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Leka Anitema Selected as 2026 School Counselor of the Year Finalist



ALEXANDRIA, VA – The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is pleased to announce Leka Anitema as a finalist for the 2026 School Counselor of the Year[®] awards program (#SCOY26). Anitema is the Post-High Counselor at Maui High School, Kahului, Hawaii. The school serves nearly 1,700 students, grades 9–12. Anitema, who was born and raised in Maui and is mother to four young children, has been a school counselor since 2020. She received a bachelor's degree in TESOL and Linguistics

Education from Brigham Young University – Hawaii and earned advanced licenses in school counseling 6–12 and school leadership from the Hawaii Department of Education.

"Leka is a profound advocate for the school counseling profession itself," said Lora-Lee Grando, academy principal at Maui High School. "While her role is solo by title, she prioritizes building powerful schoolwide and community partnerships, highlighting others' strengths to connect students with resources and mentors. She collaborates extensively with colleagues, from special education teachers to AP instructors, delivering schoolwide rollouts and tailored sessions based on identified classroom needs. Through her relentless work, she exemplifies the critical role of school counselors in shaping student futures. Her unwavering commitment to empowering students and bridging home-school connections elevates the entire school counseling discipline."

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

"Each year, the School Counselor of the Year® program shows us what the research tells us – that school counselors have a significant impact on students' academic achievement, social/emotional development and plans for life after graduation," said Jill Cook, ASCA executive director. "Through their dedication, contributions and excellence, these finalists have demonstrated their commitment to the values and mission of the school counseling profession."

The School Counselor of the Year® and finalists will be celebrated in Washington, D.C., in January 2026 and will participate in online events during National School Counseling Week, Feb. 2–6, 2026.

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About the American School Counselor Association

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

advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide their students toward academic achievement, career planning and social/emotional development to help today's students become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. Founded in 1952, ASCA has a network of 53 state and territory associations and a membership of approximately 43,000 school counseling professionals. For additional information on the American School Counselor Association, visit www.schoolcounselor.org.