



2024 School Counselor of the Year

Diana Virgil, Ph.D., ACSC

School Counselor
Daleville High School
Daleville, Ala.

Diana Virgil, Ph.D., ACSC, has been a school counselor since 2015 and currently works at Daleville High School in Daleville, Ala. Virgil received a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in school counseling (education specialist in counseling) from Mississippi College. She earned a doctorate in counselor education and supervision from the University of the Cumberlands. In 2021, she became an ASCA-Certified School Counselor (ACSC), in the inaugural class of ACSC recipients.



"Right from the start, Dr. Virgil demonstrated her deep knowledge of and commitment to a comprehensive school counseling program," said Erin O'Malley, a member of the School Counselor of the Year Selection Committee and principal at St. Theresa Catholic School, Ashburn, Va. "Throughout the interview process, Diana presented as an energetic and caring professional, with a deep compassion for her students and desire for them to succeed.

Approximately 73% of the 347 students at Daleville High School come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of these students are trailblazers in their families, aiming to be the first to graduate from high school. When Virgil arrived at the school, she noticed that a significant number of students were not participating in dual-enrollment classes. After surveying the students, she identified several barriers to their access to dual enrollment: a lack of awareness about

dual enrollment, limited college aspirations, transportation challenges and financial constraints regarding class and book costs. Virgil promptly established a partnership with the local community college to boost student enrollment. A significant turning point came when Virgil learned that the partner college had applied for a grant that would provide eligible students with free tuition and books for dual enrollment, revolutionizing the opportunities for students to earn both high school and college credit. To address the transportation challenges, Virgil worked with the college to implement online courses and conduct Accuplacer testing on the high school campus and enlisted teachers with master's degrees to teach dual-enrollment courses at the high school. This approach increased the number of students in dual enrollment from four to more than 40 each semester. This year, the school is on the cusp of graduating its first student with a high school diploma and an associate degree in science, along with its first student with a mechatronics certification from the aviation college. As a result of Virgil's extensive collaboration and advocacy efforts, the school now offers dual-enrollment courses in science, English and math, with in-person instruction provided by teachers on the high school campus.

For Virgil, the most rewarding part of her work as a school counselor is the opportunity to be a support system for her students. In the mornings, many students are exhausted from staying up all night to care for their siblings, feeling defeated because they struggle to improve their math grades or pondering their place in the world. "Each day that I have the privilege of going to Daleville High School and giving my students my best, that's where I find the most rewarding feeling," she said.

Virgil is a member of ASCA, the Alabama School Counselor Association, the Alabama Counseling Association and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. Instagram: @realitycounselor

Delaware

Kristin D. Nye

School Counselor
Anna P. Mote Elementary School
Wilmington



Kristin D. Nye has been a school counselor since 2005 and currently works at Anna P. Mote Elementary School in Wilmington, Del. Nye received a bachelor's degree with a double major in psychology and sociology from the University of Delaware and a master's degree in elementary school counseling from West Chester University.

Nye is proud that her elementary school is the first in her district to have a diversity club. With a predominantly minority population of multilingual learners, a significant focus of the school's counseling and continuous improvement plans is on creating a learning environment where all students feel engaged and accepted. "We have been seeing an increase in students struggling with their identities and their place in our school and in our community," she said. "Our club's name highlights our purpose. Bringing Awareness, Respect and Kindness while Practicing Acceptance, Courage and Kinship (BARK PACK) encapsulates our vision and mission to enact systemic change." BARK PACK strives to make all students and staff feel seen, heard and validated through projects, artwork, conversations and time. "Our focus is on the many different types of diversity, from culture to race, gender identity to traditions, religion to abilities and everything in between," she said. "We hope to become a model for diversity and inclusion in elementary schools in our district, as well as in our state."

To Nye, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is the impact school counselors can have. She is passionate about challenging traditional ideas about school counseling by helping people understand that mental health is health and that school counselors are an integral part of education. "I have been fortunate enough to serve on our state school counselor association board, make connections throughout our state across multiple stakeholder groups and act as a resource, not only for my school but for other schools in our district," she said. Her work has led to a collaboration with local legislators in the process of crafting, supporting and advocating for mental health supports in education to be enshrined in state legislation. "I strive to be seen as a leader, an advocate, a resource and a support, for my students and for my staff and colleagues as well," Nye said. "Systemic change is happening in Delaware, and it is so rewarding to be a part of the positive momentum

supporting mental health needs, not only in my school but in my district and my state."

Nye is a member of ASCA, the Delaware School Counselor Association, the Red Clay Education Association, the Delaware State Education Association, the National Education Association and the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Twitter/X: @zenmstrmndknye, Instagram: @zenmstrmndknye

Oklahoma

Jennifer Sack

Lead School Counselor
Booker T. Washington High School
Tulsa



Jennifer Sack has been a school counselor since 2012 and currently works at Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Okla. Sack received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Saint Mary's College at Notre Dame, Ind., and a master's degree from the University of Tulsa in counselor education.

In April 2022, Sack became aware of language in a bill proposed in the state legislature related to students meeting with their school counselor about issues of gender identity or sexual orientation. As an ASCA U Legal & Ethical Specialist and a member of the Oklahoma School Counselor Association's (OSCA) Ethics Committee, she was concerned about the bill's ethical implications for the working relationship of trust between school counselors and students. Sack collaborated with ASCA, OSCA and some state legislators to work to either defeat the bill or at least have the language "meeting with their school counselor" stricken. "I enlisted the support of other school counselors in my district," she said. "I advised legislators who opposed the bill about the role of the school counselor and the ASCA Ethical Standards related to topics of student gender identity and sexual orientation." Legislators used the information Sack shared to guide them in calling for amendments to the original bill. The language of the bill was significantly revised, and the phrase "meeting with the school counselor" was stricken.

For Sack, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is when students tell her she made a difference in their lives. "Whether they say, 'Thank you for making me believe college was possible for me,' or 'If it weren't for you, I would have dropped out' or 'Thanks for being someone I could talk to,' knowing I made a difference to a student is the greatest feeling in the world," she said.

Sack is a member of ASCA, OSCA, the Great Plains Association for College Admission Counseling and the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Instagram: @sack.jennifer

Washington

Jorge Torres

School Counselor
Foster High School
Tukwila



Jorge Torres has been a school counselor since 2000; he currently works at Foster High School in Tukwila, Wash. Torres received a bachelor's degree with a triple major in Spanish, social studies and history from Eastern Washington University and a master's degree in counseling specialization from Heritage University.

"In fall 2016, many students and families reached out to me with feelings of fear of being separated from their families due to their legal status in a climate of increased xenophobia," Torres said. "I experienced instability and unpredictability as a child migrant farmworker, so I know firsthand the impact fear can have on a student's life and education." The fears expressed by students and families led Torres to initiate a legal clinic at his school that December and facilitate the event with the help of other educators, their student MEChA club and community organizations. He coordinated the participation of state and local organizations and 15 immigration attorneys, who provided free legal support to students and families, and he arranged for local immigrant rights organizations to inform them of their legal rights. He also ensured mental health agencies were present to provide services. The presentations were held entirely in Spanish, and child care and dinner were provided. "The legal clinic was a tremendous success, with more than 200 parents and students in attendance," he said. "Parents left the clinic with legal guardianship paperwork and resources, which gave students a greater sense of safety and allowed them to better focus at school."

For Torres, the ability to serve students during their high school years, knowing that through his work he is shaping future generations, is what he finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. "I also really enjoy the everyday interactions with students and colleagues and the countless shared experiences," he said.

Torres is a member of ASCA, the Washington School Counselor Association, the Washington Education Association and the Tukwila Education Association. Instagram: @jorge573

Wisconsin

Cindy Bourget

School Counselor
Elk Mound Middle School
Elk Mound



Cindy Bourget has been a school counselor since 2016; she currently works at Elk Mound Middle School in Elk Mound, Wis. Bourget received a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls and a master's degree in school counseling from University of Wisconsin - Stout.

In 2022, data on discipline at Elk Mound Middle School showed that male students were struggling to meet behavioral expectations and were receiving 85% of the school's office discipline referrals (ODRs). This data, when combined with supplemental reports from teachers, parents and students, exposed a gap in student discipline; students weren't being taught the coping and conflict management skills expected, and when they made mistakes, they did not receive the help they needed to figure out how to fix it. Subsequently, Bourget created an ODR Club, where students who had received an ODR spent time processing the referral. "The focus was on identifying how their actions affect others and on how to fix the situation," Bourget explained. By the end of the first year, 75% of the boys had fewer than three ODRs a semester. Further, with the success of the intervention, the school developed a multitiered system of supports for discipline, including explicit instruction and consistent Tier 2 interventions.

For Bourget, the most rewarding aspect of school counseling is seeing how the hard work students put in pays off in ways that help them be successful the rest of their lives. "When we start our work together, many times students do not believe they can do it," she said. "There is true joy in seeing how they can surprise themselves. I am beyond fortunate to have found a career that allows me to find personal fulfillment. I know that everything I put into my work is going to help my community for generations."

Bourget is a member of ASCA and the Wisconsin School Counselor Association, where she is the data director for the board of operations.



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Alaska

Sara Miller

School Counselor
South Anchorage High School
Anchorage

Sara Miller has been a school counselor since 2004 and has a bachelor's degree in environmental science from the University of Nevada - Reno, and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Alaska - Anchorage.

As a school counselor and coach at South Anchorage High School, Miller had grown tired of losing quality students to other local schools that offered unique programs, seminar-style learning or an IB program. As a community member who is on several nonprofit boards, she noticed a lack of volunteers. "Since a community can only be as strong as the number of people willing to contribute, I decided we needed a systemic change," she said. "We needed to start graduating young adults who understand the importance of giving back to their community." Her original idea was to intertwine community service and civic leadership into a few classes and have each student complete 120 hours of community service with a single nonprofit or charity and then report about their experience through a senior capstone project. Eventually, a group of teachers bought into the mission of shaping civically minded individuals, and they went to work.

In addition to emphasizing community involvement, they reached out to the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). "In developing this new academic pathway, we had to keep Anchorage School District (ASD) requirements in mind while navigating UAA protocol," she explained. "Working with the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, UAA professors and some ASD administrators, the Civic Leadership Program was born - the first dual-credit program in Anchorage where students earn college credit while being taught at their home school by their own teachers with a required community involvement project." Our goal was to recruit a wide array of students from gifted AP students to hard-working students who thought college was out of reach. "I worked extensively at the middle-school level with school counselors and teachers to familiarize them with the program and solicit interest, and I organized parent/student nights to unveil the program to our community," she said. The first cohort of 75 is on their way to earning 30 college credits.

For Miller, supporting and mentoring students and being a positive influence on their educational and social/emotional journey is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor.

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

Arizona

Zulema Fragoso

School Counselor
Nogales High School
Nogales

Zulema Fragoso has been a school counselor since 2006. She has a bachelor's degree in business management and a master's degree in business administration (emphasis on health care management), both from the University of Phoenix. Fragoso also has a master's of education degree in school counseling from the University of Arizona.

Since the beginning of her career in school counseling, college and career readiness was a driving force for Fragoso, leading her to create a University Club focused solely on postsecondary education. Colleges, universities, trade schools and other programs in the community are invited to the weekly meetings to help students understand the opportunities available to them so they can achieve their postsecondary goals. Students in the University Club have received scholarships from such entities as Questbridge, Gates, Flinn, Dorrance, Foot Locker and others. They have continued their postsecondary education at Stanford University, University of Notre Dame, Duke University, Johns Hopkins University, Washington University, Boston University, University of Arizona and Arizona State University, to name a few. Students also learn about summer opportunities inside and outside of the community. This past year, Nogales High School students received more than \$10 million in scholarship funds. "The success rate of our program continues to increase as new students become aware of this program, which is now embedded within our school, and the culture of going to college has grown," Fragoso said.

For Fragoso, being able to make a difference in someone's life is the most rewarding part of being a school counselor.

Fragoso is a member of ASCA, the Arizona School Counselors Association, the Rocky Mountain Association for College Admission Counseling, the Horatio Alger Association and Arizona ACT Council. Twitter/X: @zulemafragoso, Instagram: @zafragoso



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Arkansas

Pamela Parkman

School Counselor
Wynne High School
Wynne

Pamela Parkman has been a school counselor since 2011 and has a bachelor's degree in business/accounting and a master's degree in educational leadership, both from Arkansas State University. She has a second master's degree in school counseling from the University of West Alabama.

Parkman believes it is important to encourage students to be service-minded. During the holidays, her school offers students the opportunity to connect with various agencies in their community. The students have written personal Christmas cards to a local retirement/nursing home, donated items to a local homeless/women's shelter and created secret notes to be left for various students and staff members.

For Parkman, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is working one-on-one to prepare students for life after high school.

Parkman is a member of ASCA, the Northeast Arkansas School Counselors Association and the Arkansas School Counselor Association. Instagram: @pcparkman

California

Laurie Tristan

Counselor Coach
Santa Ana Unified School District
Santa Ana

Laurie Tristan has been a school counselor since 1997 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of California - Los Angeles and a master's degree in counseling (concentration in school counseling) from California State University - Fullerton.

To address the rising need to build community and support social/emotional learning post-pandemic, Tristan created a schoolwide advisement program called Tiger Connection. Through this homeroom period, students learn social/emotional lessons and character education, and her school reinforces behavior expectations. What was meant to provide support for one year as the school returned from distance learning has become a systemic structure now in its fourth year. "To support the ASCA Student Standards on understanding postsecondary education and lifelong

learning, my co-counselor and I recognized a need to increase college and career exposure and exploration opportunities for students," Tristan said. "From this, we created a college and career exploration program in which students complete engaging activities to learn about postsecondary options." For completing MacTivities, students earn a field trip to local universities. Since 2015, more than 1,000 students have participated and visited local colleges. "My proudest accomplishment was leading our team to earn RAMP designation for our comprehensive school counseling program at MacArthur Fundamental," she said. "In my new role, I coach our district school counseling teams to align their programs with the ASCA National Model. Additionally, I recently coached three high schools to apply for RAMP designation, and I serve as a RAMP reviewer for ASCA."

"What I love about being a school counselor is the relationships I get to build with my students," Tristan said. Her greatest joy is watching them grow from unsure, nervous sixth graders to more confident eighth graders, ready to move on to the next level of high school. Knowing that they trust her to go on this journey with them through what can be the most challenging part of their adolescence is what drives Tristan's passion to do her work each day.

Tristan is a member of ASCA, the California Association of School Counselors and the UCLA Alumni Association. Instagram: @schoolcounselor.mrs.tristan

Colorado

Sarah Clapham

School Counselor
West Middle School
Colorado Springs

A school counselor since 2009, Sarah Clapham has a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism from Troy University and a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Colorado - Colorado Springs.

After identifying opportunity gaps that had an impact on student engagement, Clapham advocated for all students to have opportunities to access academically rigorous programs and coursework. She partnered with a precollegiate program that supports diverse, first-generation middle school students and enrolled 24 students, who participated in monthly field trips to the university for academic and social/emotional activities that prepare them for their postsecondary journeys. Clapham also advocated to pilot middle school pre-AP classes for all eighth graders. Previously, only students enrolled in the



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school's Gifted Magnet Program had access to advanced coursework. Now, all eighth graders have access to pre-AP courses, and 75% of them earned one or more high school credits, while some earned as many as five. At the end of the year, student engagement data showed a 17% increase. Also, when Clapham noticed a disproportionate number of male students failing classes and accruing suspensions, she wrote a grant to develop a boy's mentoring program. In collaboration with administrators, teachers and community organizations, she developed an elective class that reduced the number of suspensions by 50% and the number of failing grades by 43% among male students.

At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, West Middle School was notified that the grant that allowed for two school counselors would not be maintained. Amid the pandemic, this news seemed counterintuitive to the students' needs, so Clapham advocated for her students and their families to have access to a comprehensive school counseling program, even if it challenged current policy. She submitted programming details, data and community support letters to the district's board, and the decision was reversed. The district leadership maintained the second school counselor position for the year and made it permanent.

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

Connecticut

Anne Zinn

School Counselor
Norwich Free Academy
Norwich

A school counselor since 2015, Anne Zinn has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Connecticut and a master's degree in school counseling/counseling psychology from Boston College.

In her role as a school counselor, a coach and a club advisor, Zinn has a unique vantage point that has allowed her to connect with all types of students across campus. In the past few years, it was clear that student athletes, in particular, were struggling with the pressure of perfectionism and their emotional well-being. "Inspired by their resiliency and perseverance, in fall 2022 I planned the first-ever #MentalHealthMatters Conference for all 700 rostered athletes," she said. "The goal of the day was to shed light on the increased pressure and expectations athletes can face and emphasize that it is OK to ask for help when needed." The day consisted of a student panel,

where nine student athletes shared their personal stories about sports and mental health, and a presentation by a sports psychologist, who shared strategies for caring for personal well-being. The conference also included a session for coaches, who shared ways to create a positive, healthy environment in which athletes can thrive. "The day was incredibly impactful for all involved and helped coaches to better understand the social and emotional struggles our athletes are facing," she said.

To Zinn, the most rewarding thing about being a school counselor is watching students who may be hesitant to try something or may have felt lost realize their potential, their personal strength and passion and become the people they want to be. "I love cheering students on, pushing them to accomplish their goals and watching as they make their dreams come true, no matter what it is," she said.

Zinn is a member of ASCA, the Connecticut School Counselor Association and the University of Connecticut Alumni Association. Instagram: @annezinn

Florida

Danya Laverack

School Counselor
Indian River Academy Elementary School
Vero Beach

Danya Laverack began work as a school counselor in 2018 and has a bachelor's degree in music education from Stetson University and a master's degree in school counseling from Capella University.

Laverack's greatest accomplishment as a school counselor was finding meaningful ways to decrease her school's discipline referrals by 44.19% since the 2020 school year. To accomplish this, she knew she needed to work closely with administration, school staff, parents/guardians and community members. "We quickly identified students' needs and realized they needed additional support to regulate their emotions," she said. "I focused my instruction on teaching positive coping/social skills and resiliency lessons once a week for all students grades K-5." She also provided teachers with professional development to bring a community check-in to their classrooms in which each student could share that day's feelings, a morning meeting outline and a social/emotional lesson. Data showed that when students were regulated, their behavioral issues decreased, and they improved academically.



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To Laverack, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is advocating and building strong relationships with each student on campus. “I truly believe that every child deserves a school counselor who believes in them, celebrates their success and is always there for them,” she said. “Being a school counselor is such a gift, and I am thankful that I have had the opportunity to support them to create goals to be successful during their fundamental years.”

Laverack is a member of ASCA and the Florida School Counselor Association. Twitter/X: @danyalaverack

Georgia

John O. Nwosu Jr.

School Counselor
Garrett Middle School
Austell

John O. Nwosu Jr. has been a school counselor since 2017 and has a bachelor’s degree in chemistry (minor in Africana studies) and a master’s degree in school counseling, both from Georgia Southern University. He also has an education specialist degree in counselor education from Georgia Southern University.

Nwosu’s school counselor training leads him to look deeper by considering disproportionality in various types of school data. He began by integrating discipline, achievement and attendance data into student performance spreadsheets that his administration uses for intervention planning. During leadership and staff meetings, he brought attention to gaps in outcome data, such as the overrepresentation of Black students in discipline data and underrepresentation of Latinx students in advanced classes. The data compelled him to research interventions to meet student needs, and he found that trauma-informed and restorative practices, explicit SEL instruction and culturally sustaining teaching were all linked to improved outcomes. “Conveying my findings contributed to my principal’s decision to implement trauma-informed practices, the Second Step SEL program and adult SEL support,” he said. “Additionally, I began collaborating with a school counseling colleague to remove district-level barriers. We cofounded a community organization, Stronger Together, which supports students experiencing racism by organizing events and interventions to address districtwide data gaps.” After significant effort, the district began offering culturally responsive training, which Nwosu’s principal hosted for the staff. While this was a step forward, concerning stories and statistics persist,

leading Nwosu to continue cultivating conditions for systemic change.

For Nwosu, getting to help students and staff do and become more than they previously thought is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor.

Nwosu is a member of ASCA, the Georgia School Counselor Association and the Cobb County School Counselor Association. Twitter/X: @johnjayknew, @thinkdflife; Instagram: @johnjayknew, @thinkdflife

Guam

Brenda Jean Porter

School Counselor
Finegayan Elementary School
Dededo

A school counselor since 2005, Brenda Jean Porter has a bachelor’s degree in education (with a minor in psychology) and a master’s degree in school counseling, both from Southern Adventist University.

Porter’s desire to be a school counselor stems from her passion for working with young people. “My desire to help students be the best they can be, to be alongside them and be their cheerleader while teaching them coping skills to deal with life’s challenges, has helped me realize that I love what I do,” she said. From that she has drawn the inspiration to lead and make lasting contributions that have supported students’ academic and social/emotional growth and development. Through her role as work team leader for elementary school counselors, she has collaborated and advocated for initiatives that promote the professional development of school counselors so they are well-equipped to serve and make a difference in the lives of students. Just as she strives to inspire, Porter also finds inspiration in others. She notes that her fellow school counselors and work team leaders have encouraged her to bring out her best self, and she is especially thankful to her school principal for seeing in her what she did not see in herself. “I am also inspired when I see my students making changes in their lives for the better,” she said.

For Porter, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is when students have an “aha” moment after learning a new concept or skill she taught them.

Porter is a member of ASCA and the Guam Association of School Counselors.



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Hawaii

Shely Matsuko Chang

School Counselor
Ka'imiloa Elementary School
Ewa Beach

Shely Matsuko Chang has been a school counselor since 2005 and has a bachelor's degree in ethnic studies and a master's degree in school counseling, both from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

One of Chang's accomplishments as a school counselor was creating a schoolwide career day for students in grades K-6. Now in its 12th year, the annual career day helps students develop aspirations for the future while they hear firsthand about careers that might interest them or that they had never heard of before. "I have also worked with our administrator, advisory team and MTSS cadre to develop tiers to support and address all of our students socially/emotionally and behaviorally with interventions," she said. The two-person school counseling department developed and implemented a School Attendance Review Team system to meet with families who have students who either had or developed high numbers of absences. "By working with the families," she said, "we are able to create a better relationship and provide support to improve our attendance rate/chronic absenteeism."

To Chang, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is working with students every day and seeing them gain the skills they need to be successful.

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

Idaho

Jordan Chesler

School Counselor
Eagle High School
Eagle

A school counselor since 2015, Jordan Chesler has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Boise State University and a master's degree in counseling (emphasis in school counseling) from Northwest Nazarene University.

"After my school experienced two student suicides within nine days of each other, I launched a communitywide Mental Health Matters campaign," Chesler said. "I spoke to each grade level about resources and identifying the trusted adults in their lives and held a family information night

regarding warning signs and community resources." The Mental Health Matters campaign was focused on the central point that there is no shame in people struggling with their mental health.

For Chesler, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is having the opportunity to connect with students, many of whom often do not have a connection with an adult.

Chesler is a member of ASCA and the Idaho School Counselor Association. Instagram: @jchescounselor

Illinois

Mary Wilson

School Counselor
Churchville Middle School
Elmhurst

A school counselor since 2008, Mary Wilson has a bachelor's degree in middle school education from the University of Dayton and master's degrees in school counseling and educational leadership, both from Northeastern Illinois University.

The needs of the most vulnerable population in Wilson's school community were unveiled during the pandemic. Disparities in the educational, health, food and legal systems unearthed needs that one school or organization could not support on its own, so the Elmhurst Resource Collaboration (ERC) was born. During the 2020-2021 school year, Wilson was a founding member of this impactful force of leaders. "We worked to harness the resources of our community and make them accessible to all," she said. They hosted an inaugural Back-to-School Resource Fair, a one-stop-shop event that empowered families by promoting community engagement, education, health and wellness. "We provided clothing; counseling; and legal, literacy, medical and school resources to adults and children," she said. This monumental undertaking included administering 32 school and sports physicals, performing 35 dental exams, distributing 200 sets of school supplies and providing 300 boxes of food. In 2022, the fair grew, and more than 400 people attended. "Career recruitment and hearing and vision screenings were added, and the Mexican and Guatemalan Consulates were on site to assist with services. The fair has become an annual event, and I am proud to continue the impactful work of the ERC in strengthening our community," Wilson said.

To Wilson, the rewards of being a school counselor are bountiful. "To watch the growth and metamorphosis of students is powerful and encouraging. I strive to build



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strong, positive relationships with students through implementing Tier 1 and Tier 2 strategies schoolwide, which results in empowered students who have the confidence to explore beyond their comfort zone, advocate for themselves and friends and reflect during setbacks. Students trust me with their vulnerabilities, gifts and celebrations. Being a part of our students' stories is an honor."

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

Indiana

Lydia G. McNeiley

College and Career Coordinator
Charles N. Scott Middle School
Hammond

Lydia G. McNeiley has been a school counselor since 2017 and has a bachelor's degree in social work from Indiana University Northwest and a master's degree in education-school counseling from Purdue University - Northwest.

As a school counselor, McNeiley built a large network of community partners and leveraged those relationships to develop a program that provides students with exposure to a variety of postsecondary opportunities. To increase the number of students taking dual-credit courses, McNeiley worked with Ivy Tech, the school's dual-credit partner, to take eighth-grade students to visit their local campus and learn about the dual-credit program, tour the campus and meet with the director of admissions. Since then, the number of students taking the dual-credit classes has increased by more than 50%, and Ivy Tech now offers the students an industry certification. "We have also partnered with Purdue University - Northwest so their TRIO program could visit all of our middle school classes and take our students to visit the campus," McNeiley said. "I have also worked with Indiana Latino Institute to take more than 500 students to their College and Career Fair." She also worked to earn RAMP designation for her school and is working to align the district school counseling programs to the ASCA National Model. Two of the district's other schools applied for RAMP designation in 2023.

What McNeiley finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is knowing that she can help make a difference in her students' lives. Even on the most challenging days, she focuses on why she is a school counselor - to help find opportunities for the students. "This is not a job to me," she said, "it is what I know I am called to do. As school counselors, we have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our students and bring about systemic change in

our school buildings and communities. My students deserve the best, and I work to bring that to them."

McNeiley is a member of ASCA, the Northwest Indiana Influential Women Association, the Hammond Hispanic Community Committee, the National College Attainment Network and the Indiana Latino Institute's Legislative Advisory Committee. She is a lead RAMP reviewer, a National School Counselor Fellow through San Diego State University and currently serves on the Indiana School Counselor Association's Board of Directors and ASCA's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. Twitter/X: @lmcneiley

Iowa

Lori L. Clore

School Counselor
John F. Kennedy High School
Cedar Rapids

A school counselor since 1996, Lori L. Clore has a bachelor's degree in English education and a master's degree in counseling and human development, both from the University of Iowa.

A primary goal of Clore's school counseling program is to address gaps in achievement with a focus on equity for all. Her school had a multiyear professional development opportunity provided by the Cedar Rapids Community School District using the national Transforming School Counseling initiative sponsored by the Education Trust in Washington, D.C. "One of my roles as department lead at my high school was to infuse what our team learned into everyday practice, incorporating the ideals of the program to positively impact our most vulnerable student populations," she said. "When our school counseling team started to develop and implement a tiered approach to our curriculum, our administrators were willing to add school counseling staff after seeing the benefits of a schoolwide school counseling program." In 1998, the school had four full-time school counselors; now there are seven. "The use of data, as well as a focus on the ASCA National Model, has made significant improvements to our school community," Clore stated.

What Clore finds most rewarding about being a school counselor is the opportunity to meet with students, watch their growth, be a supportive listener and problem-solver as they navigate high school and help them customize their postsecondary plans, thus helping them make their personal goals a reality.

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



2024 State School Counselors of the Year

Kansas

Mallory Jacobs

Lead School Counselor
Whitson Elementary School
Topeka

Mallory Jacobs began work as a school counselor in 2012 and has a bachelor's degree in family studies human services (minor in leadership studies) and a master's degree in school counseling, both from Kansas State University.

As a school counselor, Jacobs loves working with elementary school students and being their cheerleader. "I am so happy to help motivate kids to be their best selves and learn how to be awesome," she said. "My favorite word is awesome, and we learn how to spell it in preschool and kindergarten. We talk about how important it is to be awesome every single day." In classroom lessons, Jacobs teaches weekly social/emotional learning lessons. "We talk about what awesome means, how we show it and how we rock it every day," she said. They also discuss how some days are not always awesome, but they can look for something awesome in every day. In the past three years, Jacobs started "Motivational Mondays with Miss Jacobs/Mal Pal," a pump-up video for schools to encourage parents/guardians, students and staff to have a great week. The video has been a success with the students as the stars of the show. "It is such a fun opportunity and a wonderful way to kick off the week in a positive way," she said.

To Jacobs, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is being able to help students, staff and families. "Working with the kids is the best," she said. "The students are so fun and enjoy learning, and it makes me so happy to see them happy. I am able to help families in tough times and be a bridge between home and school." Knowing that she is an extra support for families and their children and is part of their village is so rewarding that it is the reason she keeps coming back year after year.

Jacobs is a member of ASCA, the Kansas School Counselor Association and the Kansas State Alumni Association. She is a school counseling consultant for the Kansas State Department of Education. Instagram: @maljacobs

Kentucky

Brooke Fell

School Counselor
Bondurant Middle School
Frankfort

A school counselor since 2018, Brooke Fell has a bachelor's degree in middle grades education from Eastern Kentucky University and master's degrees in middle grades education from Georgetown College and school counseling from the University of the Cumberlands.

"Empowering students to have the courage to take risks and be authentic is important," Fell said, "especially in middle school where kids often feel insecure and look for a place of belonging." Fell believes strong student relationships have given her the opportunity to empower many students and help them make big ideas a reality. Fell worked with a group of students to create The Kindness Club, which has the mission of promoting kindness at school. Other student-led projects stemmed from the club, including The Kind Line, in which the creators work to spread happiness and motivation to anyone who needs a positive message. The Kind Line is accessible from any phone and has a changing positive outgoing message that includes a joke. "This is impacting our community in a large way by providing a built-in pick-me-up," Fell said, "but it has also inspired many students in our school to participate by submitting jokes, quotes or a request to be a guest voice on The Kind Line." The impact of The Kind Line has been far-reaching, and it has been featured on a local podcast and in the newspaper, the news and *People* magazine. Most important, it has placed kindness and positivity into everyday conversations in her building and has been a big part of the positive culture shift at the school.

For Fell, having the opportunity to interact with and have an impact on every student in her building in a positive way, even if it is just greeting them by name each day, is what she finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. "When students come to me for help or with ideas or celebrations, I feel accomplished knowing they feel seen, loved and valued," she said.

Fell is a member of ASCA and the Kentucky School Counselor Association. Instagram: @brookefell4



2024 State School Counselors of the Year

Louisiana

Sarah Martin

School Counselor
Milton Elementary Middle School
Milton

Sarah Martin has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Mississippi College and a master's degree in school counseling from Mississippi State University.

Healing House, a nonprofit organization that specializes in children's grief and offers free counseling to children who have experienced the death of a loved one, is a particularly helpful resource in the area. Martin knew that many of the families in her school community were unable to travel across town to attend a grief counseling group, so in 2019, she collaborated with Healing House and school board supervisors to begin a program that would bring grief counseling to students at Carencro Middle School. "The shift we saw in those students, coupled with the new grief- and trauma-informed approach the teachers had, made a noticeable positive change in the culture of school," she said. "This program was so successful that we ended up being a pilot school." Grief groups were established in some other schools in her district that spring, and by the following school year, it was offered to all schools in her parish. "Currently the program is running in many of our elementary, middle and high schools," she noted.

What Martin finds most rewarding in school counseling are the moments where the walls come down - when students begin to feel comfortable in expressing their feelings but then shift and begin to advocate for themselves. "That moment is so empowering, but oftentimes it does not happen in the same school year," she said. "However, it may be a follow-up email the next year or years later that reminds you of those pivotal moments in that student's life when you helped plant that seed."

Martin is a member of ASCA, the Louisiana School Counselor Association and the Louisiana Counseling Association. Instagram: @sarah_martin_0414

Maine

Amanda Wilcox

School Counselor
Hall-Dale Elementary School
Hallowell

Amanda Wilcox has been a school counselor since 2015 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Clemson University and a master's degree in counseling from the University of Southern Maine.

To better implement an effective school counseling program aligned with the ASCA National Model, Wilcox used her leadership skills to facilitate positive change. Once weekly guidance instruction was established for students, she advocated for teachers to remain in the room during the lessons, add to the discussion and think about how to embed the core ideas into regular classroom content. On occasion, the classroom teacher acted as a co-facilitator when role-playing or working in groups. "The goal in setting up the classroom lesson in this format is to help teachers become more aware of the social/emotional skills their students are currently working on and to feel more equipped to reference these topics in the moment as situations arise in the classroom," Wilcox said. "As a leader within my school and community, I promote and support student success through this effective approach to classroom lessons, which results in more collaboration among teachers."

To Wilcox, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is supporting all students so they can blossom and grow. "Working with students longitudinally from kindergarten through fifth grade provides a unique opportunity to observe student growth through risk taking, personal discovery and academic challenges," she said.

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



2024 State School Counselors of the Year

Maryland

Heather Quill

School Counselor
Lincoln Elementary School
Frederick

Heather Quill has been a school counselor since 1999 and has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Frostburg State University and a master's degree in counseling from McDaniel College.

In 2018, Quill created a comprehensive schoolwide program to provide trauma-informed, restorative education to the students, staff and community. The program shares a common language and schoolwide system of emotional temperature-taking to develop consistent communication and responses as students and adults increase self-awareness leading to increased regulation. Quill trains all staff, including bus drivers, day care providers and local support groups, as well as city police. The program has also been expanded to a local college to train new mentors for the students. "We have seen a tremendous increase in the students' ability to regulate and advocate, leading to increased academic success," she said. "Families regularly share that students use our common language and skills at home."

For Quill, helping students and families experience their worth and dignity is what she finds most rewarding about being a school counselor, along with supporting educators to successfully educate in a regulated environment.

Quill is a member of ASCA, the Frederick County Counseling Association, the Maryland Counseling Association and the American Association of Educators. Twitter/X: @heatherquill4

Massachusetts

Andrea Encarnacao Martin

School Counselor
Boston Latin School
Boston

Andrea Encarnacao Martin has been a school counselor since 2004 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of New Hampshire and a master's degree in school counseling from Northeastern University. She also has a certificate of advanced graduate studies in educational leadership from the University of Massachusetts - Boston.

For more than 10 years, members of the junior class at Martin's school have participated in an annual Career Day, which brings in more than 100 alumni to share their career and educational paths. The program was created for juniors, who weren't permitted to participate in the district's Shadow Day. When Martin brought the idea to the school after participating in an 18-minute networking event, she hoped to use a similar model with the alumni community. "Each year, we work with the school's alumni association to assist in our outreach and recruit alums in the various fields in which students express interest," she said. At the event, alums in the same field pair up to co-facilitate a series of 20-minute discussions with different students. "Since 2021, we have been offering the program virtually with the outstanding benefit of engaging alumni from across the globe," she said. One alum shared, "This is a wonderful opportunity I wish more schools offered." The program has made a difference to students. According to this year's data, 95% of students agreed that Career Day was a valuable experience, and 98.9% of the students who completed the survey believed the event should be repeated. "We believe it is one of our most impactful programs," Martin said. "It is by far the school program with the largest alumni participation. More than 1,200 alumni participated over the last 10 years."

For Martin, working with the outstanding young scholars she has the privilege to work with each day is what makes her work as a school counselor so rewarding. "They are so creative, thoughtful, funny, brilliant, resilient, honest, brave, kind, driven and fun," she said.

Martin is a member of ASCA, the Massachusetts School Counselor Association, the Project Beacon SEAS (Student, Equity, Access and Success in School Mental Health) Advisory Board and the Board of Trustees for City Year and Youth Enrichment Services. Instagram: @encarnacaomartin

Michigan

Jamie S. Hess

School Counselor
Calhoun Area Career Center
Battle Creek

Jamie S. Hess began working as a school counselor in 2010 and has a bachelor's degree in business administration education from Olivet College and master's degrees in career and technical education and counselor education from Western Michigan University.



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Early in the pandemic, Hess recognized it would be important for her to develop an online presence to build relationships with students and create an avenue for them to find support. She collaborated with her instructors to deliver a weekly virtual classroom lesson around career development and social/emotional learning. “Within the first few weeks, we were able to collect data that showed our students were lacking the habits to be successful in a fully virtual learning environment and were reporting significant increases in stress,” she said. “We immediately began focusing our lessons around habits that set a student up for success in a virtual classroom.” The number of students failing classes decreased, attendance in virtual classes increased, and students reported feeling less stress about their CTE program. When they returned to a hybrid schedule in the second semester, students came to the building, recognized the school counselors and were able to advocate for the support they needed. “Despite difficult circumstances, we were able to provide services to students in a non-traditional CTE environment,” she said.

For Hess, the most rewarding part of her work as a school counselor is watching students grow and prepare for their next chapter after high school. “I love to be a part of those conversations and the exploration and planning,” she said.

Hess is a member of ASCA, the Michigan School Counselor Association, the National Board for Certified Counselors and the American Counseling Association.

Minnesota

Errol Joel Edwards

School Counselor
St. Paul Public Schools
St. Paul

A school counselor since 2018, Errol Joel Edwards has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Metro State University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Adler Graduate School.

As a leader in a school community serving more than 500 students in a state with the largest achievement and opportunity gaps in the nation, Edwards has been there for his students and their families with his ASCA National Model program. In addition, he has advocated on behalf of all of his students, their families and their community to help create an equitable and prosperous future for all. “I’ve had the privilege to be able to support my students, families and educators to help change inequitable practices based on data and experience,” he said. “As the Minnesota School Counselor of the Year, it gives me the opportunity to

advocate, teach and support my students to become future leaders of the world with a moral and ethical compass that will make our communities a place of inclusivity for all.”

With more than 15 years’ experience as an educator, Edwards emphatically believes he has changed lives from elementary through high school and into college so his students have the skills to be successful game changers in education and throughout their lives.

Edwards said, “I strongly feel that one of the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor is that I have the opportunity to help my students showcase their growth so they are prepared to be their best authentic selves.”

Edwards is a member of ASCA, the Minnesota School Counselor Association and the St. Paul Association of Counselors. Also, he is a member and professional development coordinator of the St. Paul Federation of Educators.

Mississippi

Suzanne Porter Stokes

School Counselor
Pecan Park Elementary School
Ocean Springs

Suzanne Porter Stokes has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor’s degree in communication and a master’s degree in counselor education (school counseling), both from Mississippi State University.

This past year Stokes worked to help improve the MTSS process related to behavior for her school and district. The collaboration included working with the district’s student services coordinator, MTSS coordinator and school behavior specialist. The tier structure was already in place for the district, but the process had room for improvement, and the addition of many new staff members made it a good time to implement changes. “My work began with the new district MTSS coordinator, with whom I talked about existing structures and how things could be improved,” she said. “As the new school MTSS coordinator learned about her role on the academic side, I have explained how behavior can impact academics and guided how we track the data for our students,” she said. Additionally, Stokes collaborated with the new behavior specialist at her school to decide which forms they would use and how they will work together to address behavior concerns. “These steps are a necessary part of the process to help us be a more cohesive team, which will help us to more effectively serve our students in need,” she said.



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“The most rewarding thing about being a school counselor is the connections I have built with students,” Stokes said. “I encourage students to talk to me when they have a problem before it becomes a bigger problem. It is rewarding when they ask for my help because they know I am there to support them.”

Stokes is a member of ASCA, the Magnolia State School Counselor Association, the American Counseling Association and Chi Sigma Iota. Instagram: @collaborativeschoolcounselor

Missouri

Melissa Millington

School Counselor
Ash Grove High School
Ash Grove

A school counselor since 2014, Melissa Millington has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Missouri State University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Evangel University.

When her review of progress reports showed that many Hispanic students were failing math classes, Millington worked to allow those students to do online math instruction with Spanish translation, which enabled the students to successfully pass their classes. After the pandemic, she saw a large rise in mental health struggles among students and staff at her previous school. “I collected data on how many people were coming to our office with anxiety attacks and needed a few calm minutes or to regulate themselves,” she said. With the data in hand, she was able to create a Zen Den, a quiet room within her office for students and staff, which resulted in fewer students hanging out in bathrooms to get out of class and more students coming to her office. Through the Zen Den, they began a conversation at the school about asking for help when needed and lessening the stigma that accompanies mental health and trips to the school counselor’s office. “It was remarkable to see students take 5 or 10 minutes in the Zen Den and get back to class when before they would have left school entirely after having an anxiety attack,” she said. “The conversation about mental health in that building truly changed after we implemented the Zen Den.”

For Millington, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is watching students find success. “There is nothing better than watching students take pride in their accomplishments and being able to celebrate with them,” she said. “Whether that is celebrating with students who are finally caught up and passing all of their classes, witnessing

a student using coping skills to combat an anxiety attack or fight the urge to self-harm or celebrating with students who land a job or get a scholarship – all of these are what make school counseling the best career.”

Millington is a member of ASCA, the Missouri School Counselor Association, the Southwest Missouri School Counselor Association, the Missouri Association for College Admission Counseling and the Missouri National Education Association. Twitter/X: @mrs_millington, Instagram: @counselor_mills

Montana

Alli Bristow

School Counselor
Florence-Carlton School
Florence

A school counselor since 2004, Alli Bristow has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Arizona State University and a master’s degree in community counseling from the University of Phoenix. She is currently working on her doctorate degree.

After moving to Montana, Bristow knew that finding a supportive team while being creative with resources would be essential to building a comprehensive school counseling program in a rural school setting. “Within the school system, I focused on collecting data surrounding our needs through surveys, as well as staff and parent meetings,” she said. “Using our needs assessment data, I focused my efforts on creating and facilitating an internal framework of a schoolwide system of supports.” With support from administration, an intervention team was created to focus on mentoring; creating meaningful student jobs and support groups; and bringing in special support groups where students could participate in yoga, dance and interactive games. Additionally, Bristow fostered relationships with educational nonprofits, local religious organizations and charities outside of the school to partner in providing school supplies and developing a new off-site after-school program. “I sought out, wrote and secured several grants for extra monies for additional academic tutoring, social/emotional development curriculum, gas cards and other resources for families experiencing hardships,” she said.

Bristow is passionate about supporting rural school counselors and school-counselors-in-training and providing advocacy education support for school counselors within the multitiered system of supports. Her current Ph.D. interest and research has focused on best practice approaches for school counselors in training in rural areas.



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She is specifically interested in developing the support and skills school counselors need for engaging and effective group work.

Bristow is a member of ASCA, the Montana School Counselor Association, the American Counseling Association, the National Board for Certified Counselors and the Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International. Instagram: @alli.bristow

Nebraska

Kara Hahn

School Counselor
Jefferson Elementary School
North Platte

Kara Hahn began work as a school counselor in 2006 and has a bachelor's degree in elementary education K-6 (with an endorsement of special education K-6). She has a double master's degree in school counseling K-6 and school counseling 7-12, all from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Although Hahn sees students individually, in small groups and in classroom lessons, she wanted to focus on being more intentional with the small groups she developed. More and more often, she saw that many students did not have the necessary skills to understand and manage emotions, adequately use conflict resolution, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive friendships, make responsible decisions or display resiliency due to trauma. "Identifying the specific needs of each student in the school helps me determine how I can help them," she said. "I always hope to have a positive impact on the identified students individually or in a small-group setting."

Of the many rewards that come with being a school counselor, building relationships with students, families and staff is one of the things Hahn finds most rewarding. Knowing that she has trusting relationships in place helps when issues arise related to behavior, attendance, family issues or something else. "When I reach out to help students and families," she said, "it feels great when I can help them in an emergency situation or help them become successful." Although she works with students in many different situations, from peer conflicts to situations resulting from stress, abuse, poverty, difficult family situations and others, she would not change her role for anything.

Hahn is a member of ASCA, the Nebraska School Counselor Association and the North Platte Education Association.

Nevada

Judy Pelto

School Counselor
Howard Heckethorn Elementary School
Las Vegas

A school counselor since 1999, Judy Pelto has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling and educational psychology, both from the University of Nevada, Reno. She also has a second master's degree in administration from Sierra Nevada College.

Years ago, when Pelto surveyed former students about which aspect of her school counseling program had made the biggest impact on them, she was humbled to learn that what she thought was impactful was not what the students thought. As a result, she began her journey with data collection and the ASCA National Model. "By implementing the ASCA National Model, I brought energy back into my school counseling program and had the data to show what was making a positive impact on the students' lives," she said. "Over the years, my data has been used to help increase the number of school counselors in my schools and other schools in the district." In addition, her school counseling programs have earned ASCA's RAMP designation three times. "Experiencing firsthand how the ASCA National Model can benefit schools, students and school counselors inspires me to teach others about the ASCA National Model," Pelto said.

To Pelto, supporting students with their challenges and seeing them succeed are the most rewarding aspects of being a school counselor. "As a school counselor, I am given the opportunity every day to make a positive impact on the lives of students," she said. "It fills my heart to see the positive changes in their lives."

Pelto is a member of ASCA and the Nevada School Counselor Association. Twitter/X: @keesnv, Instagram: @vegasdogmomabc

New Hampshire

Jennifer Lyon

School Counselor
Groveton Elementary School and Stark Village School
Groveton and Stark

Jennifer Lyon has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor's degree in human development/elementary education/special education from Rivier College and a master's degree in counseling education from Indiana



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University of Pennsylvania. She also earned a certificate of advanced graduate study in educational leadership from Plymouth State University and is a National Board Certified School Counselor.

As a school counselor, Lyon has a unique and special role within the school. “My school counseling program meets all students’ social/emotional, academic and career needs,” she said. “I do this by implementing whole class, small group and individual counseling, as well as collaborating with educators and the students’ families to meet the individual needs of each student and to help build a positive climate within the school.” Lyon launched a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program and introduced Second Step curriculum and the Zones of Regulation. Also, she implemented morning announcements and a student leadership team and is the program administrator of the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), which includes setting up and training educators on DESSA. In addition, she is a crisis prevention intervention instructor and has mentored several future school counselors and colleagues. “Overall, I use data to help guide my school counseling program, and I focus on skills and strategies that help promote social/emotional and academic growth, which will help students be the best they can be and become responsible and productive members of society,” she said. “I have reached far beyond the classroom and have touched the lives of many students and families.”

For Lyon, building relationships with students, staff and families, as well as teaching students the skills they need to be successful, is the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor.

Lyon is a member of ASCA, the New Hampshire School Counselor Association and the Association for Play Therapy.

New Jersey

Laura Fortson-Williams

School Counselor
Deptford Township Middle School
Deptford Township

Laura Fortson-Williams has been a school counselor for 12 years and has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and history and a master’s degree in student personnel services, both from Rowan University.

In 2021, Fortson-Williams spearheaded a mental health and wellness initiative focused on the needs of every student in the elementary school where she worked at that time. “A tech-based wellness program was purchased for all of

the district’s elementary schools,” she said, “and data from the program was used to improve and increase the school counseling services provided to students as they reentered in-person learning in the aftermath of the worldwide pandemic.”

For Fortson-Williams, being a trusted and safe space for students and parents who are in need is the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor. “Whether it be academic, social/emotional or other needs, it is a very fulfilling experience to know that I can provide what a child or family needs to experience success and wellness,” she said.

Fortson-Williams is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association (executive board member), the Gloucester County Elementary Counselor Association (past president), the Gloucester County Middle School Counselor Association, the New Jersey Health Starts Task Force, the Growing Healthy Minds Project New Jersey Chapter (Echo Hub faculty) and the Gloucester County Education Association Equity Committee. She is liaison for the New Jersey School Counselor Association BIPOC Affinity Group. Twitter/X: @teach9798, Instagram: @thefancycounselor

New Mexico

Stacey Sieberg

School Counselor
Jefferson Middle School
Albuquerque

Stacey Sieberg has been a school counselor since 1999 and has a bachelor’s degree in English literature from the University of New Mexico and a master’s degree in school counseling from Niagara University.

With a focus on closing opportunity gaps, Sieberg created a middle school group for Black male students called Jefferson Brotherhood. The group is guided by the themes of scholarship, leadership and fraternity and is grounded in the ASCA Student Standards. Brotherhood aims to foster school belonging, facilitate college and career readiness, and increase academic achievement outcomes leading to graduation. Also, through a shared racial identity, students process together the impacts of systemic racism, while empowering each other to excel. Students love Brotherhood so much they routinely ask if they can meet every day after school or if it can be an elective. The group meets weekly after school year-round, in addition to two small-group meetings by grade level per month during the school day. The students are monitored for improved outcomes in



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academics, attendance and discipline. “The success of this group was so evident that in November 2017 I was named an Every Day Hero by the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs,” Sieberg said. “Student data outcomes demonstrate impact, including a 42% decrease in students receiving F’s on a semester report card, a 28% decrease in chronic absenteeism and a 40% decrease in discipline incident referrals during the school year.”

“My life’s work has been to help create a school climate where students feel like they belong,” Sieberg said. With a focus on the kindness, empathy, equity, restorative justice and anti-racism practices, she loves being able to foster a space where students feel safe to explore and be their authentic selves during a time of rapid identity formation. “Knowing that I contribute in any way to their sense of wholeness brings much personal joy and gratitude,” she said.

Sieberg is a member of ASCA, the New Mexico School Counselor Association, the American Counseling Association, the Counselors for Social Justice and the American Federation of Teachers.

New York

Julianne N. Lewis

Director of College and Life Counseling
The Park School of Buffalo
Amherst

Julianne N. Lewis started working as a school counselor in 2007. She has a bachelor’s degree in health and human services from the University at Buffalo and a master’s degree in school counseling from Canisius University.

Lewis serves students age 3 to 18 at The Park School of Buffalo, western New York’s only pre-K-12 and Montessori Independent school. Her interventions occur in three broad categories: social/emotional health education and counseling, working alongside classroom teachers to best serve students and directing college counseling services to guide students in grades 9-12 through the college application process. Lewis is proud of her work with students who have a wide range of developmental needs in all three categories, but her achievements in the college counseling program stand out. This past graduating year, her school’s 22 seniors were accepted into 81 different colleges and universities, and they garnered \$2.2 million in scholarships and need-based aid. Assisting students in their postsecondary planning, including filling out college applications, composing personal statements, searching for financial aid and scholarships and exploring

various career paths, are all significant parts of her school counseling program. “Since planning is so important to success,” she said, “I take great satisfaction in being able to help my students develop their life plans and follow their dreams. Watching former students achieve their goals and become successful adults is a lasting and meaningful accomplishment for me as a school counselor.”

“Advocating for students and ensuring they have access to the resources and support they need is what I find most rewarding about being a school counselor,” Lewis said.

She is a member of ASCA, the New York State School Counselor Association and the Western New York School Counselor Association.

North Carolina

Kiersten Traylor

School Counselor
Lincoln Heights Environmental Connections Magnet
Elementary School
Fuquay Varina

Kiersten Traylor has been a school counselor since 2016 and has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Salisbury University and a master’s degree in counselor education from the University of Virginia.

Traylor is passionate about advocating for mental health awareness. Locally she gives presentations to current and future educators at North Carolina State University and her district’s Behavioral Health Summit and School Counselor Kick Off, and statewide at the North Carolina School Counselor Association Conference. She hosts and collaborates with graduate-level school counseling students, leads a school counselor professional learning committee for her region and is an emerging leader for the North Carolina School Counselor Association, where she leads the grants and scholarships subcommittee. “I created a fifth-grade GROW Ambassador program to allow for authentic student leadership at the school level and to empower them to create a welcoming environment for everyone,” she said. “Increasing student voices is especially important for historically marginalized populations, including students from Black and Latinx communities, which make up 34% of our school and 58% of GROW Ambassadors.” Traylor also facilitates restorative and conflict circles that provide students a safe and trusting environment to release emotions, lead to less harm from conflict and reduce student incidents.



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For Traylor, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is building meaningful connections with students and their families. “By creating a trusting and inclusive environment to build relationships, multiple students are safe because I was one adult they trusted to share their experiences with,” she said. “Receiving emails and letters from former students sharing the positive impact I had on them is the greatest gift. I always say we take a little piece of every person with us as we go through life, and I take with me each story and lesson my students taught me.”

Traylor is a member of ASCA, the North Carolina School Counselor Association and the National Board for Certified Counselors. Twitter/X: @msb_counselor

North Dakota

Vanessa Boehm

School Counselor
Fargo Public Schools Virtual Academy
Fargo

A school counselor since 1990, Vanessa Boehm has a bachelor’s degree with majors in psychology and sociology and a master’s degree in counseling, both from North Dakota State University, and an education specialist degree in educational leadership from Concordia University, St. Paul.

The 5 Voices Assessment describes Boehm as a creative, and as such she is an innovator who enjoys dreaming of new ways to align with her district’s values to improve educational opportunities for her students. In her 15 years with Fargo Public Schools, Boehm has been proud to have been involved with the district’s growth and the opportunities she has had to use her creativity to open the school counseling department at a new comprehensive high school in 2011 and when her district started a K-12 virtual academy post-COVID. In addition, she strives to form relationships with her students and their families to connect them to resources. She also enjoys connecting with and advocating for the school counseling field, has been an adjunct faculty member and has taught several school counseling courses in one of North Dakota’s school counselor education programs. Over her 30-plus years in the school counseling field, she has supervised numerous school counseling interns and mentored new school counselors. Boehm stays connected with former students and was gratified to see one of her recent school counseling interns receive the North Dakota Outstanding New Professional Award the same year Boehm was named North Dakota School Counselor of the Year.

For Boehm, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is seeing students take pride in their successes.

Boehm is a member of ASCA, the North Dakota School Counselor Association and the North Dakota Counseling Association.

Ohio

Alana Pustay

Manager of Counseling Services
Great River Connections Academy
Columbus

A school counselor since 2022, Alana Pustay has a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts from Gannon University and a master’s degree in school counseling from Malone University.

After noticing a concerning pattern where a majority of office referrals came from a small percentage of students, Pustay collaborated with her administration to review and update their discipline policies to aim for greater equity. They integrated restorative justice into their protocols and offered counseling and alternative pathways to students with minor infractions or behavioral concerns. Additionally, after she recommended a room be dedicated to students who need space in times of dysregulation, their sensory room was born. “These small changes have yielded positive effects, as students now have more control and ownership over their behavior,” she said. “In my new position as manager of counseling services at Great River Connections Academy, I’ve been tasked with developing our PBIS program.” Since PBIS requires a systemic whole-school approach to foster an inclusive and equitable climate, Pustay developed an advisory committee that would speak on behalf of the program. Through ongoing collaboration, they were able to lay the groundwork for the program. As an online school, Great River Connections Academy has students from diverse backgrounds all across Ohio, so it was imperative that they incorporate culturally responsive practices that acknowledge the experiences of all students. Those practices entail using inclusive language, differentiated instruction and intentional family engagement. “We have set three-year goals that align with MTSS, SEL, RTI and AIP, and we are determined to make our school an inviting and engaging space for everyone,” she said.

Building meaningful relationships is what Pustay finds the most rewarding aspect of her work as a school counselor.

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



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Oregon

Rebecca Cohen

School Counselor
West Sylvan Middle School
Portland

A school counselor since 2003, Rebecca Cohen has a bachelor's degree in human development and family life from the University of Kansas and master's degrees in special education from the University of Oregon and school counseling from Pacific University.

"Advocacy is a powerful aspect of school counseling," Cohen said. "In predominantly white schools, however, it is best used to amplify the voices of students of color, who are often silenced." Throughout her career she has created affirming spaces and opportunities for marginalized students to express their voices and supported leadership programs to shape the climate of their schools. To support connection, in the 2020-2021 school year, Cohen's school created 15 distinct clubs that were chosen by students, including several affinity groups that were held online. The following year, after returning to in-person learning, the clubs grew to more than 20 and doubled the following year. They include Asian, Black, Latinx and Native student unions, a gender-sexuality alliance and an equity group focused on the intersection of race and gender and how students experience their school. The school now has a No Place for Hate group, two leadership classes and eighth-grade pack leaders. In 2023, all of the students at West Sylvan Middle School participated in at least one club, with many participating in multiple clubs and affinity groups. "Our students of color were able to step into leadership roles in order to run schoolwide activities, such as the Day of Silence, advocacy events and fundraisers," she said.

For Cohen, the most rewarding part of her work as a school counselor is shaping school culture and relationships with individual students and their families.

Cohen is a member of ASCA and the Oregon School Counselor Association. Instagram: @thankgoodthoughts

Pennsylvania

na'Khia S. Washington, Ed.D.

Director of School Counseling
Boys' Latin of Philadelphia
Philadelphia

A school counselor since 2017, na'Khia S. Washington, Ed.D., has a bachelor's degree in behavior health counseling from

Drexel University and a master's degree in school counseling from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. In 2023, she earned a doctorate in educational leadership from Northcentral University.

Now in her second year as a school counselor at Boy's Latin of Philadelphia, Washington notes that they have a full, comprehensive school counseling program in a school that had never had a school counselor in its 15 years of existence. "Last year was tough, and it was all about collecting data and being responsive, but this year we have a full comprehensive program," she said. "The fruits of my labor (and tears at times) have been a major accomplishment."

For Washington, school counseling is about relationships. Knowing that she is an agent of change because of her program and the relationships that she has formed with her students and other educational partners is what she finds most rewarding about school counseling. "It is also rewarding when I see the growth and strides that my students have made as a result of the school counseling program," she said.

Washington is a member of ASCA, the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association, the National Society of Leadership and Success, the National Council of Negro Women and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.

Rhode Island

Anne-Marie Flaherty

School Counseling Department Chair
East Greenwich High School
East Greenwich

A school counselor since 1999, Anne-Marie Flaherty has a bachelor's degree with majors in secondary education and English from Trinity College of Vermont and a master's degree in school counseling from Providence College.

"I have been working for the past three years to train my department on all aspects of the ASCA National Model and implement it with fidelity," Flaherty said. "Through feedback from use-of-time studies, data analyses and advisory board meetings, we have adjusted our program to ensure that we are reaching all students in our school." Also, she works to promote their efforts throughout their school community, and she goes to the monthly PTA meetings to report on news from the school counseling department, shares information on social media and has asked to speak at faculty meetings. "Recently, I have been asked to serve on a school counselor advisory board at the Rhode Island Department of Education," she said. "This is giving me a



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platform to highlight the amazing work done by school counselors, not only at my school but throughout the state.” As an executive board member of her state association, Flaherty is working on a grant-funded project in conjunction with school social workers, student assistance counselors and school psychologists to improve school-based mental health services. She is hoping to highlight the work of the mental health professionals throughout Rhode Island and advocate for more services.

For Flaherty, the most rewarding part of being a school counselor is helping her students grow into adults. “I’m a high school counselor, and when I first meet my ninth graders, they are really still children,” she said. “I get to be part of their four-year journey through high school and witness their transition into confident and capable young men and women.”

Flaherty is a member of ASCA, the Rhode Island School Counselor Association and the New England Association for College Admission Counseling. Twitter/X: @aflahertyeghs, Instagram: @amflaherty1

South Carolina

Mary Katalinic Tchouros, Ph.D., ACSC

School Counselor
Sterling School Charles Townes Center
Greenville

Mary Katalinic Tchouros, Ph.D., has been a school counselor since 2012 and has a bachelor’s degree in psychology (minor in biology) and a master’s degree in community counseling with school licensure, both from Lenoir-Rhyne University. In 2018, she earned a doctorate in counselor education and supervision from Walden University. In 2022, Tchouros received the ASCA-Certified School Counselor designation.

While the social/emotional needs of students have always been important, the pandemic further intensified the need for school counselors to teach skills for emotional regulation. To meet this need, Tchouros worked to ensure primary students had the resources available to regulate their emotions and subsequently be successful in and out of the classroom. “I have worked to develop several sensory paths to provide movement-based opportunities for regulation,” she said. “The development of our larger outdoor path allowed me to create a partnership with our art teacher, which has continued as we have blended our lessons to focus on emotional intelligence with our first graders.” Additionally, across primary grades they are using the Zones of Regulation curriculum to foster self-regulation and provide a common language for emotional regulation.

Focusing on more specific needs of her students, she uses small groups to help build relationships and increase opportunities for skill development. Over the past two years, she has seen about 25% of her caseload in the small-group setting each year. “Utilizing these different strategies and services has allowed me to meet the needs of my students and help prepare them for success in the future,” she said.

The most rewarding part of being a school counselor is seeing students grow each and every day. “Our students are our future, and school counselors have the ability to help encourage them to be the leaders they will one day become,” she said. “I was always taught to dream, reach, believe and one day you will achieve.”

Tchouros is a member of ASCA, the Palmetto State School Counselor Association, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. Instagram: @drtdatqueen

South Dakota

Andrea Junker

School Counselor
Harrisburg South Middle School
Harrisburg

A school counselor since 2010, Andrea Junker has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in school counseling from the University of South Dakota.

At the start of her first year at Harrisburg South Middle School, Junker knew there was a strong chance a beloved teacher in her building was going to lose her battle with cancer. Junker put together a team of district school counselors to start building a crisis/grief response plan. With the help of her administrators, district administrators and community partners, the team was able to provide the support staff that students, their families and the teacher’s family needed. The team put together grief kits, documents, procedures, packets and guidelines that are still being used today. Unfortunately, Junker has had to use the crisis/grief response plan on several other occasions, and it has helped multiple schools in the district weather multiple crises. In times of loss, especially unexpected loss, the comfort of knowing there is a plan and people who can step up and know how and what to do is invaluable.

To Junker, the best part of being a school counselor is getting to be a part of so many students’ lives. “I’m so blessed to be the person who helps them through whatever challenges they face and celebrate their successes,” she said.



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Junker is a member of ASCA, the South Dakota School Counselor Association Sioux Chapter and the South Dakota Counseling Association.

Tennessee

Emily Gill

School Counselor
Thurman Francis Arts Academy
Smyrna

Emily Gill began working as a school counselor in 2015. She has a bachelor's degree in electronic media journalism from Middle Tennessee State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Clemson University.

"One program that I am very proud of is teaching middle school students about leadership through the TFAA Student Council and classroom lessons," Gill said. Students learn the importance of having the courage to do what is right and serve the good of the community. Thurman Francis Arts Academy students are high-achieving, and many qualify as intellectually gifted so Gill, along with the teachers, focuses on teaching them to use their intelligence and problem-solving skills to better their school and community.

"I love being a helper in the school and in my community," Gill said. "I believe I am living my purpose to be one of what Mr. Rogers called 'the helpers.' Mr. Rogers said to look for the helpers, and I have the privilege of being one."

Gill is a member of ASCA, the Tennessee School Counselor Association, the Tennessee School Counseling Advisory Council and is an advisor to the Tennessee Association of Student Councils. Instagram: @egc2b

Texas

Kelly Mountjoy

School Counselor
Parkhill Junior High School
Richardson

Kelly Mountjoy has been a school counselor since 2014 and has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from Texas A&M University and a master's degree in school counseling from Lamar University.

When Mountjoy looked at the makeup of her campus' on-level versus advanced-level course enrollment, she recognized that students who were economically disadvantaged, Hispanic and/or emerging bilingual from

a particular feeder elementary school were drastically underrepresented in advanced courses compared with those from the other three feeder elementary schools. As a result, advanced- versus on-level class ratios did not represent the student population, which created a cultural split throughout the campus. Operation Spot 'Em & Got 'Em was born out of a vision to alter school culture by creating a systemic change to break down barriers to equity on the campus by increasing enrollment in advanced courses among underrepresented populations. Through the program, Mountjoy used data and collaborated with stakeholders to identify the students who would take the recommended advanced courses while being supported with meaningful guidance and mentorship. As a result, she increased access to advanced courses for underrepresented populations and created systemic change. "The makeup of courses on our campus is starting to represent the student population, and the access gap is being closed," she said. "At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, the targeted students passed 96% of the recommended advanced courses. Now this program has expanded to other campuses across the district, creating equity and systemic change districtwide."

Connecting with her students and learning about their strengths and passions is what Mountjoy finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. "I am especially passionate about seeking out and seeing students who are typically unseen," she said. "I love helping them discover who they are as humans and partnering with them as they unlock their dreams."

Mountjoy is a member of ASCA, the Lone Star State School Counselor Association and the Association of Texas Professional Educators. Twitter/X: @kellymountjoy18, Instagram: @ktmountjoy

Utah

Patty Conboy Nielson

School Counselor
Mount Ogden Junior High School
Ogden

A school counselor since 2010, Patty Conboy Nielson has a bachelor's degree in Spanish and anthropology from the University of Georgia and a master's degree in human development counseling from Vanderbilt University.

As a school counselor leader, Nielson has been an advocate for equity and systemic change. "When I started at Mount Ogden six years ago, the data was clear that classes, programs and sports were not representative of the highly diverse population," she said. "My goal has been



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to make our environment more inclusive and welcoming to all students.” In collaboration with her principal, they integrated the honors classes, increased the rigor within all classes and conducted student focus groups as a team to gain ideas and make changes to the school’s goals. The changes improved student peer relationships and helped teachers build community within their classes. Nielson specializes in discovering barriers and data inconsistencies and implementing plans to address those issues. As a result, the school has reduced the number of applications for programs and increased the number of invitations. Additionally, during individual planning meetings, Nielson improved parent/guardian participation from 55% to 75% over the past few years by using new ways to reach parents/guardians who had not felt welcome or needed in those settings. “In school and district leadership meetings, I look for patterns and data supporting equitable changes, and I address faulty systems,” she said. “I advocate for systemic change to ensure all students gain access to programs and opportunities.”

“School counseling is rewarding because I am continuously learning and growing,” Nielson said. “Students bring new issues, ideas and concerns that provide me an opportunity to help them, as well as learn myself. I love that school counseling is a system and involves collaboration with administration, teachers, families, students and the community.” She finds school counseling rewarding because every day is different and each month brings new challenges.

Nielson is a member of ASCA, the Utah School Counselor Association, the Ogden Education Association and the Utah Education Association. Instagram: @pattyrosenielsen

Vermont

Mindy Farnham

School Counselor
Chelsea Public School
Chelsea

A school counselor since 2006, Mindy Farnham has a bachelor’s degree in political science and development studies from Wheaton College and a master’s degree in mental health and substance abuse counseling from Johnson State College.

“As a per diem mental health crisis clinician when I am not working in the school, I am passionate about ensuring that all students have access to mental health services,

information and resources,” Farnham said. “Through the Lifelines curriculum and other supplemental material, students are taught about the facts of suicide, how to recognize when a friend is at potential risk of suicide and how to access help for themselves or others.”

For Farnham, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is providing social/emotional education to students in middle school, as well as supporting students and their families with their needs.

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

West Virginia

Jenna Domba

School Counselor
Central Elementary School
Moundsville

A school counselor since 2014, Jenna Domba has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from West Liberty University and a master’s degree in school counseling from California University of Pennsylvania (now Pennsylvania Western University, California).

“Working in a Title 1 elementary school, it is imperative to foster a school/home connection,” Domba said. “Some of the ways I helped do this was by providing weekend meals to students in need; implementing a caring tree for students who needed help with Christmas gifts; and making sure students had clothing, shoes, school supplies and hygiene items.” At one point, the weekend meal program served nearly one-third of the school population and provided enough meals for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks for the weekend. Their caring tree helped provide clothes, shoes, toys and other items for students at Christmas. With the help of the school nurse, they made sure that students in need had clothing and shoes. “We also provided coats for students in the winter, as well as hats, gloves and even snow suits at times,” she said. “We discreetly provided hygiene items, as well as school supplies, throughout the year.”

For Domba, the most rewarding aspect of being a school counselor is being a supportive ally to students and seeing their growth.

Domba is a member of ASCA and the West Virginia School Counselor Association.



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Wyoming

Elisa Andersen Harrison

High School Counselor
Riverton High School
Riverton

Elisa Andersen Harrison has worked as a school counselor since 2014 and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Idaho State University and a master's degree in school counseling from Liberty University.

Harrison is proud to have developed a three-tiered response for SEL and student needs at her schools. "I was able to bring in and establish a Tier 1 SEL program for all students and staff, small groups for trauma and study skills interventions and individual help and a self-regulation room for individual students," she said. Harrison worked with her school to certify and bring in a therapy dog, Kevin,

to support all students wherever their needs were. Her work bringing sustainable programs and interventions to students changed the school environment and supported the schoolwide goal of increasing graduation rates. "We were able to increase graduation rates at an alternative school to above the state average, prepare students for postsecondary plans and change the life trajectories of many students and families," she said. "I am forever grateful for the learning I received while working with students who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders and still persist to make their lives better."

Building positive relationships that support student success is what Harrison finds most rewarding about being a school counselor. "I love seeing the students overcome hardships and succeed," she said.

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



AMERICAN
SCHOOL
COUNSELOR
ASSOCIATION