



2021 School Counselor of the Year

Olivia Carter is the 2021

School Counselor of the Year, Missouri school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Jefferson Elementary School in Cape Girardeau, Mo. She provides school counseling services to the suburban school's 304 students, K-4, 100% of whom receive free or reduced lunch. "Nothing speaks louder than data," said Carter. "When I use data to create annual student outcome goals, it drives the program and helps me create intentional interventions."



As a member of her school's leadership team, Carter used behavior data to encourage the implementation of a more trauma-informed approach at Jefferson Elementary School, which led to a "trauma-informed transformation" at the school. "She has single-handedly brought trauma-informed practices to our school and built a team of educators on our trauma team that has helped transform our school and better fit the needs of our students," said Zech Payne, assistant principal.

Carter taught teachers about trauma and trauma responses, sparking an interest among staff members for further training in anti-biased and anti-racist teaching, restorative practices and self-regulation. She also created *Trauma Informed Tuesdays*, a newsletter focused on teacher wellness and best practices related to building resilience. "The cultural shift in

the building toward all students feeling loved and respected, as well as teachers' time being respected and valued, is palpable," she said.

"Quite simply, Olivia has a gift to reach our most traumatized students," said colleague Kandee Oliver, the school's administrative assistant. "Creating and building trust, chipping away at hurts and heartaches, inspiring and uplifting, Olivia pieces together an environment for our students that surrounds them like a comfortable old quilt."

Needs assessment data from across the district showed that families wanted more emphasis on career exploration at the elementary level, so when a community partner reached out to Jefferson Elementary School about designing a project around financial literacy and giving back to the community, Carter saw it as an opportunity to align to Missouri's school counseling standards and ASCA's Mindsets & Behaviors Student Standards related to career exploration. Through this project, fourth-grade students completed an interest inventory and had an immersive experience with someone in their chosen field, culminating in a career fair for all students.

Carter has been a school counselor since 2012 and is an ASCA U School Counseling Data Specialist. She received her master's degree in school counseling and her bachelor's degree in psychology from Southeast Missouri State University. She is a member of ASCA, the Missouri School Counselor Association, the Missouri State Teachers Association, the Down Syndrome Association of Greater St. Louis and is a member and president-elect of the Southeast Missouri School Counselor Association.





2021 School Counselor of the Year Finalist

Vanessa Goodman Barnes

is a 2021 School Counselor of the Year finalist, the North Carolina school counselor of the year and the dean of students, counseling and student services at Millbrook Magnet High School in Raleigh, N.C. She leads a team of six school counselors serving the urban school's 2,375 students, grades 9-12. "Our schedule and program are based on consistently providing high-quality information to all students and families in a way that promotes personal connections," she said. "We believe these build educated self-advocates who feel empowered to access help when additional resources are needed."



"Ms. Barnes has been the driving force in helping grow programs and to improve the quality of our services for a diverse student population," said Dail Midgette, assistant principal. "She has a unique ability to understand the needs of students regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances and to then use that understanding to create support systems and structures to address their individual needs and goals." As part of closing-the-gap efforts, her department organized a Futuro Summit to work with Latinx students and families to increase their knowledge of community resources and educational opportunities. The event included bilingual and motivational sessions for students, as well as

an opportunity to participate in a community fair and work with school counselors on scholarships and the application process. Barnes and her colleagues held additional activities throughout the year based on survey results. Seventy of the 71 students (98.5%) graduated in the first year of the project.

A school counseling internship supervisor, Barnes collaborated with the counselor education faculty at North Carolina State University to run intervention groups to assist select sophomores identified as needing assistance with improving academic performance, attendance and study skills. She worked with interns from across the county to run weekly small-group sessions as a part of a three-year collaborative. The first year, 24 of 29 participants (83%) were promoted to the next grade level. Barnes and the interns presented at the North Carolina School Counselor Association conference regarding the impact of collaboration on student success.

Barnes has been in the school counseling profession since 2001. She received her master's degree in counseling from East Carolina University and her bachelor's degree in political science from Meredith College. She is a member of ASCA, the North Carolina School Counselor Association, the North Carolina School Counseling Strategic Leadership Team (North Carolina Department of Instruction), the North Carolina Association of Educators, the National Education Association, the Wilson Family YMCA Board of Directors and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.



2021 School Counselor of the Year Finalist

Megan Bledsoe is a 2021 School Counselor of the Year finalist, the Washington school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Discovery Middle School in Vancouver, Wash. She and two other school counselors provide school counseling services to the urban school's 680-730 students, grades 6-8. "Middle schoolers can be a tricky group to connect with, but I find that if I am slow and steady with my approach, I can create a foundation of trust and rapport to build interventions and supports on," she said.



"Megan is a balanced combination of unflappable determination and peaceful calm," said colleague Brian Mathieson, school counseling specialist. "She has a great sense of humor and combines this in equal parts with her dogged focus on what is right for students and the profession."

Her school's high mobility rate prompted Bledsoe to focus efforts on helping new students make connections to the school and their peers. She designed and implemented a student ambassador program devoted to the needs of the transient student population. "It provides new students with a peer guide who helps them transition into their new school, giving leadership opportunities to current students and helping to foster our schoolwide sense of communi-

ty," said Steve Dutelle, school counselor. New students are paired with a same grade peer who takes them to all of their classes for several days, introduces them to their teachers and other students, sits with them at lunch, answers their questions and helps them form essential connections.

To combat chronic absenteeism caused by the challenges many of her students face in coming to school, Bledsoe designed an intervention to identify those students, learn about their obstacles, provide supports and start daily check ins. The intervention consistently results in an average of approximately a 10% increase in attendance for participants.

When remote learning began for sixth-graders in fall 2020, Bledsoe looked for creative ways she could help students struggling to connect with their peers. She visited Zoom classrooms to discuss interests and needs with students, surveyed students and families, and started clubs over Zoom so students could meet and connect with others with similar interests and hobbies. Bledsoe now has more than 10 active clubs, and families report feeling more connected to the school and peers.

Bledsoe began her career in school counseling in 2007. She received her master's degree in school counseling and her bachelor's degree in psychology from Western Washington University. She is a member of ASCA and the Washington School Counselor Association.



2021 School Counselor of the Year Finalist

Sarah Flier is a 2021 School Counselor of the Year finalist, the Wisconsin school counselor of the year and the elementary school counselor at Willow River Elementary School in Hudson, Wis., where she provides school counseling services to the urban school's 320 students, grades K-5. "My mission as a school counselor is to ensure all of my students feel seen, safe and successful," she said.

"My program reflects this mission by prioritizing personal connections with students."



"Mrs. Flier showed all of her students that life should be a ride that you love, and you never want to get off of, so do all things that make you happy and will let your light shine," said Adreanna Johnson, former student. "I have known Mrs. Flier for almost 10 years, and I am proud to say that she has helped me grow into the person I am today."

When an achievement gap was found on the state exam in English/language arts for students who were economically disadvantaged, Flier collaborated with teachers, parents and her school counseling advisory council to develop the school's Literacy Toolbox program. The program collects

donations to support a book club that provides a self-selected book each month from school book fliers to students in need. By choosing their own book each month, students are able to build their own personal library and foster a lifelong love of reading. "Ms. Flier has an abundance of energy, natural ability, magnificent rapport with students and staff, and no end to creative ideas," said Kimberly Osterhues, principal.

In 2019, her school set a goal for 65% of students meeting their English/language arts spring-to-spring growth target on the Measures of Academic Progress assessment. Flier disaggregated the data and found that third-grade students were the farthest from reaching this goal, with only 45% doing so. She focused school counseling instruction on academic success while also facilitating a small group to further address study skills, growth mindset, test-taking strategies and goal setting. In spring 2019, 76% of third-graders reached their target goal on the assessment.

Flier has been a school counselor since 2007. She received her master's degree in guidance and counseling from the University of Wisconsin – Stout and her bachelor's degree in studio art and psychology from St. Olaf College. She is a member of ASCA and the Wisconsin School Counselor Association.



2021 School Counselor of the Year Finalist

Barbara Truluck is a 2021

School Counselor of the Year finalist, the Georgia school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Palmer Middle School in Kennesaw, Ga. She works with one other school counselor to deliver school counseling services to the suburban school's 905 students, grades 6-8. A former science teacher, Truluck became a school counselor to address the increasing stress and anxiety she saw in students. "As a school counselor, I knew I could work directly with students and help them to learn coping skills, to reduce stress and to build resiliency," she said.



When students were reporting at an alarming rate that they were "just so stressed," Truluck dug into her school's attendance data, which indicated a rise in school avoidance. To combat this issue, she created Stress Busters, a small-group intervention focused on managing stress and anxiety. Grounded in the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors' self-management skills, the group sessions incorporate stretching, visualization, art activities, journaling and deep breathing. As a result, 90% of students reported decreased stress levels, and attendance improved by 82%. "Barbara Truluck embraces all that it means and encompasses to be a school counselor," said Melissa Marsh, school counseling supervisor, Cobb County School District. "Her quick wit and calming

presence help to reassure those facing difficult situations when they cannot see beyond the negative."

After Truluck observed a correlation between increased discipline referrals for seventh- and eighth-grade male students and a corresponding plummet in student engagement, she launched an intensive intervention aimed at encouraging authentic student engagement, empowering students to find their voice and increasing students' confidence. Inspired by the concept "It takes a village," Truluck partnered with community leaders and school faculty to create the Champion Mentor Group, a multitiered intervention to foster positive relationships between students and adult mentors. The program was unique at Palmer, as it incorporated both restorative practices and academic supports. Not only did the collaboration reduce discipline referrals by 47%, but 100% of student participants passed their classes and earned promotion.

Truluck has been a school counselor since 2015. She is an ASCA RAMP reviewer and has ASCA U Specialist designations in School Counseling Leadership, Stress & Anxiety Management and Cultural Competency. She received her master's degree in school counseling from Liberty University and her bachelor's degree in education from St. Leo University. She is a member of ASCA, the Georgia School Counselor Association, the Cobb School Counselor Association and the Cobb Counselor Leader Academy.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Ricky Almeida is the Oregon school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at West Sylvan Middle School in Portland, Ore., an urban school serving 831 students, grades 6–8. “My goal is to quietly work hard behind the scenes, empower my students and let the students take the credit for all we do,” he said. “The recognition benefits them far more than it would me.”

In 2016, Almeida started one of the state’s first middle school chapters of M.E.Ch.A. (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán), a Latinx student affinity group. The West Sylvan chapter started with 10 students and within two years grew to approximately 40 students attending each meeting. In 2019, Almeida’s chapter was the first middle school to host the statewide conference, where 475 high school and middle school students from around the state came to West Sylvan to collaborate with various Latinx leaders from Oregon and Washington. The chapter has run numerous community service and fundraising projects, including collaborating with a suicide prevention group. West Sylvan sold shirts that said, “Vales Mucho.” (You matter to me.) Proceeds from the T-shirt sales were used to buy food and gift cards for West Sylvan families in need.

To address the effects of poor attendance at school, Almeida created a ukulele attendance intervention group that increases student engagement, works on goal setting and teaches students to play ukulele. When students reach their goal, they earn their own ukulele to take home. He has also taken the lead in recruiting students and staff to help start West Sylvan’s first Black student union and its first Asian Student Union.

Almeida has been in the school counseling profession since 2009. He received his master’s degree in school counseling from Bushnell University and his bachelor’s degree in family human services from the University of Oregon. He is a member of ASCA and the Oregon School Counselor Association.

Amy Arceneaux is the Louisiana school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Milton Elementary Middle School in Milton, La., an urban school serving 1,190 students, grades pre-K–8. “I feel school counselors are the best advocates, leaders, agents for change and collaborators in the schools,” she said.

In a schoolwide effort to reduce suspensions and offer students adequate tools for emotional regulation, her school counseling program incorporated a mindfulness component that ultimately benefited faculty and staff as well. Made possible by a grant, the introduction to mindfulness began with a workshop conducted by a local mindfulness teacher, where faculty and staff learned the principles of mindfulness and practices they could implement both personally and in the classroom.

Each school day begins with a Mindful Minute, where students and teachers participate in a mindfulness exercise. Every classroom is equipped with a Calm Down Kit containing several tools for student use. Classroom lessons are conducted on emotional regulation and mindfulness exercises. They also created a Mindfulness Room, which students use as needed. Small groups focus on relaxation techniques and mindful practice. Weekly yoga classes are offered for teachers after school by a local yoga instructor.

“We will strive to continue our mindfulness education and practice in our school to aid in setting a calming tone for learning as well as personal care for our students, faculty and staff,” she said.

Arceneaux has been in the school counseling profession since 2013. She received her master’s degree in counselor education and her bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Louisiana – Lafayette. She is a member of ASCA, the Louisiana School Counselor Association, the Association for Play Therapy, the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi and Chi Sigma Iota.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

AnnaGrace Baldwin is the Alabama school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Homewood Middle School in Homewood, Ala., a suburban school serving 1,065 students, grades 6–8. “We will continue to lead, advocate, collaborate and promote systemic change with the ultimate goal of creating a positive learning environment where all students grow and develop into lifelong learners and community contributors,” she said.

Baldwin spearheaded the development and implementation of a data-informed school counseling program, which earned RAMP designation in 2020. She believes collaboration is a key component in removing barriers and helping students maximize their unique potential. Through collaboration with administrators and district leaders, Baldwin has been able to provide education and training on the ASCA National Model throughout her district. She considers herself fortunate to have built relationships within her school and community that allow her to advocate for systemic change in a positive way.

In addition to helping students maximize their unique potential, Baldwin is passionate about growing service-minded student leaders. One of her favorite programs is the Peer Helper Program, which she designed, developed and implemented. This program has had an impact on her school and students through training and subsequent identification of students in need of additional support. Selecting and training these students gives her the opportunity to develop leadership skills and provide service opportunities for peer helpers, while also providing additional eyes and ears to identify and intervene with at-risk students.

Baldwin joined the school counseling profession in 2005. She received her education specialist degree in school counseling from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has two master’s degrees from the University of Montevallo, one in community/agency counseling and one in secondary education with a concentration in mathematics. She also has a bachelor’s degree in math and history from Birmingham-Southern College. Baldwin is a member of ASCA, the Alabama School Counselor Association, the Alabama Counseling Association, the Alabama Association for Career and Technical Education and the American Federation of Teachers.

Amanda Bomstad is the Minnesota school counselor of the year and is one of three school counselors at Mankato West High School in Mankato, Minn., a suburban school serving 1,234 students, grades 9–12. “I appreciate challenges and seek to be the best school counselor I can be for my students, parents and community I serve.”

For Bomstad, addressing the mental health needs of students is of paramount concern. When survey results showed that students were experiencing increased anxiety and stress, she partnered with the school’s social worker to create an anxiety curriculum that could be used during small-group counseling sessions.

Based on state and local data, along with individual conversations with students and parents, the school counselors created an eight-week framework focused on defining anxiety, understanding signs and symptoms, and teaching students positive coping strategies. Achieved goals included all participants being able to name and use at least three coping strategies and provide written feedback on their group counseling experiences with a 100% positivity rating.

“Being able to work with and facilitate these small-group conversations with hundreds of students during my career has been one of my most impactful professional experiences,” she said.

Bomstad has been in the school counseling profession since 2005. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from Minnesota State University – Mankato and a bachelor’s degree in psychology and human services from the University of Minnesota. She is a member of ASCA and the Minnesota School Counselor Association, where she is president-elect. Bomstad is also a past president of the Minnesota School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Eliza Bryant is the Rhode Island school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts in Providence, R.I., an urban school serving 204 students, grades 7-12. “Ultimately, I believe it is my responsibility as a school counselor to use my position of privilege to show our students the power within them – and give them the tools to use it,” she said. “I am proud to say that within our school counseling program, that value system guides everything we do.”

Her program’s focus is to expand postsecondary opportunities for students of color, many of whom are first-generation college applicants. Working with the school’s dual enrollment program coordinator and the alumni coordinator, Bryant has developed numerous support systems to incentivize college enrollment and completion.

In grades 7-11, students develop college- and career-readiness skills throughout their classes and various school-wide strategies. As seniors, students and their families are engaged with a bilingual support system to complete applications, secure aid and prepare for the transition to college. The school won the Rhode Island FAFSA Dash for two years running, with 100% of the senior class completing the financial aid process. Overall, the college enrollment and persistence rate is approximately 75%, with the remaining 25% engaging in full-time work or trade school programs. This is significantly higher than the full district.

Bryant and her colleagues also prepare students to find success once they are enrolled in college. The school partners with local college programs specifically designed to ensure the success of first-generation college students of color. She maintains strong relationships with her school’s alumni well after graduation, including through Alumni Fund financial support as needed and guidance navigating college classes.

Bryant started in the school counseling profession in 2013. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from the University of Massachusetts – Boston and a bachelor’s degree in government and education from Smith College. She is a member of ASCA and the Rhode Island School Counselor Association.

Estela L. Calata is the Guam school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Wettengel Elementary School in Dededo, Guam, a suburban school serving 621 students, grades K-5. “With the harmonious and collaborative relationship with my principal and together with the school staff and teachers, the effective implementation of the components of the school counseling program in my school was made possible.”

Calata is committed to helping students exposed to adverse childhood experiences process their emotions and feel supported and able to thrive in the school environment. After conducting a needs assessment, Calata confirmed that 50% of the children have family events such as death, divorce, separation, deployment and/or parental incarceration. This prompted and inspired her to organize the Rainbows for All Children Guam program in her school. Through this program, students have the opportunity to share experiences and process emotions as they navigate life-changing experiences. “The collaborative effort with faculty and staff who volunteer to facilitate sessions is very important to support students in the transition stage,” she said.

For the past 18 years, Calata has sustained a peer mediation program in collaboration with a local organization. Students are trained to be leaders who resolve conflicts among their peers. Despite budget cuts, Calata continued training fourth- and fifth-graders to be good role models and leaders. Students were mentored in the areas of mediation, communication, mindfulness and conflict resolution. Duty schedules and regular meetings with the peer mediators to sustain knowledge, skills and attitudes for peacebuilding and bully prevention are key factors in sustaining this program.

Calata joined the school counseling profession in 2002. She received a master’s degree in counseling from the University of Guam and a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Ateneo De Zamboanga University. She is a member of ASCA and the Guam Association of School Counselors.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Jaime Clemens is the Arizona school counselor of the year, lead elementary school counselor in her district and lead elementary counselor at Edison Elementary in Mesa, Ariz. She and one other school counselor provide services to the urban school's 689 students, grades Pre-K-6. "I adore being a school counselor, and I believe my biggest accomplishment is helping my students, staff and other school counselors," she said.

Clemens writes the curriculum for her program's classroom lessons, which are aligned with ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success. She designed a mentoring program to benefit students needing one-on-one support. For students learning to get along with others, Clemens runs an after-school game club. She also piloted a positive parenting program with Arizona State University.

In her district leadership role, Clemens mentors new school counselors and has trained numerous interns on topics such as suicide prevention, including ASIST, Youth Mental Health First Aid and SafeTalk. She also serves on the district's crisis team. She's working toward RAMP designation and hopes her program can be a showcase and model for the district. "I feel my role as the lead helps me prepare all our school counselors to be the best they can be."

Clemens joined the school counseling profession in 2004. She has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Phoenix and a bachelor's degree in Spanish and music from the University of Arizona. Clemens is a member of ASCA and the Arizona School Counselor Association, where she is a board member.

Kirsten Coughlin is the Delaware school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, Del., an urban school serving 835 students, grades 9-12. "We continue to collaborate and inspire each other to build upon and continuously improve our school counseling program," she said.

Promoting postsecondary planning for both college and careers, Coughlin created a Schoology course with imbedded opportunities that was unveiled during a week-long event for seniors. The course included activities centered on submitting at least one college or trade school application, informational meetings with apprenticeship programs and college representatives, sessions geared toward completing the FAFSA and military opportunities.

In addition, Coughlin and her colleagues offered a program throughout the school year called Seniors with a Goal (SWAG). Students signed up for help with college applications, scholarships, job applications and college essay writing. These initiatives resulted in improved student engagement, and college application submissions increased significantly.

To streamline systems and utilize innovative technology resources within her school counseling department, Coughlin designed paperless procedures using Google forms to track failure data and to schedule student appointments for school counselors. These best practices were presented at a districtwide technology conference. Other school counseling offices have since implemented the ideas and strategies.

Coughlin joined the school counseling profession in 2002. She holds a master's degree in secondary school counseling from Wilmington College and a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies of human resources from the University of Delaware. She is a member of ASCA; the Delaware School Counselor Association, where she has served as membership chair; and the National Education Association. Coughlin is also an adjunct faculty member at Wilmington University, where she teaches graduate-level online school counseling courses.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Kris Croteau is the Maine school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Mid Maine Technical Center in Waterville, Maine, a rural school serving 528 students, grades 6–8. “Our program shows that our school counseling program can and does make a difference for our students.”

With food insecurity being a serious concern for numerous students in her area of Maine, Croteau started a food pantry several years ago from the ground up. She researched ways to make the food pantry sustainable and reached out to the community for help. Due to successful fundraisers and donations, the food pantry grew to sustainable levels and has served hundreds of students, reducing the barriers that get in the way of students coming to school and learning. Due to the program’s success, Croteau was named a Hometown Hero for the community and recognized for improving the quality of life for students and families.

During her tenure as a board member of the Maine School Counselor Association, Croteau advocated for the school counseling profession with the Department of Education to ensure the school counselor’s role is well-understood. She also participated in a letter-writing campaign to state senators in support of an act to increase the amount of time school counselors and school social workers spend providing direct and indirect services to students.

Croteau joined the school counseling profession in 2008. She has a master’s degree in human development and a bachelor’s degree in child development and family studies from the University of Maine. She is member of ASCA and the Maine School Counselor Association.

Virginia A. DeLong is the Connecticut school counselor of the year and the new director of counseling and admissions at Norwich Technical High School, Norwich, Conn.. Prior to that role, she was the school counselor at Lebanon Middle School in Lebanon, Conn., a rural school serving 298 students, grades 5–8.

After the district suffered three student suicides and several parent suicides within three years, DeLong knew something more had to be done with improving the suicide prevention programming in the district. With the help of the district social worker, she secured a \$20,000 grant over two years to be used in the district for suicide prevention.

DeLong worked to develop and train staff on a districtwide suicide prevention protocol to help prevent future suicides and better manage crises as they arise. Student programs were implemented at the high school, middle school and elementary school levels. The district held numerous parent events, educating parents on topics such as teen depression and parenting. A suicide prevention walk was held at the middle and high school levels as well.

As a result of the grant and DeLong’s efforts, suicide prevention programming has been strengthened throughout the district, helping to keep the students in the Lebanon community safer.

DeLong joined the school counseling profession in 2004. She has master’s degree in school counseling from the College of Saint Rose and a bachelor’s degree in psychology and social relations from the University of New England. She is a member of ASCA, the Connecticut School Counselor Association and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Lee Ann S. Elzey is the Utah school counselor of the year and one of six school counselors at American Fork Junior High in American Fork, Utah, a suburban school serving 1,926 students, grades 7–9. “Incorporating social/emotional learning in the classroom helps all students acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to ensure their future success.”

To address a growing need for social/emotional learning, Elzey led her school counseling team in teaching a resilience and growth mindset to a group of eighth-grade at-risk students. School counselors gave a 30-minute lesson, once a week for eight weeks. While quantitative data indicated improvement in grades and GPA, the most encouraging data was qualitative – students had developed a healthier attitude about their own abilities to learn math, were taking personal responsibility for their education and exhibited greater positive learning behavior.

In conjunction with other program efforts, the project has had a positive ripple effect. Elzey has seen an increased interest and support for social/emotional learning in the classroom. Teachers have begun to seek out school counselors for social/emotional learning lessons. Educators are seeing the value of helping students make relevant connections between their academic learning, behavior and their personal lives. “As school counselors, our goal is to address the unique needs of every student. We are better able to do this when we work collaboratively with teachers,” she said.

Elzey joined the school counseling profession in 2011. She has a master’s degree in psychology/school counseling from Utah State University and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Brigham Young University. She is a member of ASCA, the Utah School Counselor Association, the Utah Education Association and the Alpine Education Association.

Elesha Fetrow is the New Mexico school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Eagle Ridge Middle School in Rio Rancho, N.M., a rural school serving 927 students, grades 6–8. “Whenever I am asked about working as a middle school counselor my response usually weaves in something like, ‘I have won the job lottery.’ Why? Because it takes so much creativity, versatility and skill to knit together an effective school counseling program.”

In accordance with ASCA’s Mindsets & Behaviors for building student capacity, the school counseling staff at Eagle Ridge Middle School determined a need to expand career exposure and exploration for all middle school students. Fetrow created monthly events on her campus known as Career Cafes. Each month, students were treated to mini career fairs featuring representatives from various walks of life sharing their love and “why” of their occupation.

Small and meaningful interactions emphasized occupational skills middle school students could relate to, emulate and strengthen at their development state. All students in attendance were able to access information or experience occupations new to them. Some of the experiences produced “wow” moments for the students, such as: “I didn’t know that I would ever get to meet the mayor,” or “Oh yuck, that is so gross” watching a dentistry video or “I want to try!” when watching pushup challenge offered by a trainer.

Fetrow joined the school counseling profession in 2014. She received her master’s degree in counseling from the University of New Mexico and her bachelor’s degree in political science and history from Utah State University. She has numerous ASCA U Specialist designations, including Anxiety & Stress Management Specialist, Closing the Achievement Gap Specialist, Bully Prevention Specialist and Data Specialist. Fetrow is a member of ASCA, the American Counseling Association and the New Mexico School Counseling Association, where she has served in numerous board positions and is the current professional outreach chair.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Jillian Gaygan is the Florida school counselor of the year and school counseling co-director at Piper High School in Sunrise, Fla. She and three other school counselors provide services to the urban school's 2,294 students, grades 9–12. “Through systemic change, I have worked to collaborate with our stakeholders to change the view of school counseling, so everyone is aware school counseling encompasses academic, social/emotional, and college/career concerns.”

When Gaygan first walked into Piper High School, she realized the school had a strong need to improve graduation rates. By building rapport with students, parents, staff and administration, Gaygan was able to begin implementing research-based initiatives that led to graduation rates increasing from 82% to 96% over the course of four years. Additionally, Gaygan collaborated with several on-campus adults to create a mentoring program for 100 at-risk seniors. Through her work with Big Brothers Big Sisters, Gaygan brought the School to Work Program to Piper High School, which allowed students a chance to be mentored by Florida Panthers executives.

Gaygan worked with her principal to ensure her school counseling team focused on appropriate duties while building a proactive school counseling model. A strong believer in social/emotional learning, Gaygan worked to create a student-driven group where her students created social-emotional content under her supervision and delivered it to peers in younger grade levels. Data shows the SEL delivery correlated to a significant reduction in behavior incidents on campus.

Gaygan has been in the school counseling profession since 2013. She received her master’s degree in school counseling from Duquesne University and her bachelor’s degree in psychology and sociology from the University of Pittsburgh. She is a member of ASCA, the Florida School Counselor Association and the Broward School Counselor Association.

Erin Hamilton is Alaska school counselor of the year and one of five school counselors at Robert Service High School in Anchorage, Alaska, an urban school serving 1,630 students, grades 9–12. Her program received RAMP designation in April 2020. “This process gave us the chance to become leaders in our profession,” she said. “We grew individually but most importantly as a collaborative team.”

In working to develop a data-informed school counseling program, Hamilton and her colleagues created a five-year plan and laid out which aspects of the program they would implement each year. At the end of the five years, they applied for RAMP, becoming the third school in the state and the first school in the city to achieve the distinction. The resulting school counselor program focus has created a solid foundation for students.

Hamilton’s proudest accomplishment during this process was the development of the school counseling department’s core curriculum. In collaboration with their peer mentor program, they advocated for a monthly advisory schedule. This schedule created a 45-minute extra period in the school day each month where the school counselors could provide a schoolwide curriculum. For the first time, they were able to reach all students with curriculum beyond graduation requirements and scheduling. Hamilton looks forward to building on this school counseling instruction and finding more ways to provide innovative curriculum to students.

Hamilton joined the profession in 2006. She received her master’s degree in counseling psychology and her bachelor’s degree in liberal studies with a minor in psychology from Alaska Pacific University. She is a member of ASCA and the Alaska School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Randi Hartman is the South Dakota school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Dakota Prairie Elementary in Brookings, S.D., a rural school serving 474 students, grades pre-K-3. Her program received the RAMP designation in 2019. “I am very fortunate to be at a school where the school counseling program is supported by the administration and staff, who have an accurate understanding of the true role of school counselors.”

When she started at Dakota Prairie Elementary School, there was no formal school counseling program. She made it a goal to develop and manage a nationally aligned school counseling program. Since data was already a passion of hers, she used it to drive her program and other components of the ASCA National Model. She decided to put all of her information together and apply for RAMP.

One project Hartman is particularly proud of is the implementation of a sensory room. Perception data showed that only 60% of learners using the sensory room came into the room in the green zone, the best zone for learning, with 17% in the blue zone, 9% in the red zone and 14% in the yellow zone. While in the room, learners were able to choose three sensory tools to either calm them down or alert them.

After using the sensory tools, 94% of learners left the room in the green zone. This data showed that the sensory room was an effective intervention for those learners. Outcome data showed that of the 67 students who regularly used the sensory room, 10 of those learners were referred for the Teacher Assistant Team, and of those 10 only two were referred for special education testing. Both referred students qualified for special education services.

Hartman started in the school counseling profession in 2011. She has a master’s degree in counseling and a bachelor’s degree in human development and family studies from South Dakota State University. Hartman is a member of ASCA, the South Dakota Counseling Association and the South Dakota School Counselor Association, where she is public relations chair.

Aimee Hspodarsky is the Iowa school counselor of the year and the elementary school counselor at Shannon Elementary and Carpenter Elementary in Monticello, Iowa, two rural schools serving approximately 324 students, grades pre-K-4. “I am passionate about school counseling, and advocacy is a way to share that passion with others.”

As the school counselor lead for the district, Hspodarsky is fortunate to have a part in shaping the districtwide school counseling program and further enhancing the elementary school counseling program. With her leadership, the school counseling team completed the state’s School Counselor Academy, which focused on aligning their program with the ASCA National Model. They then went on to apply for and earn the Iowa School Counselor Association District of Distinction award for their K-12 school counseling program. This has helped Hspodarsky and the team continuously strengthen and improve their program.

Hspodarsky has also worked as the elementary Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports team’s internal coach to help incorporate social/emotional learning instruction into the core curriculum. She helped implement an evidence-based program and collected and monitored data to ensure the quality of implementation. She then helped deepen the staff’s understanding of social/emotional learning by organizing and facilitating a book study for elementary staff on trauma-informed practice.

Hspodarsky has been a school counselor since 2001. She received a master’s degree in elementary counseling from Drake University and a bachelor’s degree in elementary and early childhood education from the University of Northern Iowa. She is a member of ASCA and the Iowa School Counselor Association, where she is immediate past-president and has served in numerous leadership roles.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Dr. Donna B. Huger is the South Carolina school counselor of the year and the director of school counseling at Dutch Fork High School in Irmo, S.C. She leads a team of five other school counselors in providing school counseling services to the suburban school's 1,700 students, grades 9-12. "The school counseling program is creative and proactive in providing leadership in addressing student needs from a holistic perspective."

Huger was asked to be an SEL committee member to develop a Telewellness Manual addressing students' needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A main goal was to be able to continue providing school counseling instruction and individual academic/career counseling, while also being ready to respond to crisis situations and provide ongoing consultation and collaboration. The manual served as a working tool they continue to revise and sharpen for school counselors and other SEL providers in the district.

As part of the SEL committee, Huger also assisted with developing a website that serves as a resource to all stakeholders. Stakeholders are provided with links to webinars on recognizing when students may be experiencing higher-than-normal stress levels. Huger and the committee also provided listening circles where staff can participate using Google Meet to share frustrations, concerns and ideas on specific issues. "Above all, we continued to celebrate when and where we can, recognizing that celebrations are of value to our students, parents and the community," Huger said. "With each celebration, we gained hope that we can still create a little sense of normalcy in these uncharted times."

Huger joined the school counseling profession in 2000. She has a doctorate in educational administration from South Carolina State University, where she now serves as adjunct professor. She also has a master's degree in student development/counseling and a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of South Carolina. She is a member of ASCA and the Palmetto State School Counselor Association, where she is the Midlands regional representative. Huger is also a member of the College Board Southern Regional Council and the South Carolina State University Counselor Education Advisory Board.

Betsy Kanagawa is the Michigan school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at Patrick Henry Middle School in Woodhaven, Mich., a suburban school serving 840 students, grades 8-9. Her program received the RAMP designation in 2019. "While I know our school counseling program is only one piece of a student's school success, we spearheaded the collaborative effort to engage various stakeholders to foster systemic change in support of all students."

A top priority for Kanagawa is her work to increase awareness and opportunities for students of color, in response to years of schoolwide data that consistently showed a disproportionate number of African American students (17% of population) receiving special education services (25%), office discipline referrals (40%) and lower PSAT scores.

Initiatives included creating a Black History Month celebration, where community members of color spoke to students, and students in turn had the opportunity to write about their experiences with racism or discrimination and how they handled the situation. In addition, Kanagawa led a social-justice-themed book study with building staff. All district administrators now participate in the study, and each building is creating social justice action plans.

Staff and students began to meet regularly to look at data and come up with ways to better support students of color, such as reducing the number of students who failed courses. While these activities were put on hold due to COVID-19, Kanagawa looks forward to the future impact they will have on student success.

Kanagawa has been a school counselor since 2011. She received a master's degree in counseling and a bachelor's degree in English/psychology/secondary education from Spring Arbor University. She is a member of ASCA and the Michigan School Counselor Association, where she serves on the governing board as the middle-level representative.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Kathleen Klecan is the Maryland school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Brunswick Elementary School in Brunswick, Md., a suburban school serving 768 students, grades pre-K-5. Her program was awarded RAMP status in 2020, the first school in the county to receive the distinction. “I spend each day as a school counselor trying to positively impact the lives of my students,” she said.

In response to a sharp rise in the amount of the school’s youngest learners having issues with dysregulation, Klecan developed a series of mini-lessons that were taught to all kindergarten students as a Tier 1 support. Additionally, students who were identified as needing Tier 2 support in this area were invited to participate in small groups, where Klecan worked collaboratively with students to help them create a toolbox of coping strategies individualized to their needs. Data regarding these students’ personal and social habits showed that 88% of tracked students improved in their ability to exhibit self-control.

Klecan began serving this school year as the president of her local school counselor association. One of her main initiatives is to start a program that provides mentorship to new school counselors. Ultimately, she aims to have this mentor program include a class providing new counselors not only with support but additional education about running a data-informed school counseling program.

Klecan joined the school counseling profession in 2013. She received a master’s degree in school counseling from McDaniel College and a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Mount St. Mary’s University. She is a member of ASCA, the Maryland School Counselor Association and the Frederick County Association of Counseling and Development, where she is president.

Mistie Knox is the Kansas school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at Clifton-Clyde High School in Clyde, Kan., a rural school serving 127 students, grades 8-12. “It is important as educators that we see the good in every student and situation,” she said.

To address the Board of Education’s expectation of more students receiving scholarships, Knox started having individual meetings with students regarding their future plans, action steps toward plans/acceptance and scholarship completion. For seniors, she dedicated weekly advisory time for completing scholarship applications, along with annual hourly sessions for completing college applications. Students were also offered multiple opportunities for FAFSA completion.

As a result of Knox’s initiatives, scholarship dollars have increased on average 72% in the last five years. In the last three years, college application completion has increased from an average of 1.2 applications submitted per student to an average of 2.6 applications submitted per student. FAFSA completion rates have increased from 67% completion to a five-year average of 86% completion.

In an effort to further increase the number of local scholarship dollars awarded to students and decrease the need for student loans, Knox established a local Clifton-Clyde Scholarship Fund through a local community foundation. Fundraising goals include having enough funds to begin offering scholarships this spring.

Knox has been a school counselor since 2013. She received a master’s degree in counseling services from Fort Hays State University and a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice administration from the University of Phoenix. She is a member of ASCA, the Kansas School Counselor Association, the Kansas Counseling Association and the North Central Kansas Counseling Association, where she has served as president.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Justine Litzko is the Idaho school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Twin Lakes Elementary in Rathdrum, Idaho, a rural school serving 377 students, grades pre-K-6. "I have advocated for my role to be truly that of a school counselor," she said. "I am able to fully and truly work with students, families, staff and community partners."

After seeing an increase in major behavior referral data, Litzko created and implemented two influential programs that helped lead to a 13.8% decrease in Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavior referrals over the course of one year.

Working with her administration, Litzko launched the Transitional Learning Center (TLC), a transitional behavioral program focused on relationship building, identifying skills that are lagging in students and then building upon those skills so students can be better equipped to meet school and life demands. Since its creation, the TLC has become a districtwide program, supporting all of the district's elementary schools and their students exhibiting the highest behavioral needs.

Litzko also created a peer mentor program, where she analyzed behavior data and paired primary students with intermediate peer mentors. The students primarily work together during recess, a high behavior-incident time. Students and mentors work on problem solving, conflict resolution, friendship skills, communication skills and more. The peer mentors also take turns as morning greeters, making connections and spreading positivity throughout the whole school. Since its inception, the peer mentor program has become an integral part of the school's culture.

Litzko became a school counselor in 2015. She received a master's degree in school counseling from Gonzaga University. She also has bachelor's degrees in psychology and in secondary education, both from the University of Idaho. Litzko is a member of ASCA and the Idaho School Counselor Association.

Kelley Madden is the Colorado school counselor of the year and the student services department leader at Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins, Colo., where she guides a team of seven other school counselors to provide services to the urban school's 2,071 students, grades 9-12. The department recently received RAMP for the third time. "Our program is effective because school counselors collaborate with a wide variety of stakeholders," she said. "We work together as a team and strive to build relationships with students, staff, families, other district groups, and outside agencies."

Madden prides herself on being a high school counselor. The relationships she builds with her students is the most important thing to her. She works with students both one-on-one and within groups to help students be their best self.

For the past six years, Madden has overseen and coordinated the school's peer counseling program. This year-long program brings together a specially trained group of selected 11th- and 12th-grade students who offer support to students in need, promote a positive school atmosphere and provide presentations to middle school and high school students on a variety of topics including suicide prevention, healthy dating and sexual assault prevention. To prepare the students for this role, Madden teaches a training course that includes basic counseling skills, leadership roles, self-care, mindfulness and communication techniques.

Madden joined the school counseling profession in 2013. She received a master's degree in education and a bachelor's degree in human development and family studies from Colorado State University. She is a member of ASCA and the Colorado School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Leighanne Mainguy is the Nevada school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at Richard C. Priest Elementary in North Las Vegas, Nev., an urban school serving 747 students, grades pre-K-5. Her program received RAMP designation in 2020. "Data shows that when students feel welcome and safe, they show growth in both academics and behavior," she said.

Collaboration has been the most important facet of her program. Reaching out to the right people at the right times has been instrumental in decreases in absenteeism and discipline, along with increases in academic achievement. These collaborations led to one of Mainguy's most significant program accomplishments. Working with the MTSS team, she developed social/emotional content and pacing guides that resulted in a 77% decrease in office referrals for third-grade students (the school counseling department goal was reduction by 15%), a 51% decrease for all office referrals and systemic changes in how the school observed and processed behavior data.

Mainguy also spent more than six years developing and implementing a peer leadership program for fifth-grade students, which has become one of her most treasured times with students. Teachers and peers nominate students to participate in the program, with a goal to grow as leaders while offering support to fellow students during recess. The squad and many parents and staff also attended an anti-bullying walk to represent the school and stop bullying.

Mainguy started in the school counseling profession in 2012. She received a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Phoenix and a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Michigan. She is a member of ASCA, the Nevada School Counselor Association and the National AfterSchool Association.

Teresa Majerus is the Montana school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Lewistown Jr. High and Fergus High School, two rural schools in Lewistown, Mont. She works with three other school counselors, providing services to students grades 7-12. "I firmly believe that a well-trained school counselor and a well-rounded school counseling program are vital ingredients to preparing students for successful lives and to become productive members of society."

During her 15 years as a school counselor, Majerus has led many activities within her school to help educate and create a positive future for all students. She has been instrumental in teaching her junior high students the skills needed to create positive and healthy relationships in the school, their homes and with their peer and dating relationships. She has collaborated with staff, parents and the community to take a unified approach in teaching students about personal boundaries, the meaning of consent and the laws that apply. The outcome has been very positive, with students reaching high school knowing what a healthy relationship looks like, how to create one and what to do if they or friends need assistance due to an unhealthy relationship.

The healthy relationships lessons have also provided a solid foundation for teaching the Signs of Suicide program. Majerus helps students use their skills in positive communication and recognize body language to identify when someone is in need of assistance or may be experiencing suicidal ideation.

Majerus joined the school counseling profession in 2005. She has a master's degree in school counseling from Montana State University - Billings and a bachelor's degree in special education from Purdue University. She is a member of ASCA, the American Counselor Association and the Montana School Counselor Association, where she has served in several leadership positions including vice president of middle schools.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Karen McCrillis is the Massachusetts school counselor of the year and a school counselor and district counseling coordinator at Gardner High School in Gardner, Mass. She works with a team of three other school counselors providing services to the urban school's 683 students, grades 8-12. "Every day I put 100% of my time and effort to ensure our program is student-focused, data-informed and results-oriented," she said. "I owe it to my students and my community to push myself and my fellow school counselors to do nothing less."

When McCrillis saw the ninth-grade passing rate was not improving, she wrote two grants to enlist the help of teachers, school counselors and administrators to create interventions focused on student achievement. This data team met weekly to discuss specific data points on the most at-risk students, as determined through data collection. They entered meeting data into a Google form so it could be reviewed regularly. The form has since grown to include data from other interventions for students, and weekly data team meetings have now expanded into the eighth grade. In the two years of these interventions, the passing rate has increased from 85% to 93%.

After taking on district school counseling coordinator responsibilities, McCrillis worked to bring all student services staff together as a more comprehensive team. She assembled a hard-working group of school counselors, school adjustment counselors, school psychologists and board-certified behavior analysts. Together, they created a structure of meetings, common planning time meeting formats, annual programmatic calendars and data collection, all through an MTSS lens.

Overall, McCrillis is most proud of her work done directly with students, whether in a classroom, small group or individually.

McCrillis joined the school counseling profession in 2004. She has a certificate of advanced graduate study in interdisciplinary studies with a focus in mental health counseling, a master's degree in counseling and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Fitchburg State University. McCrillis is a member of ASCA and the Massachusetts School Counselor Association.

Megan McDougal is the Nebraska school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Bell Elementary in Papillion, Nebraska, a suburban school serving 521 students, grades K-6. "Above all else, I believe collaboration is at the heart of everything I do and a key ingredient to the success of any school counseling program."

To help bring consistency for the school counselor role across her district, McDougal became a driving force behind a movement to create deeper awareness and better alignment with the ASCA National Model. Because of her leadership and advocacy efforts, the ASCA framework began to influence district leaders' practices and decision making. This progression led to an elementary school counseling program use-of-time study based on the ASCA National Model, which provided valuable data and feedback that became the roadmap for the district's most recent curriculum and program changes.

McDougal has been part of a district leadership team to address trauma in schools. She became a certified Bounce Back and Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools facilitator. She provided research-based, small-group counseling opportunities for students affected by trauma, decreasing trauma-related symptoms by three or more points, as measured by the Child PTSD Symptom Scale, in 86% of group participants. To address the increasing social/emotional needs of her building's large military population, McDougal partnered with stakeholders to create a military club to support the unique challenges military children face.

McDougal has been a school counselor since 2006. She received a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Nebraska - Omaha and a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She is a member of ASCA, the Nebraska School Counselor Association and the Nebraska State Education Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Laura J. Mesa is the New York school counselor of the year and one of four school counselors at Valley Stream Memorial Junior High School in Valley Stream, N.Y., a suburban school serving 979 students, grades 7–9. To empower her students to be leaders today and in the future, Mesa created a leadership development club, “a comprehensive school program that uses advocacy, leadership, systemic change and collaboration to make a difference for students.”

After feeling inspired by participation in the school’s first Black History Night Celebration, a member of Mesa’s leadership development club approached her about the possibility of creating a new club committed to issues of diversity. The student felt a sense of urgency to address issues related to school community, racial diversity and social justice. Mesa relayed the process of developing a new club and helped the student create a proposal to be presented to the school principal. Unfortunately, the initiative was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this challenging time, the Black Lives Matter movement also greatly affected students and families, both worldwide and in the Valley Stream community. Mesa’s student, along with other students, were invited to voice their opinions and concerns at an open forum involving students and school faculty. A concern shared was whether the school community was supporting the needs of the students and families regarding issues of racial justice. Since the school was in a diverse school district, the students voiced that it was part of the community’s responsibility to raise awareness on this topic and fight for voices that have been silenced. Many of the students expressed feeling that the school was not engaged enough regarding Black Rights. The students also questioned how school administration and faculty would show support and if individuals from the school community would publicly support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite uncertainty about launching an initiative in a virtual learning environment, Mesa worked with her determined student to start the necessary steps. They scheduled a meeting to begin the development of the first Students Committed to Social Justice Club, along with an advisory committee to help support and address concerns.

Mesa joined the school counseling profession in 2002. She received a master’s degree in school counseling with a bilingual extension from St. John’s University and a bachelor’s degree in urban sociology from Hofstra University. She is a member of ASCA; the American Counseling Association; the New York State School Counselor Association, where she serves as membership chair; the Nassau Counselors Association; the Long Island Counselor Association; and Chi Sigma Iota.

Jon Morikawa is the Hawaii school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Ka’ala Elementary School in Wahiawa, Hawaii, a suburban school serving 441 students, grades 3–5. “We are taking a proactive approach by teaching skills necessary for students to apply in their everyday lives,” he said.

A top priority of the school counseling program is implementing the social/emotional learning (SEL) program schoolwide with fidelity. They created a schedule for the grade levels to follow to ensure lessons would be taught consistently. School counselors set up a rotating schedule to go into classrooms weekly, which allowed them to better monitor implementation, know the students and troubleshoot instructional issues with the program.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Morikawa and his colleagues learned to adjust how they taught SEL. They adapted lessons by videotaping them for kindergarten through second grade. The school counselors used Class Dojo or Google Forms as an effective way to assess the student learning for each lesson. For grades 3–5, they adopted Google Meets to teach SEL, learning ways to have students participate through the chat box and assess their understanding of lessons through Google Forms. A surprising result was that more students participated through the chat than if they were in a classroom. The responses from students assessed what they were learning and applying to their lives.

Morikawa joined the school counseling profession in 1993. He has a master’s degree in counseling and a bachelor’s degree in education from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He is a member of ASCA and the Hawaii School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Jenny Nicely is the Ohio school counselor of the year and one of three middle school counselors at Dempsey Middle School in Delaware, Ohio, a suburban school serving 1,273 students, grades 6–8. “I have the unique opportunity to play a part – sometimes small, sometimes great – in the lives of 400 teenagers each school year, hopefully making a difference for them so they can, in turn, make a difference for someone else during their own lives.”

Along with her school counseling colleagues, Nicely developed a middle school leadership program, Dempsey Helpers, that provides opportunities for interested students to get involved in improving the school climate. Students participate in projects focused on kindness, welcoming new students, developing peer helping skills and creating a positive middle school environment and atmosphere. Originally composed of about a dozen students, the program has grown to close to 80 participants this year.

For the past 10 years, Nicely has coordinated a middle school Habataki (home stay) exchange program with a school group from Sakata, Japan, its sister city. Host families are arranged for 25 Japanese middle schoolers and several teachers for this week-long program, which includes an all-school assembly, cultural sharing activities for students, community events and many logistical arrangements. The school community, as well as the city, looks forward to this time of sharing and relationship-building each fall. Strong ties have been created between the two cities’ educational leaders, and Nicely was privileged to take a small group of Dempsey students to Japan as well, helping to create life-long friendships and a wonderful international experience.

Nicely became a school counselor in 2007. She is a graduate of the University of Dayton’s school counseling licensure program. Nicely also has a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling and a bachelor’s degree in English education with a journalism minor from Ohio State University. She is a member of ASCA and the Ohio School Counselor Association and serves on the school counseling program advisory board at Capital University.

Kathleen Johnston Otal is the Virginia school counselor of the year and one of nine school counselors at McLean High School in McLean, Va., a suburban school serving 2,126 students, grades 9–12. “I never stop learning and never, ever stop believing in a child,” she said.

Otal focuses on both the individual student and systemic change as she works to level the playing field for all students. Last school year, she launched and continues to lead an equity team, collaborating with staff, students and parents to lower the achievement gap and enable students to achieve to their full potential. As part of the initiative, Otal provides staff development relating to equity. Initially consisting of 14 staff members and one student, the team has grown to more than 70 staff members and eight students. She obtained a grant for free school spirit wear for needy students and spearheads a gift card drive for families each year during the holidays. Otal also sponsors a girls’ leadership committee that helps girls achieve their goals through mentoring and leadership opportunities.

Providing support to parents, Otal has initiated a wide variety of parenting programs, including a series of pyramid-wide book talks on “The Self-Driven Child,” which culminated in the authors speaking at the school. She co-founded a Parent University to help parents support their teens in the college admissions process and has hosted several parenting podcasts.

Otal joined the school counseling profession in 1996. She has a master’s degree in counselor education from Virginia Commonwealth University and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the College of William and Mary. She is a member of ASCA, the Virginia School Counselor Association and the National Association for College Admissions Counselors.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Indra Lyn Owens is the New Jersey school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Chelsea Heights School in Atlantic City, New Jersey, an urban school serving 336 students, grades pre-K-8. "I am excited about the Trust Your Journey project and redefining mental health support and advocacy in urban communities, one child and family at a time. Building resilient families in today's climate is all a part of the positive effects an effective school and community counseling program has on student achievement and overall development and lifelong, lasting success," she said.

Owens's Trust Your Journey project was highlighted by the press of Atlantic City during the thick of the COVID 19 pandemic and has since received positive reviews from educators, parents and community members.

Owens has created a lifestyle of service as a school counselor; founder of Princess Inc., a nonprofit organization committed to mentoring; innovative community service initiatives; a resource connector for the underserved in the Atlantic City community; and The REAL Support Solutions, a platform on social media and beyond focused on redefining mental health support in urban communities and offering mental health support and awareness and consulting in an untraditional safe space for people of color.

Owens joined the school counseling profession in 2009. She has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of West Alabama and a bachelor's degree in communications from Temple University. She is a member of ASCA, the New Jersey School Counselor Association, the Cape Atlantic School Counselor Association, the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals, the National Alliance of Black School Educators and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.

Emilia Peiffer is the Pennsylvania school counselor of the year and the school counselor at East Allegheny Senior High School in North Versailles, Pa., a suburban school serving 497 students, grades 9-12. Her program has received RAMP status twice, in 2014 and 2017. "The ASCA National Model not only helped me to identify what the needs of the high school were but gave me the framework to develop plans to address those needs as well."

Peiffer's program promotes college and career readiness for every student in the high school, starting in ninth grade with career portfolios and interest inventories, aptitude tests in 10th grade, advocating for all 10th- and 11th-grade students to take the PSAT and taking all 11th grade students to the National College Fair in the spring.

To promote equity and access to Advanced Placement programs for all of her students, Peiffer advocated for the district to fund PSAT and AP testing. When her district qualified for the National School Lunch Program, Peiffer contacted the College Board to see whether her students would qualify for an SAT registration fee waiver as well. The College Board agreed to her request, resulting in students now being able to take the SAT once in their junior year and once in their senior year at no charge.

Peiffer became a school counselor in 1995. She has a master's degree in school counseling from the University of Pittsburgh and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Loyola University Chicago. She is a member of ASCA, where she serves as a lead RAMP reviewer, and the Pennsylvania School Counselor Association, where she serves as RAMP coordinator. She is also a member of the Allegheny County School Counselors Association, the American Counseling Association, the Pennsylvania Counseling Association, The Pennsylvania Association of College and Admissions Counselors and the Pennsylvania State Education Association, where she is president-elect.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Rachel Luks Petraska is the Vermont school counselor of the year and one of two school counselors at Shelburne Community School in Shelburne, Vt., a suburban school serving 729 students, grades pre-K-8. “In my district, I greatly enjoy working with my school counselor colleagues to help the community at large understand the role of school counselors,” she said. “On many occasions, we have met with the school board, parent groups and local agencies to help the community understand our role and to help foster collaborative partnerships to support students.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, Petraska and her colleagues immediately began thinking about how to support students, families and staff. When the school decided to create a website for remote learning, Petraska collaborated with the digital learning leader on how the school counselors could best continue their work teaching and supporting students and families. They came up with the idea of a wellness site, and Petraska was asked to spearhead its creation, including building it, making sure it was user-friendly and brainstorming with colleagues about content.

Although she had some experience building Google sites, Petraska hadn’t created a site of this magnitude. She modeled the site using the CDC’s comprehensive school health components as a guide, looking at how those components would best address the many needs of the user community. With the support of colleagues, Petraska launched the site in early April, providing digital information on community resources, social/emotional learning, nutrition, physical fitness, physical health, digital living and household wellness.

Petraska became a school counselor in 1997. She has a master’s degree in school counseling and a bachelor’s degree in human development and family studies from the University of Vermont. She is a member of ASCA and the Vermont School Counselor Association. She is also a school counselor or liaison at the Virtual Learning Academy.

Rhonda Ramirez is the Texas school counselor of the year and the lead school counselor on a team of seven at Naaman Forest High School in Garland, Texas, a suburban school serving 2,251 students, grades 9-12. Ramirez works to “enable all students to become successful, productive citizens and lifelong learners in a diverse and changing world.” During her tenure, the school has improved from a C rating to an A rating from the state of Texas.

In addressing her district’s goal of increasing college, career and military readiness (CCMR), Ramirez and her team created an interactive day for seniors, especially those struggling with postsecondary goals. Named LEAP 2020 to coincide with the leap year, the celebratory event encouraged all 544 seniors to “leap” into their postsecondary options. Six stations helped students facilitate their “super six” goals: college applications, FAFSA/TAFSA, scholarships, meningitis shots, military enlistment and CCMR. School counselors were on hand to work with the students. Completed stations earned tickets that students turned in so their school data records could be updated. To add an element of fun, Ramirez solicited community support to provide food while a DJ played lively music and announced door prizes for dorm accessories and senior activities. As a result of the event, seniors who previously saw these tasks as daunting actively participated and encouraged each other.

With the COVID-19 shutdown in March, Ramirez moved the school counseling office to a thriving virtual platform through the use of Google Suite utilizing Meets, Forms, Voice, Classroom and Calendar. Students continued to be actively engaged with their school counselors. Her team published additional communications through social media platforms. To address the additional stressors of COVID-19, they incorporated intentional SEL lessons for students and families. These initiatives enabled the school counselors to provide a sense of belonging to the campus and preserve a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional and physical well-being for their students.

Ramirez joined the school counseling profession in 2006. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from Amberton University, a bachelor’s degree in education from the University of Texas at Dallas and a bachelor’s degree in interior design from Baylor University. She is a member of ASCA, the Lone Star State School Counselor Association and the Texas Counseling Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Kimberly Kay Rollins is the Tennessee school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Northeast Middle School in Clarksville, Tenn., a suburban school serving 1,400 students, grades 6–8. “I have always valued the intimacy of one-on-one counseling but am passionate about the social impact of large and small-group counseling,” she said.

Over the past several years, her district has invested in the SEL initiative. In collaboration with her administration, Rollins and her colleagues began to incorporate large-group SEL lessons through an advisory time called Eagle Up, a nod to the school’s Eagle mascot. The lessons allowed facilitation by teachers and addressed a variety of topics including character traits, current events and social/emotional growth. The program has continued to grow and has proven effective in increasing SEL awareness in the school.

In collaboration with the counseling department at Austin Peay State University, Rollins facilitated a small-group mentorship group focused on building leadership skills in a select group of African American males in grades 6–8. The behavioral, academic and social/emotional data collected indicated that the group was successful in building self-efficacy and leadership awareness for participants.

Rollins became a school counselor in 2007. She has a master’s degree in school counseling and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Austin Peay State University, where she serves as a mentor and supervisor for psychology and counseling students, working with them through their field study, practicum and internship experiences. Rollins is a member of ASCA, the Tennessee School Counselor Association and the American Counseling Association.

Andrea Sebastian is the Kentucky school counselor of the year and a school counselor at John W. Reiley Elementary in Alexandria, Ky., where she and a part-time school counselor provide services to the suburban school’s 427 students, grades K–5. Her program received RAMP designation in 2016. “I feel an intense sense of pride in the school counseling program I have created and currently co-lead at Reiley.”

With a goal to implement data-informed school counseling across her district, Sebastian worked at all three levels, high school, middle and elementary, to advocate for comprehensive programming. Taking on a leadership role immediately following graduate school allowed her to further enhance the systemic change within the district’s school counseling programs. Sebastian’s advocacy and collaborative efforts resulted in a dramatic shift from the guidance counselor role to data-informed school counseling, culminating all schools in the district receiving RAMP designation.

When data showed the school’s free-and-reduced lunch population was increasing, Sebastian identified a gap area where students were scoring in the novice range in reading and math. She implemented a targeted, evidence- and research-based curriculum for students. In 2019, students identified in this gap area showed 13% increase in reading and math and a 23% knowledge increase about much-needed resiliency skills.

Sebastian joined the school counseling profession in 2012. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from Northern Kentucky University and a bachelor’s degree in psychology and family studies from the University of Kentucky. Sebastian is a member of ASCA, the Kentucky School Counselor Association, the Northern Kentucky Regional School Counselor Network and the Northern Kentucky Counseling Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Anna Simmons is the West Virginia school counselor of the year and a school counselor at Eastwood Elementary School in Morgantown, W.Va., where she and a part-time school counselor provide services to the suburban school's 618 students, grades pre-K-5. "I initially became an elementary school counselor because I had the belief that helping students learn appropriate, adaptive and effective mindsets and behaviors early in life would prepare them up to be happy and successful individuals as adults," she said. "After becoming a school counselor, I became painfully aware that the work we do cannot be done in isolation and must extend beyond the confines of our offices and school walls."

In the 2019-2020 academic year, Simmons coordinated and collaborated with other student support services staff to address chronic absenteeism among low socioeconomic students. They met with students once per month and discussed the importance of coming to school. They also coordinated parent meetings, discussed barriers to education and connected families with resources needed to help them to overcome these barriers. As a result of their efforts, chronic absenteeism among these students decreased by 26.13%.

Simmons has utilized her advocacy, leadership and collaborative skills to work toward systemic change through legislative and policy shifts. She consistently reflects on her school counseling practices using a variety of data points to ensure she is meeting student needs and that her program aligns with the school's strategic plan. She challenges her colleagues to reflect on their practices as well.

Simmons joined the school counseling profession in 2014. She received a master's degree in school counseling and a bachelor's degree in psychology from West Virginia University. Simmons is a member of ASCA and the president-elect of the West Virginia School Counselor Association. She is also a member of the American Federation of Teachers, where she serves as vice president for her county.

Sarah Slemmons is the California school counselor of the year and one of four school counselors at Culver City Middle School in Culver City, Calif., an urban school serving 1,677 students, grades 6-8. She has routinely won "most spirited" in student polls. "It's so important to me that my students not only feel connected to school but they are proud to be a CCMS Panther," she said.

In alignment with her school's goal of student connectedness, Slemmons started the Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) program to increase student engagement and leadership. Since the program's inception six years ago, Slemmons and her team have sought eighth-graders from all backgrounds and social groups to be WEB leaders, training them on leadership skills, communication, event planning, empathy and building relationships. These students then mentor incoming sixth-graders during their first year in middle school. The WEB-hosted new student orientation has maintained a 90% participation rate over the past four years.

As the lead member of her district's suicide prevention team, Slemmons has taken the reigns in ensuring all policies and protocols have been adapted to the virtual setting. She has worked closely with the head of school nurses, school site administrators, district administrators and school board members to provide training on all aspects of the district's prevention, intervention and postvention policies. Slemmons has participated in multiple cohort trainings through her county office of education in suicide prevention, trauma-informed practices, incorporating the arts into school counseling and, most recently, sitting on the county's school counselor advisory committee.

Slemmons joined the school counseling profession in 2014. She has a master's degree in school counseling from California State University - Dominguez Hills and a bachelor's degree in liberal studies and Spanish from the University of Redlands. Slemmons is a member of ASCA and the California Association of School Counselors.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Victoria Smejkal is the Indiana school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Connersville Middle School in Connersville, Ind., a rural school serving 540 students, grades 7–8. Her program has received both the RAMP designation and the Indiana Gold Star award. “This was an incredibly successful collaborative effort for myself and the school community as a whole,” she said.

During the 2016–17 school year, Smejkal led her school’s initiative to implement a data-informed school counseling program. She educated administrators, the superintendent, the school board and community leaders, helping them better understand what school counselors truly do, how their time is spent and how they bring value to schools. The process led to the opportunity to have an in-school behavioral clinician from a local mental health provider.

When data indicated students were dealing with high stress rates, Smejkal implemented classroom lessons to teach coping skills. With the assistance of the SEL coordinator, she implemented the use of a virtual reset room with students.

In efforts to ensure as many students as possible can afford a college education, Smejkal heavily promoted the school’s participation in the 21st Century Scholars program, a state initiative to provide students with grant money for college tuition. Activities included meeting with individual students, assisting parents in filling out the applications and holding parent information meetings. As a key member of the school’s Early College High School committee, Smejkal also educates her students about opportunities to earn college credit throughout high school.

Smejkal joined the school counseling profession in 1998. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from Northeastern University and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Purdue University. She is a member of ASCA and the Indiana School Counselor Association.

Missy Smith is the Oklahoma school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Lincoln Elementary School in Norman, Okla., a suburban school serving 288 students, grades pre-K–5. Her program was the third school in Oklahoma to achieve RAMP designation. “Professional advocacy is one of the paramount responsibilities I have as a school counselor,” she said. “Research indicates a comprehensive school counseling program positively impacts all facets of a school.”

When reviewing her site data, Smith noted a disproportionate number of behavior referrals came from recess. In response, she targeted recess-related referrals by teaching lessons addressing regulation skills. She also developed “recess clinics,” where students could be taught emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills in the moment, on the playground. The recess clinics allowed students to learn the skills necessary for success while also receiving the movement and brain break they needed. As a result of these interventions, recess-related behavior referrals reduced by 25%.

To address the career domain at her school in a relevant and meaningful way, Smith developed a student-led career fair. The fifth-grade classes conducted career interest inventories, researched careers, completed resumes and even participated in job interviews. The fifth-graders then hosted a career fair providing insights on what they learned to the rest of the student population.

Smith joined the school counseling profession in 2014. She received a master’s degree in counseling psychology and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Northeastern State University. Smith is a member of ASCA and serves as a RAMP reviewer. She is also a member and president of the Oklahoma School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Dr. Heidi Truax is the Illinois school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Simpson Academy for Young Women in Chicago, Ill., an urban school for pregnant teens serving 34 students, grades 6–12. Truax has earned the RAMP designation three times and in 2020 earned a RAMP School of Distinction award. “As the sole school counselor in a tiny school with only 14 total full-time staffers, I needed to step up and lead teams that supported student success,” she said. “We were able to collaboratively develop and implement more than 12 multitiered interventions of support during the school year.”

Leveraging local partnerships and community leaders, each year Truax coordinates the Cocoa, Coffee and Career Conversations event. At this event, successful professional women from across the city of Chicago, who also happen to have been teen mothers themselves, come and speak both in a panel and in triadic conversations with her students. The event includes treats from local cafes, interview preparation, and onsite application and interview opportunities for all participants.

Mindsets & Behavior data from the event shows a significant impact on students’ self-concept, career skills and confidence. Additionally, each year more than a third of the students gain employment from the event that includes either free postsecondary education or scholarship opportunities.

Truax joined the school counseling profession in 2012. She has a doctorate in counselor education and supervision from Adler University, a master’s degree in school counseling from Concordia University and a master’s degree in women’s and gender studies from Roosevelt University. Truax also has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Southern Oregon University. She is a member of ASCA, where she serves as a lead RAMP reviewer; and is vice president counselor supervisor of the Illinois School Counselor Association. Truax is also a member of the American Counseling Association, the Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling.

Kylie Wallender is the North Dakota school counselor of the year and one of three school counselors at Carl Ben Eielson Middle School in Fargo, N.D., an urban school serving 780 students, grades 6–8. “I am fortunate to work in a middle school where collaboration is one of the founding tenants of how we do things.”

After receiving staff feedback on the number of assessments required of middle school students and a feeling that students weren’t trying their best as a result of not feeling like the tests were important, Wallender and the school improvement academic team developed a goal-setting form for all students to complete with a teacher prior to testing. The tool would enable students to see growth between their previous and current year’s scores and show them adults were looking at the data and making decisions based on it. The hope was that these outcomes would ultimately lead to student buy-in on testing.

Although Wallender doesn’t yet have all her data on the use of the tool, eighth-grade transition meetings have shown a significant increase in students’ ability to have conversations around their test scores and what it means for placement in ninth grade.

Wallender joined the school counseling profession in 2013. She received a master’s degree in school counseling from North Dakota State University and a bachelor’s degree in elementary and early childhood education from the University of North Dakota. Wallender is a member of ASCA and the North Dakota School Counselor Association.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Susan Whatley is the Arkansas school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Sylvan Hills Elementary in Sherwood, Ark., a suburban school serving 411 students, grades pre-K-5. “I welcome feedback and ideas from students, teachers, administrators and community members to advocate and best meet the needs of my students,” she said.

To reduce the amount of instructional time lost to disruptive behaviors, Whatley coordinated and implemented a program built to recognize students following the school’s Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) matrix. She launched a focus group of community members, parents, staff and students that examined the school’s discipline, achievement and attendance data to create a behavior matrix. Whatley developed lesson plans, materials, procedures and training to teach all stakeholders PBIS expectations. Dubbed Bear PRIDE Student (peace, respect/responsibility, integrity, disciplined and excellence) for the school’s bear mascot, the program reinforced positive behaviors by awarding “Bear bucks” that could be used to purchase items at the school store.

Due in large part to Whatley’s advocacy, PBIS has inspired a change of mindset for stakeholders previously accustomed to a punitive system for negative behaviors. Data indicates students feel a sense of belonging. The first annual data comparison showed 88% staff participation and 83% reduction in loss of instruction due to disruptive behaviors.

As part of the school and district leadership team, Whatley has provided professional development training to peers. In addition, she sponsored student leadership and academic clubs in previous schools.

Whatley became a school counselor in 1995. She received a master’s degree in elementary school counseling from the University of Central Arkansas and a bachelor’s degree of elementary education from Arkansas State University. Whatley is a member of ASCA and the Arkansas School Counselor Association, where she serves as advocacy/public relations chair.

Michaela Ann Williams is the Wyoming school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Greybull Elementary School in Greybull, Wyo., a rural school serving 210 students, grades pre-K-5. “Given the current state of the country and world, now more than ever, it is crucial as a school counselor to lead, advocate and collaborate to get students and families what they need during this difficult time,” she said. “We will figure it out together.”

When the school had 53 behavior referrals that resulted in out-of-school and in-school suspensions in one school year, Williams worked to ensure a safe and orderly learning environment for all students by decreasing behavior referrals and increasing positive behaviors. After two years of interventions and program implementation, only three behavior referrals resulted in suspensions for an entire school year.

Williams also increased the effectiveness of the Positive Behaviors Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system and counseling lesson effectiveness, built a strong sense of belonging and school community through a schoolwide advocacy program and created a schoolwide mindfulness program. For staff members, Williams has led professional development and book studies about child development, behavior, adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed care and suicide prevention. She also teaches a community parenting class twice a year.

Williams became a school counselor in 2013. She received a master’s degree in school counseling and a bachelor’s degree in family consumer services from Montana State University – Bozeman. She is a member of ASCA and the Wyoming School Counselor Association. She is also the co-creator of an advisory council that helps the school counselors of her district advocate, educate and inform stakeholders of the school counseling programs and goals.



2021 State School Counselors of the Year

Sara Wilmot is the New Hampshire school counselor of the year and the school counselor at Plainfield School in Meriden, N.H., a rural school serving 223 students, grades K–8. “I have developed a school counseling program that I feel passionately about,” she said.

Wilmot created an adventure-based school counseling program aligned with ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors Student Standards Healthy Habits of Harmony (H3). The movement-based, experiential program is based on three harmonies: harmonies with self, others and the environment. Wilmot teaches H3 to all students once a week. In addition, Wilmot collaborated with students, staff, community members and the board to create THRIVE, a core values program that stands for trust, honesty, respect, independence, voice and empathy. She works with students to create student-led assemblies celebrating each letter of THRIVE on a monthly basis.

To help decrease the number of office or discipline referrals, Wilmot developed and implemented a peer mediation program where middle school students are trained and facilitate conflict-resolution sessions with younger students as needed.

Wilmot joined the school counseling profession in 2012. She has a master’s degree in school counseling from Plymouth State University and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Johnson State College. Wilmot is a member of ASCA and the New Hampshire School Counselor Association.