approval, she founded Broadview Middle School's restorative justice team and organized an immersive summer training led by professionals in implementing restorative justice in schools. During the 2024-2025 school year, the restorative justice team led circles to create and restore relationships at school and in the community, provided individual coaching to teachers on creating a positive classroom culture and led schoolwide professional development on relationship-building and how to tend to students' trauma. "To engage students in this initiative and promote leadership, I arranged for the trainers to work with a group of students so they could become peer mediators for their grade," Goldberg said. At the end of the school year, they saw a 30% reduction in out-of-school suspension assignments and a more than 18% decrease in the number of out-of-school suspension days assigned to Black male students.

Goldberg finds building relationships with students and using data to create systemic change to be the most rewarding part of being a school counselor. For example, after noticing a high absentee rate among the students with limited English proficiency who had lived in the U.S. for two years or less, she worked to offer a newcomer group to help them adjust to a new culture, build relationships with staff and other students and introduce them to resources in the community.

Goldberg is a member of ASCA, the North Carolina School Counselor Association and the North Carolina Association of Educators.

Virginia

Lydia Thu Kim Larimore

School Counselor
Neabsco Elementary School
Woodbridge



A school counselor since 2021, Lydia Thu Kim Larimore works at Neabsco Elementary School in Woodbridge, Va. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Simpson University and has master's degrees in business administration from the University of Phoenix and school counseling from Liberty University. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in counseling and supervision at James Madison University.

"I lead data-informed initiatives that foster student growth and grit," Larimore said. "I created Stars Supporting Stars, a peer mentorship program that reduced chronic absenteeism by 44% in its first year." The initiative supports students' attendance, academic achievement and social/emotional development through structured peer relationships. Following that success, her school earned accreditation, and the program was added as an annual goal in their continuous improvement plan. Larimore also launched a peer reader program in which students from general education settings read one-on-one with peers in specialized support settings to build literacy while fostering inclusion and empathy, and she co-leads small groups with the English-language teacher. Larimore's work is grounded in the ASCA National Model® and driven by a commitment to equity, access and advocacy, ensuring each and every student feels seen, supported and empowered to thrive.

To Larimore, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is building trust with students and being a steady presence in their lives. In her work with children from diverse backgrounds, she is continually moved by their resilience and drive. "I believe in the power of hope to transform struggle into strength, and I see it every day in the quiet determination of students who keep showing up, wanting more for themselves and their families," she said. "Helping students tap into their own strength and envision a future full of possibility is one of the greatest rewards of this work."

Larimore is a member of ASCA, the Virginia School Counselor Association, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and the James Madison University Graduate Student Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Alabama

Kimberly Jones

School Counselor
Nan Gray Davis Elementary School
Theodore

Kimberly Jones has been a school counselor since 2019 and has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of South Alabama. She also has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of West Alabama.

Jones started a leadership team at her school comprised of responsible students who could serve as good examples to their peers. "These students do many things around our campus to make the school a better place," she explained. "For example, they create posters to hang in the hallways for events, such as Red Ribbon Week and Bully Prevention Week, and help to keep the uniform closet clean and organized. One of the things I am most proud of them for is participating in a food program," she said. The leadership team helps to make sure students with food insecurity have snacks and weekend bags of food delivered discreetly to their classrooms. "These students are so helpful and always willing to lend a hand to their peers or the school staff," Jones said. "I enjoy doing small-group lessons with them weekly to improve their leadership skills and promote community involvement."

To Jones, making a difference in the lives of children and providing emotional support in their times of need is the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor.

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

Alaska

Nicole M.G. Lyke

School Counselor
Klatt Elementary School
Anchorage

A school counselor since 2014, Nicole M.G. Lyke has a bachelor's degree in French from Michigan State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Grand Valley State University.

Klatt Elementary School, a Title 1 school, serves approximately 272 students, with 32% identified as multilingual learners and 33% receiving special education services. "One accomplishment I'm especially proud of is how our school counseling program, in partnership with

staff and community members, has woven together the beauty and diversity of our school into a shared experience of unity and belonging," Lyke said. "Since its founding in fall 2023, our program has launched several Tier 1 initiatives to strengthen school climate and culture." One highlight is the Prowling Pumas program, in which students run laps during recess and earn a toe token for every mile they complete. Students, who proudly display their tokens on shoelace necklaces, set goals and celebrate their progress along the way. More than a fitness challenge, Prowling Pumas is a visible symbol of connection and pride and a way for each child to say, "I'm part of the Puma Pack." The school climate and connectiveness data reflects this growth. Since spring 2023, the percent of students who report a strong sense of caring and support from peers, staff and the community has risen 23%, from 67% to 90% by spring 2025. "We are so proud of our Puma Pack," she said.

Lyke finds it rewarding that through her work implementing a comprehensive school counseling program – sponsoring schoolwide initiatives, teaching classroom lessons, running small groups and offering one-on-one support – she gets a front-row seat to watch students grow and change right before her eyes. "It's such a gift to walk alongside students, their teachers and families to help children build the social/emotional and academic skills that will carry them through their K-12 education and beyond," she said.

Lyke is a member of ASCA and the Alaska School Counselor Association.

Arizona

Marci Bieber

School Counselor
Cactus High School
Glendale

A school counselor since 2003, Marci Bieber has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Wyoming and a master's degree in school counseling from Northern Arizona University.

Bieber is most proud of transforming her district's approach to college and career readiness through the Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP). "Although Arizona requires students to update their ECAP annually, our district's outdated system had become a routine task for school counselors, lacking meaningful engagement," she said. In response to a 10% drop in college enrollment from 2016 to 2023, she collaborated with administrators, school counselors and CTE staff to revamp the process. In spring 2023, they adopted Schoolinks, a comprehensive



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

platform for grades 7-12, and launched it districtwide in the 2023-2024 school year. "I developed a scope and sequence aligned with the ASCA National Model® that integrated grade-level lessons to support student mindsets and behaviors," she said. "The new electronic ECAP system includes parent e-signatures and ensures annual updates for every student." The initiative has significantly increased student engagement and provided school counselors with targeted tools to help students create meaningful postsecondary plans.

To Bieber, the best part of being a school counselor is helping students discover their strengths and guiding them toward their goals. "While most days are chaotic and sometimes challenging, it also brings daily opportunity to support students," she said. "Empowering students as they navigate challenges, celebrate their successes and make meaningful decisions about their future brings me joy and hope. Whether it's helping students discover their strengths, explore career paths and aspirations or overcome personal obstacles, being a trusted advocate in their journey is incredibly rewarding. Watching students grow into their potential and knowing you played a part in that transformation is what makes this role so special."

Bieber is a member of ASCA, the Arizona School Counselors Association and the Arizona Career and Technical Education Association.

Arkansas

Angela Millard

School Counselor
Oaklawn STEM Magnet School
Hot Springs

Angela Millard has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor's degree in Spanish from the University of Texas at Arlington. She also has a master's degree in school counseling from Henderson State University.

Millard is most proud of her school's longstanding Birthday Project program, developed in 2018 to respond to the high level of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among students. One concern was that several students' birthdays were not celebrated by their families due to poverty, neglect or traumatic events. Millard's goal was to create positive childhood experiences to combat the impact of ACEs, and the Birthday Project addresses several factors contributing to positive childhood experiences. "It is an ongoing tradition, time of celebration and rapport-building event that students look forward to every year," she said. "All 400 of our students get to choose a birthday present

from my birthday pantry and have an opportunity to eat lunch with me." The project is a joint effort, with private and public funds to purchase gifts, such as calming toys, fidgets, art supplies and building kits, chosen strategically to help students' social/emotional needs.

As a K-6 school counselor, Millard finds walking through half of her students' school-age years with them the most rewarding aspect of her work. "By the time they graduate from our school and move on to junior high, they have become like family," she said. "I have gone through many celebrations with them, as well as tragedies. I joke that I have lived through stories of stolen swings as a kindergarten student to stolen boyfriends and girlfriends as a sixth grader."

Millard is a member of ASCA, the Arkansas School Counselor Association, Arkansas Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages and the Kiwanis Club of Greater Hot Springs.

California

Jordan Blevins-Williams

School Counselor
Pacific Law Academy
Stockton

Jordan Blevins-Williams has been a school counselor since 2018 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University and a master's degree in counselor education from California State University - Stanislaus.

One of Blevins-Williams' accomplishments as a school counselor has been implementing a comprehensive school counseling program at both schools where she worked. Her program at the K-8 school earned a Recognized ASCA Model Program® (RAMP®) School of Distinction in 2021, and she recently submitted a RAMP® application for the high school, where she currently serves as a solo school counselor. "Implementing a data-informed, comprehensive school counseling program has strengthened my craft as a school counselor and guaranteed that each of my students receives services from our school counseling program," she said. "The data-informed component strengthened the trust and relationship between the school counseling program and our administrators, further ensuring we are providing services our students actually need. Administrators now seek the expertise of school counselors to dive into data and determine the priorities for the campus, which also helps us align our goals seamlessly into our school plan for student achievement."



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

To Blevins-Williams, her relationships with students are the most rewarding part of being a school counselor. "The honor of witnessing the next generation grow and evolve has been a true pleasure," she said, "and getting to be the one to hold their stories and sometimes be the only adult in their life who provides a safe space is something I do not take for granted. For example, I have a student who felt safe enough to come out to me during a session, something that they had not said out loud to anyone until that moment. Since that discussion, the student has blossomed into a wonderful human who embraces who they are. I was so grateful to be a part of their story of finding themselves in the world."

Blevins-Williams is a member of ASCA and the California Association of School Counselors.

Colorado

Rachel McKeeman

School Counselor
Jenkins Middle School
Colorado Springs

A school counselor since 2018, Rachel McKeeman has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Lindenwood University and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Colorado - Colorado Springs.

Three years ago, McKeeman launched H.O.P.E. Month at her school to promote suicide prevention and build connections, service to others and individualized future planning. Each week they focus on a different theme from the H.O.P.E. acronym, all tied to the concept of hope. "During H.O.P.E. Month, our school counseling team delivers two classroom lessons (signs of suicide and postsecondary readiness) to all sixth- to eighth-grade students and an additional lesson for sixth graders (friendship/bullying)," she said. "We also make numerous referrals following individual student check-ins from the signs of suicide lessons." After the first year, their survey results showed a 5% increase in overall hope scores. The results also indicated a 7% increase in sense of belonging scores. In subsequent years, McKeeman empowered their student leaders to plan and facilitate many schoolwide activities, including a service project, spirit week, announcements and lunch events. The increase in student ownership has made the month even more impactful and meaningful for the school community.

Building relationships with students, their families and the school's staff is the most rewarding part of McKeeman's role as a school counselor. "Being invited to student graduation parties this past May for students from my first cohort of

middle schoolers reinforced Maya Angelou's quote, '...people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel,'" she said. "I love greeting staff and students, being the first point of contact for a prospective or new student, and welcoming and supporting new staff. Having the opportunity to be a light to others is such a blessing."

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

Connecticut

Patrick Brintle

Director of School Counseling
The Gilbert School
Winsted

A school counselor since 2005, Patrick Brintle has a bachelor's degree in human development and family studies from the University of Connecticut and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Hartford.

One of Brintle's proudest accomplishments has been helping the students at The Gilbert School realize their postsecondary options and have confidence that they can achieve those options. "Upon my arrival at The Gilbert School in fall 2022, I learned that the class of 2022 had an approximate college application rate of 50%," he said. "I immediately took that data and worked to increase the percentage of students applying to at least one two- or four-year college. My colleagues and I achieved this through increasing the visibility and celebrating the postsecondary options students chose." They made paper college pennants, military pennants and trade school pennants and hung them on the wall in a main stairwell where all students could see them. "We began meeting with every student in eighth through 11th grade to choose courses for the next school year, which allowed us to talk with students about their goals and aspirations," he said. Brintle and a colleague meet individually with each senior throughout their senior year to ensure they have a plan and the assistance necessary to begin their journey. They also remove the barrier to financial aid by hosting a FAFSA event for students, their parents/guardians and financial aid professionals from the local community college to provide access to postsecondary financial assistance. These initiatives have resulted in a consistent 80% to 85% of the senior class applying to at least one two- or four-year college or trade program. "Helping students obtain access to postsecondary opportunities changes lives," he said.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

To Brintle, the most rewarding part of his work as a school counselor is making a positive impact on students' lives by helping them overcome obstacles, achieve their goals and make connections.

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

Delaware

Matthew Eskridge

School Counselor
Sussex Central Middle School
Georgetown

Matthew Eskridge has been a school counselor since 2018 and has a bachelor's degree in social science from Radford University and a master's degree in school counseling from Wilmington University.

"The work we have done to improve our school climate is one of the greatest accomplishments our school counseling program has had," Eskridge said. "Working with the instructional team, administrators and support staff to reshape the way we discuss and support students through restorative and trauma-informed practices has been instrumental in that improvement." Implementing weekly student-focused team meetings to discuss individual students' performance and a behavioral reflection process that students and staff work through together has positively improved student/staff relationships. "Student behavior improved when teachers had a better understanding of the background and external factors that play a large part in the baggage students bring with them each day," he said. "On the other side, as students gained a greater understanding that teachers are human and have bad days or moments, they demonstrated more patience and had fewer reactive responses to interactions in times of heightened emotions."

To Eskridge, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the meaningful relationships he forms with students and their families. "More often than not, as school counselors, we do not get instant feedback that what we're doing is making an impact," he said. "We cannot guarantee the lessons students will take away from our offices. However, there are few better feelings than having former students stop you in public to update you on their lives; visit the school and make your office their one stop; or have a family share updates about a job, college or an enlistment at an event. These are the moments that reassure me the processes and the school counseling program are headed in the right direction."

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

Florida

Cassandra L. D'Addeo

School Counselor
G. D. Rogers Garden-Bullock Elementary School
Bradenton

A school counselor since 2016, Cassandra L. D'Addeo has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and legal studies from Quinnipiac University and master's degrees in marriage and family therapy from Nova Southeastern University and in school counseling from National Louis University.

Early in her career in Manatee County, D'Addeo recognized that increased family and community involvement directly improved student attendance, academic performance and behavior. To foster a positive school climate and strengthen family engagement, for the past eight years D'Addeo has led an annual Community Night at her Title I elementary school. What began as a small event to build a sense of safety and belonging has grown into a cornerstone of the school counseling program. "Community Night serves two key purposes," she said, "to bridge classroom resiliency education with home life through interactive, family-centered activities and to eliminate barriers to consistent attendance by connecting families with local agencies, including medical and mental health providers, literacy support, tutoring and parenting resources." Most recently, they partnered with the Early Learning Coalition to promote their Sleep Baby Campaign, further expanding their reach and impact. "This initiative reflects our commitment to equity, access and whole-child support," she said. "It has become a powerful tool for building trust, strengthening relationships and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive in and out of the classroom."

One of the most rewarding initiatives D'Addeo has led is an annual Career Day that she introduced to expose students to a wide range of future possibilities. "Watching their faces light up as they interact with professionals, from firefighters to engineers, is a powerful reminder of the impact of hope and vision," she said. "I work closely with families, staff and community partners to ensure every student has access to the tools and relationships they need to thrive. School counseling, to me, is about planting seeds of possibility and nurturing them with care."

D'Addeo is a member of ASCA and the Florida School Counselor Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Georgia

Mi'esha G. Reynolds

School Counselor
Meadowcreek Elementary School
Norcross

A school counselor since 2015, Mi'esha G. Reynolds has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Augusta University and a master's degree in professional counseling specializing in school counseling from the University of Georgia. Reynolds also earned an education specialist, school counseling, degree from Valdosta State University.

One of Reynold's proudest accomplishments as a school counselor has been organizing her school's annual College and Career Week, which concludes with a highly anticipated Career Day. "I coordinate all aspects of the event," she said, "from inviting participants to scheduling volunteers and managing logistics to ensure a smooth flow throughout the week. By effectively collaborating with administrators, faculty, families and community partners, we provide students with invaluable exposure to diverse career paths and real-world insights into various professions, ultimately helping them make more informed decisions about their future endeavors." After the event, Reynolds collects feedback from volunteers, faculty and staff and uses their insights to make the event bigger and better every year.

What Reynolds finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is the impact she gets to make each and every day with students. "I love the small connection points I share with students, like the fifth grader who made our morning greeting our thing by flashing a peace sign with her leg out every day," she said. That simple gesture reminded Reynolds how small moments can leave lasting impressions, and she's hopeful that those brief interactions will follow the students for a lifetime. "It's also incredibly rewarding to fill in gaps that make school a better, or even possible, experience for students," she said. "I'll never forget the time I used our care team funds to help a student get her hair done after noticing it was affecting her confidence. The joy and pride on her face when she returned reminded me that sometimes the smallest acts of care can make the biggest difference."

Reynolds is a member of ASCA and the Georgia School Counselor Association.

Idaho

Cari Barnes

School Counselor
Meridian High School
Meridian

Cari Barnes has been a school counselor since 2011 and has a bachelor's degree in political science from Boise State University. She also has a master's degree in counseling with a school counseling emphasis from Northwest Nazarene University.

One of Barnes' greatest accomplishments as a school counselor is the relationships she's built and maintained with a group of students for seven years. "Previously, I worked at Meridian Middle School and spent three years working with the class of 2025," she said. "When they transitioned to high school, I moved with them to Meridian High School. The trust, rapport and support I cultivated with this group of students led to lasting connections." To Barnes, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is cultivating positive relationships with students.

Barnes is a member of ASCA and the Idaho School Counselor Association.

Illinois

Marisa Mathews

School Counselor
William H. Prescott Elementary School
Chicago

Marisa Mathews has been a school counselor since 2018, and she has bachelor's degrees in English language and literature, as well as women's studies from the University of Maryland - College Park. She also has master's degrees in secondary education from the University of Maryland - College Park and in school counseling and guidance services from New York University.

After attending anti-racist school counseling sessions at the 2023 ASCA conference, Mathews analyzed academic and behavioral multitiered system of supports (MTSS) data for her school and found glaring disparities in who was referred to MTSS and for special education services. "I presented this data to our school staff along with a primer in anti-bias, anti-racist education and used it to advocate for new referral and progress monitoring procedures," she said. As a result, the administration began paying more attention to referrals and helping to clarify with teachers whether a referral was necessary based on classroom data and what



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

they had tried at the Tier 1 level. "Our students of color need to be treated with dignity and the assumption that they have just as much ability and capacity to learn academics and school behaviors as any other student," she said. "We cannot let our inherent biases get in the way of their school experience."

"It is rewarding to see students who have worked so hard accomplish the goals they set for themselves or that we set together," Mathews said. "I also love being able to provide what students need to succeed. That could make me the snack lady, the fidget queen or just the person who sits next to them when they're sad so they don't have to be alone. Although those may not be traditional school counseling skills at work, they remind students that someone cares about them and is going to listen to them and validate their thoughts and feelings."

Mathews is a member of ASCA and the Illinois School Counselor Association.

Indiana

Timothy S. Adams

School Counselor
Pierre Moran Middle School
Elkhart

A school counselor since 2018, Timothy S. Adams has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Ball State University and master's degrees in ministry from Indiana Wesleyan University and in school counseling from Capella University.

Adams is one of three school counselors at Pierre Moran Middle School who serve 621 students in sixth through eighth grade. "It's not me, it's we," he said. "Everything we accomplish is because of teamwork." Adams leads the largest Bring Change to Mind (BC2M) middle school program in the nation, a mental health advocacy group dedicated to ending the stigma surrounding mental health. Under his leadership, students in the program design and implement awareness campaigns, peer-to-peer support initiatives and schoolwide kindness challenges that foster inclusion, empathy and resilience. Students gain leadership experience while developing critical life skills such as communication, teamwork and advocacy. The program also hosts a yearly community event that connects students and their families with local mental health resources, expanding its impact beyond the school walls. Adams' BC2M student leaders make up six of the 10 available positions on the BC2M Regional Advocacy Board and help shape mental health initiatives and provide peer leadership for other

middle and high school students. Their work has led to increased awareness of mental health issues, more open conversations among peers and tangible improvements in school climate, including reductions in bullying incidents and increases in student engagement. In addition, he also helped his school achieve RAMP® designation, the first in the Elkhart Community Schools district.

What Adams finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is building meaningful relationships with students and helping them discover their strengths, resilience and potential.

Adams is a member of ASCA and the Indiana School Counselor Association (board of directors). Also, he is the former chair of the INSCA Awards Committee, where he helped increase statewide recognition for school counselors.

Iowa

Megan Bowden

School Counselor
Peet Junior High School
Cedar Falls

Megan Bowden has been a school counselor since 2018 and has a bachelor's degree in family services and a master's degree in school counseling, both from the University of Northern Iowa.

Bowden is proud of the work her school counseling department has done to receive a RAMP® designation for the second time, and they have committed to advocating for their program through an annual administrative conference and advisory council. "Being able to show our administrators, teachers, parents and school board members the work we are doing and how it makes a difference, makes me extremely proud of this accomplishment," she said.

"Additionally, I am proud of the work I've done to create a safe and inclusive space for our students through Sexuality and Gender Acceptance (SAGA), our school's gay-straight alliance." SAGA is constantly evolving and is, at times, a large group focused more on community-building and education, and at other times, it is a small group, focused on more sensitive topics. I have collaborated with Iowa Safe Schools to learn the intricacies of new legislation affecting our LGBTQ+ students' lives, joined district committees to have an even louder voice on the district level to advocate for our students and began working toward the Certified School Culture Advocate designation through the Iowa Safe Schools Academy," she said.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

To Bowden, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is witnessing her students' growth over the three years she works with them. "It brings me immense pride to see them develop greater resilience and confidence in themselves," she said. "I feel fortunate to be able to watch our students transition to high school, where I see them continue to grow and thrive. I am honored to play even a small part in their journey."

Bowden is a member of ASCA and the Iowa School Counselor Association.

Kansas

Erin Metsker

School Counselor
Overbrook Attendance Center
Overbrook

Erin Metsker has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Kansas State University. She also has a master's degree in school counseling from Emporia State University.

Overbrook Attendance Center had no formal school counseling program when Metsker came onboard, so she created a comprehensive program to serve grades K-3. The program includes individual, small group and classroom lessons and emphasizes embedding explicit SEL instruction into the daily school schedule. "I provide resources and support for teachers to deliver SEL lessons each day to create a consistent and intentional approach schoolwide," she said. "I also helped establish our school's attendance team and collaborated with the social worker and principal to develop processes for addressing chronic absenteeism and supporting families who have challenges getting children to school." Outside of her school, Metsker serves as a leader on the district mental health team and played a key role in securing a \$500,000 grant to employ two school-based mental health professionals to provide free therapy to families and students. She also serves on and facilitates the Student Improvement Team, which helps to set academic and behavioral goals and create plans for student success. "Additionally, I designed a tiered system of support using our SEL screener through FastBridge, allowing targeted individual and small-group instruction that has significantly reduced behavioral challenges and strengthened student engagement," she said.

Metsker finds helping students, families and teachers work together to create a positive, supportive environment for children the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. "I love seeing how modeling and teaching SEL

skills and collaboration can improve student confidence, behavior and success," she said. "Watching students thrive while knowing I've helped teachers and families feel equipped and supported is what makes this work so meaningful."

Metsker is a member of ASCA, the Kansas School Counselor Association, the National Education Association and the Santa Fe Trail Education Association.

Kentucky

Dr. Tinika Campbell

School Counselor
Central High School
Louisville

A school counselor since 2007, Dr. Tinika Campbell has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in elementary education, both from the University of Louisville. She also has a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of the Cumberlands.

Based on data from her school's comprehensive school survey and needs assessments, Campbell realized that although many of their minority male students faced challenges stemming from personal and neighborhood trauma, they did not seek support from their school counselors. "During one-on-one counseling sessions with students, I identified male students who would benefit from small-group counseling due to similar trauma experiences," she said. "My groups started with setting goals and purpose statements, then evolved into bibliocounseling." They read books such as "The Other Wes Moore" and "All American Boys" to help the young men make authentic connections and open up about their lived experiences, and the group created a safe space for them to express their feelings and release emotions. In turn, the young men in the group became more engaged in literary discussions in class, worked more efficiently to achieve their goals and improved their overall grades. Students who had not previously been eligible to play school sports became eligible, which increased their sense of belonging at school. "The group was also a learning experience for me as it helped me to move out of my comfort zone and learn new strategies for meeting the needs of my students," Campbell said.

For Campbell, building relationships with students and guiding them through obstacles and difficulties is the most rewarding part of being a school counselor.

Campbell is a member of ASCA, the Kentucky School Counselor Association, the Jefferson County Association



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

of School Administrators, the Jefferson County School Counselor Association, the Jefferson County High School Counselors Advisory Board, the Louisville Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and the Kentucky NBCT Network Board of Directors.

Maine

Cynthia Martell

School Counselor

Captain Albert Stevens Elementary School
Belfast

A school counselor since 1999, Cynthia Martell has a bachelor's degree in communications and psychology from the University of Colorado and a master's degree in counseling and guidance from the University of Alaska.

One of Martell's greatest accomplishments as a school counselor has been implementing an intervention to support students' academic success, reduce office referrals for behavioral incidents and address chronic absenteeism, which ultimately improved schoolwide attendance. To achieve those goals, she organized a team that includes administration, school counseling, social work, case management, special education and nursing to review student data on a regular basis. "We work to identify barriers and areas of strength for students and their families and identify who each child's 'person' is at school," she said. "In addition, I implemented a process to recognize and celebrate students' behavior, academic and attendance successes. Every year since we started this intervention, attendance, behavior and academics, in general, have improved." For example, in January 2019, the school had 33 students who were officially truant. By January 2023, only one student was officially truant. "For the past nine years, our school had been on a monitoring and improvement plan due to our lower than state averages for academic progress and attendance," she said. "But as of fall 2025, our school is no longer considered an underperforming school in our state."

For Martell, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is the opportunity to genuinely connect with students and watch them face challenges and grow. She said, "Many years ago, a student in my grief support group told me she thought of me as a heart with ears. Last year she returned to our building as a student teacher."

Martell is a member of ASCA, the Maine School Counselor Association, the Maine Counseling Association and Maine's Civil Rights Team Project.

Massachusetts

Sugeily Santos

Student Development Counselor
Curley K-8 School
Boston

Sugeily Santos has been a school counselor since 2007 and has a bachelor's degree in political science and criminal justice from Stonehill College and a master's degree from University of Massachusetts – Boston.

As a school counselor, one accomplishment Santos is most proud of is leading her school to adopt My Career and Academic Planning (MyCAP) to strengthen students' sense of belonging and engagement. "When our 2022 Panorama survey showed that only 39% of students felt they belonged and 30% felt engaged in school, I knew we needed to take action," she said. "I worked with district leaders and teachers to make MyCAP a schoolwide initiative by building teacher buy-in, providing professional learning and weaving lessons into advisory and classroom instruction." Through MyCAP, students began to discover their strengths, set goals and explore future pathways that connected to who they are and what they care about." In 2023, they hosted their first career fair, where more than 20 community professionals shared their stories and inspired students to dream big. "Seeing students light up as they made connections between their interests and real-world possibilities was incredibly rewarding," Santos said. "By the following year, more students reported feeling connected and invested in school, a change that reaffirmed the power of this work."

What Santos finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is watching students learn about their strengths, set meaningful goals and begin to envision their futures. "With middle schoolers in particular, I love helping them explore who they are and what they're capable of becoming," she said. "These early conversations about careers and future possibilities can open their eyes to paths they may have never considered. Seeing that spark of confidence and curiosity – that 'aha' moment – is what makes this work so rewarding."

Santos is a member of ASCA and the Massachusetts School Counselors Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Michigan

Emily Gay

School Counselor

Dakota High School

Macomb

A school counselor since 2017, Emily Gay has a bachelor's degree in secondary education mathematics from Lake Superior State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Spring Arbor University.

Throughout her career as a school counselor, Gay's proudest achievement remains her work to implement a comprehensive school counseling program that serves all students at the middle and high school levels. Observing unmet student needs, she collaborated with administration to enhance her school counseling program, targeting improved academic and social/emotional outcomes that align with ASCA Student Standards. "Using data and collaborating with stakeholders, I recognized a gap in postsecondary planning for seniors and juniors," she said, "I worked to develop Tier 1 lessons to help all seniors and juniors understand graduation requirements, set postsecondary goals and engage in one-on-one future planning with school counselors." Additionally, she developed a staff presentation aimed at clarifying the school counselor's role, which was followed by a survey to gather input. "Insights from the survey results helped us develop our annual student goal and establish a small-group initiative targeting sophomores who needed Tier 2 academic support," she said. These students were invited to participate in small groups, where Gay worked collaboratively with them to identify the root cause of the issue and develop skills to help them succeed in their classes. Her efforts resulted in a 20% decrease in sophomore failures.

Gay finds that one of the most rewarding aspects of her role as a school counselor is the opportunity to work closely with students and witness their growth and achievements firsthand. "The journey of guiding and supporting students through their educational, personal and social challenges is both fulfilling and inspiring," she said.

Gay is a member of ASCA, the Michigan School Counselor Association, the Oakland Counseling Association and the Lake Superior State University Alumni Association.

Minnesota

Julie Fox

School Counselor

Becker Middle School

Becker

Julie Fox has been a school counselor since 2008 and has a bachelor's degree in social studies, secondary education from Bemidji State University. She also has a master's degree in education from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus.

The program Fox is most proud of is called Discover, Inquire, Grow (DIG): Cultivating connectedness, community, mindfulness and self-care via exploratory classes. "At Becker Middle School, our DIG exploratory classes provide an exciting opportunity for students to engage in learning to help them grow as individuals," Fox said. "We offer a wide variety of hands-on learning across a variety of subjects, including yoga and mindfulness, art and physical education, learning styles and career exploration, engineering and STEAM activities like building with Legos. Students can also enjoy playing card and board games, learning new languages, cooking, sewing, crocheting and much more." Fox notes that the goal of these classes is not only to inspire curiosity and creativity but also to help students develop important skills that incorporate self-care, advocacy and self-awareness skills/tools that will be useful for their future academic and social/emotional success.

To Fox, the most rewarding aspect of being a middle school counselor is witnessing students grow academically and socially/emotionally. "Their progress and transformation during the middle school years are truly inspiring to observe," she said. "Each year, our school embraces a guiding theme. This year's motto, Be a Good Human, encourages kindness, empathy and integrity in all we do. Watching students gain confidence, develop resilience and learn to manage life's challenges is deeply fulfilling." Fox finds it particularly meaningful when students open up, apply strategies she's shared or simply smile because they feel supported and understood. "Those moments capture the heart of why I love being a middle school counselor," she said.

Fox is a member of ASCA, the Minnesota School Counselor Association and Education Minnesota.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Mississippi

LaDonna J. Townsend

School Counselor
Oak Grove Middle School
Hattiesburg

LaDonna J. Townsend has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Southern Mississippi. She also has a master's degree in counseling psychology and school counseling.

One program Townsend is particularly proud of is Building Legacies Overcoming Obstacles and Mindsets (BLOOM), a social/emotional learning group designed specifically for female students, which focuses on empowering girls to develop self-awareness, strengthen their coping skills and build healthy relationships. Through group discussions, activities and mentorship, and community partners, participants learn to navigate the social/emotional challenges of adolescence while embracing their individual strengths. "For male students, I was able to establish Boys to Men (B2M), a mentoring and leadership program that promotes positive identity development, self-discipline and goal setting," Townsend said. "The group encourages accountability, character growth and peer support, helping young men build resilience and confidence as they prepare for adulthood."

What Townsend finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is the opportunity to be a bridge connecting students, families and the school community in ways that create lasting impact. "Engaging stakeholders in our comprehensive school counseling initiatives has transformed how we support students," she said. "It has strengthened morale, encouraged collaboration and created a shared sense of pride and purpose. When teachers, parents and community partners come together, it creates a culture of care that uplifts everyone involved. Being able to witness that collective growth – seeing people connect, students thrive and our school community flourish – is what makes being a school counselor one of the most rewarding and fulfilling roles I could have."

Townsend is a member of ASCA, the Magnolia State School Counselor Association (board of directors), the Mississippi Counseling Association and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Missouri

Marissa Pablo

School Counselor
Osage Trail Middle School
Independence

Marissa Pablo has been a school counselor since 2020 and has a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation and a master's degree in school counseling, both from Northwest Missouri State University.

"As a school counselor, I have been blessed to work with the best team and run a comprehensive school counseling program," Pablo said. "From creating curriculum and bringing it into the classroom, to implementing advisory councils and sharing data, our RAMP® program speaks volumes about the hard work and advocacy of my team." Pablo's team has seen firsthand the power of data collection, advocacy and encouraging student's voices. "When I started my school counseling career, I had a fire to ignite change, and every year since then, I have tried to find new ways to advocate, push and share knowledge throughout the state and nationwide," she said. "In my first year as a school counselor, I was honored to receive the Service Person of the Year Award/Teacher of the Year Award. Since then, I have given presentations at the state counseling conference four times and became a member of my regional board, the Greater Kansas City School Counselor Association, with the goal of becoming a leader on a state and national level."

To Pablo, the most rewarding part about being a school counselor is seeing success within her current and former students. "From seeing my students succeed at theater performances, achieve a perfect score on the ACT, place Top 12 at a national pageant and graduate high school, I love having a front-row seat to student success and cannot wait to be a cheerleader for my future students," she said.

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



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Montana

Krystal Ferguson

School Counselor
Jim Darcy Elementary School
Helena

A school counselor since 2018, Krystal Ferguson has a bachelor's degree in K-12 art education from the University of Montana Western and a master's degree in counselor education from the University of Montana Northern.

One of Ferguson's most impactful accomplishments as a school counselor has been implementing a proactive, research-based approach to suicide prevention at the elementary level. In Montana, where suicide rates remain among the highest in the nation, she recognized the urgent need to begin prevention efforts early. After extensive research, she identified the PAX Good Behavior Game, an evidence-based program proven to increase self-regulation, reduce disruptive behaviors and decrease long-term risks, such as substance abuse and suicidal ideation. "I wrote and secured a grant to fund the program at my school, which later expanded districtwide across Helena Public Schools," she said. "I collaborated with district leadership, teachers and a sustainability coach to ensure fidelity and reached more than 70% of students in targeted classrooms." Through ongoing training, data collection and classroom walk-throughs, they built a strong, consistent framework for behavior and mental health support. "The initiative has become a cornerstone of our early suicide prevention strategy, strengthening Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports and shifting our system from reactive responses to proactive, sustainable prevention for Montana's children," she said.

Ferguson finds that helping children learn to advocate for themselves and grow into the best versions of who they are meant to be is the best part about being a school counselor. "There's something incredibly meaningful about watching students find their voices, build confidence and realize they are capable of more than they believed," she said. "Whether it's through small daily check-ins, teaching coping skills or celebrating small steps forward, I get to witness growth that goes far beyond academics."

Ferguson is a member of ASCA, the Montana School Counselor Association and the Montana Federation of Public Employees.

Nebraska

Nicki Hanseling

School Counselor
Lincoln Standing Bear High School
Lincoln

A school counselor since 2014, Nicki Hanseling has a bachelor's degree in child, youth and family studies and a master's degree in counseling psychology, both from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

One of Hanseling's proudest accomplishments as a school counselor has been developing programs that strengthen student connection, character and hope. She designed and implemented a monthly recognition program that celebrates students for demonstrating Character Counts traits and fostering a positive culture where students feel valued for their integrity, respect and perseverance. Also, she serves as the Hope Squad facilitator, leading peer-based suicide prevention efforts that empower students to promote mental health awareness and build a culture of belonging. "Our squad supports new students on their first day, creates uplifting posters during Mental Health Awareness Month and decorates sidewalks with hopeful messages," she said. "We've hosted interactive lunch booths for World Kindness Day, Hope Day and Valentine's Day that feature activities like Be the 'I' in Kind and a photo booth to encourage connection and positivity." Also, Hope Squad members made cards for teachers, led a schoolwide "Hope Chain" of positive messages and shared bullying prevention information over the intercom during Bullying Prevention Awareness Month. "Our Hope Squad is truly cherished and loved by our school community for the positive impact, care and encouragement they bring to every student," she said.

For Hanseling, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is watching students grow and thrive during their time in the school building. As she points out, "Many arrive feeling nervous or unsure, but thanks to our incredible teachers, staff and encouraging school culture, they find their place. I have the privilege of seeing their growth, confidence and transformation unfold as they navigate challenges and find where they belong."

Hanseling is a member of ASCA, the Nebraska School Counselor Association and the Lincoln Education Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Nevada

Dawn R. Wallace

School Counselor
Harvey N. Dondero Elementary School
Las Vegas

Dawn R. Wallace has been a school counselor since 2006 and has a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. She also has a master's degree in counseling from the University of Phoenix.

School counselors play a unique role in addressing the often-complex academic, social/emotional and systemic barriers that prevent young students from attending school regularly, so reducing chronic absenteeism at the elementary level has been at the forefront of Wallace's school counseling goals. "Since positive daily attendance is a strong predictor of future academic achievement, I developed and implemented a successful Tier 2 attendance intervention program that focuses on goal setting, daily student accountability, resources to assist families in overcoming attendance barriers and individual student incentives," she said. "In the last school year, students in my Tier 2 attendance group decreased their chronic absenteeism by more than 38%, which also drastically improved our school's overall average daily attendance."

To Wallace, building relationships with students and allowing them to feel known, valued and respected is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. Several years ago, while teaching a classroom lesson, she met a second-grade student who struggled to stay engaged in class. He put his head down and refused to speak to students or adults. "Shortly after the lesson, I invited him to play a board game with me about feelings," she said. "He immediately opened up and started to share his story. We scheduled a weekly check-in where we practiced coping skills, discussed positive behavior strategies or played a game. After several weeks, he started to participate in class, make friends and appear happier and better connected. Now a fifth grader, he is in our school's leadership program, is engaged in his learning and has big plans for middle school."

Wallace is a member of ASCA and the Nevada School Counselor Association.

New Hampshire

Courtney Menswar

School Counselor
McLaughlin Middle School
Manchester

Courtney Menswar has been a school counselor since 2021 and has a bachelor's degree in American studies/elementary education from the Franklin Pierce University and a master's degree in school counseling from Rivier University.

One of Menswar's key accomplishments was creating positive behavior expectations posters and lessons for her school. She initiated the project after conducting a needs assessment with administration, teachers and staff to identify problem behaviors in hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria and bathrooms. "I helped to develop clear, student-friendly behavioral expectations and ran grade-level student focus groups to ensure the language was clear and meaningful," she said. "After incorporating student feedback and securing staff approval, I helped design and print the posters, which were placed throughout the school as daily behavior reminders." To introduce and reinforce the school's "safe, respectful, responsible" expectations, Menswar created a six-week series of lessons aligned with the posters, which were implemented weekly to build consistency and shared language across the school. "This initiative successfully engaged multiple groups, produced clear and accessible behavior expectations and established a structured, schoolwide approach to promoting positive behavior," she said.

Building meaningful relationships with students and witnessing their personal growth over time is what Menswar finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. "Watching my students gain confidence, develop resilience and achieve goals they once doubted is incredibly fulfilling," she said. "Each moment of progress is a reminder of the power of connection and guidance. Whether an inside joke, a secret handshake or just a hello each day, I am proud to have made connections with each one of my students." Knowing that she has had a positive impact on their journey makes her role deeply meaningful and inspiring every single day.

Menswar is a member of ASCA, the New Hampshire School Counselor Association and the Psi Chi Honor Society.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

New Jersey

Viviana Moncada

School Counselor

Francis A. Desmarest Elementary School
Flemington

A school counselor since 2019, Viviana Moncada has a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy from Colombia S.A. University and a master's degree in counseling from Kean University.

Moncada built a comprehensive school counseling program at her school to help multilingual learner students new to the school and the country adjust to their new lives. She created a Newcomer Friends support group to assist new students throughout the acculturation process. New students, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, experience loneliness, anxiety and, at times, cultural disorientation. In the group, which was held twice a week after school hours, students learned to build friendships, understand school routines and develop social/emotional skills to feel welcomed and included in their new environment. The students transferred those skills to the regular school day, family life and the community, while the group provided a safe space for students to express their feelings and ask questions to prevent isolation and reduce their anxiety related to the transition. "When the newcomers feel welcomed and supported, they engage in school activities and contribute positively to a school culture and community," Moncada said. "I consider creating this group a unique experience where I was able to empower students by fostering a safe, inclusive and supportive environment."

To Moncada, the most rewarding aspect of being an elementary school counselor is the opportunity to make a positive impact on a child's development during their early years. "Every day I go to work thinking that I need to make a difference in my students' lives by supporting them through academic, family or emotional challenges and social struggles," she said. "Working in a diverse school means helping students learn to appreciate differences in culture, language, family structure and beliefs. Creating a safe space where all students feel seen, respected and valued is deeply fulfilling."

Moncada is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association and the Hunterdon County School Counselor Association.

North Dakota

Steven Andrew Quinlivan

K-12 School Counselor

Center-Stanton Public School
Center

Steven Andrew Quinlivan has been a school counselor since 2019 and has a bachelor's degree in history education from Valley City State University. He also has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Mary.

As a K-12 school counselor, Quinlivan used the Early Warning and Intervention Monitoring System and the schoolwide data to identify barriers to learning and implemented targeted interventions that improve academic performance and attendance. He expanded career development opportunities through structured classroom lessons, job shadowing experiences and individualized student planning. "Beyond school counseling, I actively contribute to the broader school community by coordinating the Center-Stanton Crocobots Robotics Team, the Mini-Science Olympiad and the full Science Olympiad programs, as well as assisting with Acalympics," he said. "By collaborating with families, staff and community partners, I strive to ensure that all students have equitable access to meaningful opportunities that foster growth, resilience and lifelong success."

Quinlivan finds that witnessing students experience their "aha" moments when they gain clarity about who they are and where they are headed is the most rewarding part of being a school counselor. "One of the most meaningful moments for me was working with a student who had been unsure about her future," he said. "Through our conversations about her interests, values and experiences caring for younger children, she realized she wanted to become a pediatric nurse. Watching her excitement grow as she explored programs and began planning her path was incredibly fulfilling."

Quinlivan is a member of ASCA, the North Dakota School Counselor Association, the North Dakota Counseling Association and the National Geographic - North Dakota Advisory Council.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Ohio

Carrie A. Plourde

School Counselor
Como Elementary
Columbus

A school counselor since 2012, Carrie A. Plourde has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Ohio University and a master's degree in school and mental health counseling from Roosevelt University.

Following the COVID-19 closures, Plourde created a comprehensive multitiered system of supports centered on the whole child, transforming her school from a place of crisis into a model of resilience. Within two years, she coordinated multiple teams to help win a state PBIS Gold Medal and a Momentum Award, and her programming reduced behavior incidents by 75%, virtually eliminated suspensions, and helped to create a culture of connection. Serving students affected by poverty, trauma and relationship instability, she remains dedicated to fostering a trauma-informed, emotionally safe place where every learner feels valued. Plourde's passion lies in strengthening community connections. She founded the Passion and Purpose Fair, now the largest engagement event in her school's history, and started the school's free store and seasonal giving initiatives, ensuring families' basic needs are always met. She embodies her profession by blending her therapeutic insights with her academic expertise.

What Plourde finds most rewarding about her work as a school counselor is watching students who once struggled to believe in themselves begin to thrive because someone saw their potential and never gave up on them. One of her most meaningful experiences was helping to transform her school's culture after COVID, when many students returned dysregulated and disconnected. "We built systems and structures that honored the whole child," she said. "Within the first year, students reported on Panorama surveys that they felt supported and that they belonged, that they could do hard things and that they had hope and belief in themselves and their futures. Seeing them regulate, connect and succeed is the heart of why I do this work."

Plourde is a member of ASCA and the Ohio School Counselor Association.

Oklahoma

Sarah Morgan-Forbes

School Counselor
Union High School
Tulsa

Sarah Morgan-Forbes has been a school counselor since 2021 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Oklahoma and a master's degree in educational psychology from Oklahoma State University.

"One of my most meaningful accomplishments has been creating the mobile Counselor Cart, a hands-on, student-centered initiative designed to make school counseling services more visible and accessible," Morgan-Forbes said. Equipped with sensory tools, college and career resources and SEL activities, the cart allows her to bring support directly to students throughout the building. Whether addressing stress management, postsecondary planning, conflict resolution, healthy peer relationships or just a simple check-in, this mobile approach has broken down barriers and helped normalize seeking help and having access to a trusted adult, especially for students who may not otherwise visit the school counseling office. "Also, I led a data-driven effort to close academic gaps among Hispanic students, our highest student population, through collaborative efforts with the Hispanic Student Association, one-on-one transcript education lessons, time-management lessons, referrals to tutoring services and bilingual parent outreach. These efforts led to an increase in academic performance, improved engagement and stronger family partnerships, and students began to feel truly supported," she said. Together, these programs reflect her philosophy as a school counselor: meet students where they are, literally and emotionally, so every student feels seen, supported and capable of success.

To Morgan-Forbes, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is witnessing students realize their potential and begin to believe in themselves, then seeing that potential and confidence come to fruition.

Morgan-Forbes is a member of ASCA; the Oklahoma School Counselor Association; the Union Public Schools Guiding Coalition Committee; the Safe Schools, Healthy and Fit Kids Committee; the Oklahoma State University Alumni Association; and the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Oregon

Briana Meyer

School Counselor
Hedrick Middle School
Medford

A school counselor since 2020, Briana Meyer has a bachelor's degree in human development and family sciences from Oregon State University and a master's degree in counseling from Oregon State University – Cascades.

Meyer is widely celebrated for her compassionate approach and her deep belief that every child deserves to feel seen, supported and capable of success. Families describe her as a lifeline, someone who lifts the burden of advocacy from families and walks beside them through challenges ranging from bullying and mental health struggles to academic barriers. Her Tier 1 work includes a full-year advisory-centered curriculum of SEL, academic growth and career exploration lessons that empower students with lifelong, postsecondary skills and connect them to trusted adults to guide them along the way. For example, after reviewing schoolwide advisory data, Meyer noticed that while many students felt connected at school, some had not yet identified a trusted adult they could turn to for support. As a result, she designed and implemented a schoolwide lesson called Finding Your Trusted Adult. The lesson invited students to reflect on who they felt safe with, how to ask for help and what trusted adults can do to support them. Teachers, administrators and support staff participated, creating a moment of connection across the campus. Following the lesson, the number of students who identified at least one trusted adult at school significantly increased.

The moment when a student realizes there is someone in their corner who believes in them, listens to them and will advocate for them is the most rewarding aspect of school counseling for Meyer. "For me, the true reward isn't found in awards or data points," she said. "It's in the relationships built, the hope restored and the steady transformation of a school community where every student feels safe, connected and capable of success."

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

Pennsylvania

Dr. Adam Blaine Oldham

School Counselor
Big Spring High School
Newville

Dr. Adam Blaine Oldham has been a school counselor since 2013 and has bachelor's degrees in human communication studies, business and Spanish, and a master's degree in school counseling, all from Shippensburg University. He also has a doctorate in educational leadership and administration from Immaculata University.

To reduce the burden of higher education costs for students, Oldham has worked diligently to connect students with dual-enrollment opportunities. Over a three-year period in his last school district, he oversaw a 467% increase in the number of dual-enrollment credits students took and facilitated partnerships with five local universities. In the past three years, his current district saw a 95% increase in the number of dual-enrollment credits taken by students. Both districts saw significant increases in students registering for and successfully completing AP exams. The end result was that students earned thousands of college credits at a fraction of the cost. Oldham has also been engaged in the fight for adequate school funding for all Pennsylvania schools and has testified before the state's Basic Education Funding Commission and other committees in the state's House of Representatives and Senate. He contributed language that was signed into law that delivered \$1.1 billion in new school funding targeted to hiring school counselors and other student services professionals. Since Oldham's advocacy work began in 2020, more than 1,000 new student services professionals, including more than 500 school counselors, are now working across Pennsylvania.

To Oldham, walking alongside young people as they navigate school and life, and being able to help them along the way, is the best part of being a school counselor. "Being a helper is the greatest reward," he said.

Oldham is a member of ASCA, the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association (government relations chair, former board member), the Pennsylvania State Education Association (school counselor president), Capital Area School Counselors Association (past president) and the Pennsylvania Coalition of Student Services Associations.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Rhode Island

Kristen Luongo

School Counselor
Smithfield High School
Smithfield

A school counselor since 2022, Kristen Luongo has a bachelor's degree in education from Rhode Island College and a master's degree in school counseling from Providence College.

Since attendance often affects students' abilities to learn and achieve, Luongo formed and facilitated an attendance committee to address chronic absenteeism. The team worked to discover the root causes of chronic absenteeism, disaggregate attendance data, implement an attendance policy and administer evidence-based attendance interventions. "Through this process, I developed and implemented an action plan, which aligns with my annual student outcome goal," she said. "By the end of the school year, student absenteeism had decreased by 55%." From the 2023-2024 to the 2024-2025 school year, the cumulative number of days absent decreased by 10%, and chronic absenteeism decreased by 1.57%. Luongo is also passionate about promoting the trades as a postsecondary option for students. At Smithfield, 63% of high school graduates attend a four-year college, 25% attend a two-year college, 4% attend a career/technical school and 2% enlist in the military, so for the past two years she focused on the 6% of students who are undecided. Through her work as a career and trades specialist, she collected data from individual assessments, including the ASVAB career interest inventory and the O*NET, to determine students' abilities and career interests. Then, she provided large group, small group, classroom instruction and individual advice about potential career paths and trades opportunities. During March, she hosts a trades month and has guest speakers from various trades talk to students about potential career paths, training programs, benefits and the application process.

As a school counselor, Luongo finds it most rewarding to see students evolve over four years and develop essential skills in problem-solving, self-advocacy and conflict resolution.

Luongo is a member of ASCA, the Rhode Island School Counselor Association (board member) and the Rhode Island Math Collaborative (board member).

South Carolina

Chasity McDaniel

School Counselor
Millbrook Elementary School
Aiken

Chasity McDaniel has been a school counselor since 2009 and has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of South Carolina - Aiken and a master's degree in school counseling from Augusta University.

McDaniel successfully implemented the All Pro Dad program to bring together key education partners to support student well-being. The initiative invites fathers and father figures to participate in monthly breakfast meetings with their children, creating opportunities for meaningful conversations and activities that strengthen family bonds and promote emotional connection. "With an average of 250 participants at each meeting, the program has become a vital part of our school community, fostering a positive and supportive environment that encourages active parental involvement," she said. "In addition, I took steps to address students' emotional regulation within the classroom by giving each class a toolbox of strategies and fidgets designed to help students manage big feelings and reduce stress." These resources empower students with self-regulation tools, allowing them to better focus on learning while promoting a culture of empathy and mental well-being throughout the school. By engaging families and equipping classrooms with emotional supports, McDaniel has helped to strengthen her school community's capacity to meet students' social/emotional and behavioral needs.

As an elementary school counselor, McDaniel's greatest reward is seeing her students grow and continue to thrive after they leave her care. "I was blessed by a former student who recognized me at the gym and shared that she was in college studying to become a school counselor because of our small group in elementary school," she said. "Another student recognized me in the grocery store and shared how well she was doing and expressed how proud she was to prepare for graduation. Moments like these remind me that the work I do may not cause an immediate change but does have lasting impact."

McDaniel is a member of ASCA and the Palmetto State School Counselor Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

South Dakota

Amy Hanisch-Lupkes

School Counselor
West Central High School
Hartford

Amy Hanisch-Lupkes has been a school counselor since 2002 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from South Dakota State University and a master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of Colorado - Colorado Springs.

As the only high school counselor for approximately 400 students, Tier 1 emphasis is crucial, so Hanisch-Lupkes makes it a priority to have SEL and depression/suicide awareness lessons in every class at every level working on career and college readiness. "It is important to me that students know what resources and help are out there if I'm not available," she said. "For example, I use Erika's Lighthouse curriculum with sophomores. They learn valuable information about depression and suicide awareness, and I have the opportunity to get to know each student a little better." Hanisch-Lupkes worked closely with administration to establish a robust Tier 2 program that uses data and identifies students who need extra support academically, emotionally or behaviorally.

For Hanisch-Lupkes, seeing students' emotional and behavioral growth from grades 9-12 is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. "Seeing the success that some students have as seniors, and knowing everything they battled through when they were younger, is always remarkable," she said. "This year, I think of one senior, who as a freshman faced a lot of turmoil that was out of his control. Yes, I was there for him, and many other adults supported him, but in the end he made the choice to use those supports and help himself end up in a better place than where he came from. I am in awe of seeing a student take ahold of their own power and choices, despite their circumstances."

Hanisch-Lupkes is a member of ASCA and the South Dakota School Counselor Association.

Tennessee

Dr. Trudy J. Hill-Jones

School Counselor
Sheffield High School
Memphis

A school counselor since 2008, Dr. Trudy J. Hill-Jones has a bachelor's degree in human development (with a certification in elementary K-8) from Christian Brothers University and a master's degree in education, early childhood, from Union University. She has a doctorate in educational leadership from National Louis University.

Hill-Jones has a strong belief that SEL and human connection are the heart of school counseling, as well as the heart of her school. "SEL is more than classroom lessons, parent meetings and professional development. It's about building and maintaining relationships," she said. "When students, parents and educators feel seen, heard and valued, they're equipped to manage emotions, build empathy and form positive connections with others." Her school is an urban school with concerns surrounding attendance, student behavior, family involvement, and climate and culture. After completing student minute-meetings, parent/guardian surveys and reviewing previous schoolwide data and trends, she noticed that the human connection was missing and that the school counseling program she inherited was reactive and not data-informed. "I immediately implemented a data-driven, proactive, Tier 1 SEL school counseling program, infused with mental health awareness to reach and benefit all students, staff and parents," she said.

For Hill-Jones, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is seeing the small wins: students who finally believe in themselves, shy students who find their voices, a family that feels heard and supported. "I love being a school counselor, and there is no doubt that this is my calling," she said. "I believe in the power of positive relationships, advocacy, empowerment and inspiration. There is no joy greater than making a lasting impact on the people that you serve."

Hill-Jones is a member of ASCA, the Tennessee School Counselor Association, the Memphis-Shelby County Education Association, the United Education Association, the National Education Association, the Tennessee Alternative Education Association and the National Alternative Education Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Texas

Paige Pendery

School Counselor
Northwood Hills Elementary School
Dallas

A school counselor since 2010, Paige Pendery has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies (emphasis in early childhood) from Texas A&M University - College Station and a master's degree in counseling from Texas A&M University - Commerce.

One of Pendery's biggest accomplishments has been helping her district's school counselor advisory resource team create a lesson timeline aligned with the district's graduate profile. She also helped to create guidance and small-group lessons aligned to the ASCA Student Standards. "In my leadership role as the elementary vice president of the Lone Star State School Counselor Association (LSSSCA), I was able to transition what we created in our school district to the members-only access part of the LSSSCA website so our district school counselors and LSSSCA members had access to well-vetted lessons," she said. Pendery also shared the process they used to create their timeline, lesson format and lessons with the Metroplex Area Counseling Educators and Supervisors and presented at LSSSCA's annual Rural Route Conference and the ASCA Annual Conference. "I am already looking forward to working with a team of school counselors to update our lessons and timeline since the needs of our students continually change," she said.

"The most rewarding thing about being a school counselor is being able to connect with students, their families and our school's staff," Pendery said. "I am thankful that I can provide a safe space for people in my school community to share what is going on in their world and that they trust me to connect them with the tools and resources that might help make their lives a little better. I always tell kids that as much as I wish I had a magic wand to take away the challenges they may be facing, I don't. However, I am always willing to listen and find a way to help."

Pendery is a member of ASCA and the Lone Star State School Counselor Association.

Utah

Amie Doepling

School Counselor
Mountain View Jr. High
West Haven

Amie Doepling has been a school counselor since 2018 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Weber State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Utah State University.

As an elementary school counselor, Doepling has had the opportunity to lead many important programs that support students' academic and social/emotional development; however, she especially values the impact of teaching classroom lessons. "Implementing Tier 1 instruction allowed me to address schoolwide needs proactively while building meaningful connections with every student in the building," she said. "By analyzing multiple sources of school data, I identified areas of need and designed targeted lessons and activities that supported our students' growth." Her approach helped to establish a shared language and consistent expectations across her school community and foster a more positive and cohesive learning environment.

Doepling said that one of the most rewarding parts of her profession is witnessing her students' growth and supporting the journey that helps them make positive, lasting changes. "While teachers have the wonderful opportunity to work closely with students each day, I feel fortunate to watch their development and maturity unfold over several years," she said. "I value the relationships I build with students, families and staff, and I take pride in bringing people together to create a strong, collaborative team dedicated to supporting each student's success."

Doepling is a member of ASCA and the Utah School Counselor Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Vermont

Lomond Richardson

School Counselor
Oxbow High School
Bradford

Lomond Richardson has been a school counselor since 2001 and has a bachelor's degree in special education from Lyndon State College (now Vermont State University) and a master's degree in school counseling from Plymouth State University.

After Vermont enacted Flexible Pathways legislation requiring schools to create multiple pathways to a high school diploma, Richardson implemented and expanded her school's flexible pathways offerings for students. "Our school now offers seven different concurrent enrollment courses for college credit," she said. The schedule allows students to take extra college courses while having time during the school day to do the work or seek help. "Since many students need to work to help their families, we have the start of a solid work-based learning program so students can take classes and get credit for work," she said. "We have many students doing independent study courses, online courses and self-designed projects to earn credit while exploring their interests."

To Richardson, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor in a small high school, which is also her alma mater, is helping students find their passions and interests and working with them to develop a graduation plan that meets their needs. "I had a student who wanted to explore the heavy equipment program at the Tech Center. When we looked into the program together, the student wanted to get a commercial driver's license (CDL) to drive a truck. We planned the junior year so most of the graduation requirements were completed. Then in the fall of senior year the student took the CDL driving course and passed and in the spring was able to go to work while earning credit."

Richardson is a member of ASCA, the Vermont School Counselor Association and the New Hampshire School Counselor Association.

Washington

Stefa Chow

School Counselor
Juanita High School
Kirkland

Stefa Chow has been a school counselor since 2014 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Washington and a master's degree in school counseling from Seattle Pacific University.

One of the most meaningful parts of Chow's work has been helping to develop the Juanita Flex Academy, a program designed to expand access to learning and create equitable opportunities for students who benefit from nontraditional pathways. "Using student data and identified needs, our team reimagined how we serve students who were struggling to stay connected to school," she said. "What began as a small initiative has grown into a program centered on trust, flexibility and belonging. Students who felt unseen or were unsure about how high school could help them now have consistent support and a team that believes in their ability to succeed." This same commitment extends to Chow's work supporting multilingual learners and their families. "Through data and student feedback, we expanded small-group supports for postsecondary planning, increased access to mental health care and strengthened the Family Connection Center, which has become a welcoming space where families access resources, build relationships and engage more fully with our school community. Together, these efforts have created a more inclusive and responsive system of support in our community."

For Chow, the most rewarding part of her work as a school counselor is seeing students grow each year, especially as they prepare themselves for life beyond high school. "School counseling is built on relationships, trust and care, and the greatest reward comes from seeing a community rally around students, remove barriers and help them recognize their strengths," she said. "I feel so honored to be in the community supporting them in this chapter of their lives."

Chow is a member of ASCA, the Washington School Counselor Association, the Washington Association for Bilingual Education and the University of Washington Alumni Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

West Virginia

Cari Jubb

School Counselor
Jefferson High School
Shenandoah Junction

A school counselor since 2007, Cari Jubb has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in school counseling, both from Slippery Rock University.

One accomplishment Jubb is proud of is leading the effort to develop comprehensive resources to help students and families better understand high school credits, graduation requirements and available programs. "I recognized a need for a clear, user-friendly guide that could serve as a central place for important academic information and collaborated with a colleague whose strengths complemented mine," she said. "I shared the vision, and together we created a Canva presentation that outlines how credits are earned, what's required to graduate and the various pathways available to students." This resource has become an essential tool during course registration, family nights and grade-level meetings and has improved communication with families and helped students make more informed decisions about their academic planning. "This project was a reminder of how collaboration and a shared goal can lead to lasting, meaningful impact within a school community," she said.

For Jubb, knowing that she can be a consistent support for students, especially when they're facing challenges, is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. "I often think back to a student who was going through a really difficult time and ended up withdrawing during his junior year," she said. "Before the withdrawal was finalized, we met several times to discuss his options and outline a plan for him to return when he was ready. Not only did he re-enroll the following fall, but he also stayed committed and graduated on time with his class. Being part of that journey and helping him see that his goals were still within reach is something I'll never forget."

Jubb is a member of ASCA, the West Virginia School Counselor Association, the West Virginia Education Association and the Jefferson County Education Association.

Wisconsin

Tammy M. Van Ess

School Counselor
Annie Jackson Elementary School
Green Bay

A school counselor since 2008, Tammy M. Van Ess has a bachelor's degree in human development from the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay and a master's degree in school counseling from Lakeland University.

One of Van Ess' proudest accomplishments is creating and growing Hunger Heroes, her school's pantry. "Since 2020, more than 1,500 bags of food have reached the homes of our families, ensuring that no child goes to bed hungry, and every household has access to the nourishment they need to thrive with dignity and hope," she said. "Local businesses, faith organizations, food banks and volunteers have become the lifeblood of Hunger Heroes, offering not just donations, but time, care and advocacy." Beyond food, Hunger Heroes also provides warmth. For the past three years, families have received handmade quilts crafted by a small group of students Van Ess has led. Mentored by the generous quilters of Calvary Lutheran Church, they built connection, compassion and purpose. "Each quilt is stitched with love and community spirit, offering comfort through the long winter months," she said. "Hunger Heroes is a testament to what's possible when a community comes together to care for its own: one meal, one quilt and one act of kindness at a time."

To Van Ess, serving her students in meaningful ways by guiding, encouraging and empowering them to grow into the best version of themselves is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor. "My goal is not only to support their academic growth but to help them develop empathy, resilience and a sense of purpose," she said. "When they leave the walls of Annie Jackson Elementary School, I want them to carry with them the tools to lead lives rooted in care for others, lives that reflect kindness, community and a commitment to making the world better for those around them."

Van Ess is a member of ASCA, the Wisconsin School Counselor Association and the Green Bay Education Association.



2026 State School Counselors of the Year

Wyoming

Erin Curtis

School Counselor
Shoshone Learning Center
Powell

Erin Curtis has been a school counselor since 2013 and has a bachelor's degree in family and consumer science from the University of Wyoming and a master's degree in education (school counseling) from Liberty University.

One of Curtis' biggest accomplishments as a school counselor has been transforming the school counseling program at her alternative high school. "When I started, services were mostly responsive and limited to a few individual meetings each week," she said. "Over time, I built a comprehensive, data-informed program aligned with the ASCA framework that better supports our high-needs, high-turnover student population." The program now includes wellness and senior groups, workshops, college and career events, mindfulness mornings, a Building Intervention Team and MTSS. Curtis is also dedicated to strengthening the

profession statewide through her work with the Wyoming School Counselor Association (WySCA). "I've served on the board for six years, including as conference chair, where I helped grow the annual conference and make it more engaging and relevant for school counselors across Wyoming," she said. Curtis also co-led the creation of the WySCA Book Study, turning traditional webinars into a credit-bearing, discussion-based learning opportunity that brought school counselors together in new ways. "These experiences have deepened my passion for advocacy and connection, giving me more confidence to be a leader in my roles as a school counselor and someone who represents the profession," she said.

For Curtis, witnessing the moment when students truly see their potential and realize the possibilities ahead of them is her favorite part of being a school counselor.

Curtis is a member of ASCA, the Wyoming School Counselor Association and the Wyoming Counseling Association.