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## **Joshua Nelson Selected as 2023 School Counselor of the Year Finalist**



ALEXANDRIA, VA – The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is pleased to announce Joshua Nelson, school counselor, Richard Lewis Brown Gifted and Academically Talented Academy, Jacksonville, Fla., as a finalist for the 2023 School Counselor of the Year awards program (#SCOY23). Nelson has been a school counselor since 2015. Richard Lewis Brown Gifted and Academically Talented Academy, a Recognized ASCA Model Program school, serves 232 students, grades K–5, 75% of whom receive free and reduced-price lunch. Nelson received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of North Florida.

“Mr. Nelson is the heartbeat of our learning community,” said Kristi E. Kincaid, principal, Richard Lewis Brown Gifted and Academically Talented Academy. “He takes his role very seriously, and he has made a great impact on our school. When I think about where we were six years ago and where we are today, the biggest impact has been creating a culture of trust. Mr. Nelson has been very integral in this culture of trust and collaboration.”

“He works together with our students to make sure they’re on the right path and also brings the community together. Mr. Nelson goes way above and beyond; in a sense, he is the core and the culture of the school,” said Darryl Willie, chairman, Duval County Public School Board.”

When analyzing discipline data from previous years, Nelson discovered that a small percentage of students were receiving the bulk of the discipline referrals. Upon further research, and discussions with students, families and the community, he discovered the group of students struggled with aggression, depression, frustration, poor focus and inability to resolve minor conflicts, which are the same behaviors associated with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Nelson collaborated with the school's PBIS team to create emotionally safe and supportive spaces, providing calm down corners in every classroom and creating a sensory room where students could de-escalate.

"Working with the students taught me the power of intentional/caring relationships, the need for explicit instruction in healthy coping skills and the power of positive relationships in reversing the impact of ACEs," Nelson said. "I became the trusted adult students needed on good days or bad. One student wrote, 'Mr. Nelson is my safe person. I know I can come to him at any time, and he will always be there for me.' It wasn't just me, though. Students were assigned an adult mentor, and I intentionally paired students in lunch bunches, which gave them opportunities to create positive friendships and support each other with self-regulation."

Nelson discovered the combination of groups and mentoring to be powerful. "It wasn't just that kids were learning a growth mindset, social skills and self-control, but working with each other in small groups and with adult mentors gave students more than one safe space and a greater variety of coping strategies to add to their toolboxes," he said. The data illustrated the intervention's success, with a majority of students not only decreasing their number of discipline referrals but also increasing academic achievement in reading.

"ASCA's School Counselor of the Year program shines a valuable spotlight on the school counseling profession, bringing attention to exceptional school counselors who are supporting K-12 students every day," said Jill Cook, CAE, ASCA executive director. "School counselors are vital to students' academic achievement, social/emotional development and plans for life after graduation. The 2023 finalists

have demonstrated their commitment to the values and mission of the profession to help all students succeed.”

The School Counselor of the Year and finalists will be celebrated in Washington, D.C., in February 2023 and will participate in webinars and additional online events during National School Counseling Week, Feb. 6–10, 2023.

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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 50 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](http://www.schoolcounselor.org).