Jen Walsh:

From the American School Counselor Association, this is I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education.

I'm Jen Walsh, director of education and training here at ASCA. ASCA's school counselor of the year award honors professionals of vote their careers to advocating for the nation students, and addressing their academic and social emotional development and college and career readiness needs. Today we sit down with the 2022 school counselor of the year, Alma Lopez.

Alma is the lead school counselor at Livingston Middle School in Livingston, California. A graduate of California State University, Fresno, Alma has been a school counselor for 15 years and also serves as Livingston Unified School District school counseling coordinator. Alma is also the first Latina school of the year. Welcome Alma, and congratulations.

Alma Lopez:

Thank you.

Jen Walsh:

I hear you say that the spring of 2015 was a significant turning point in your career.

Alma Lopez:

Yes, the spring of 2015 was my decision to lean in, as Sheryl Sandberg Facebook author wrote, and I leaned into an opportunity that resulted in my superintendent's decision to "invest half a million dollars in school counseling for students." And so for me, this was the moment that that miracle of school counseling was happening in my district.

It was at that time in California, that the local accountability plan, or the LCAP, and the local control funding formula, that LCFS, was introduced, and I was invited to a meeting with my superintendent and director of categorical funding, and we had this really beautiful and very intentional conversation that changed really my career and changed counseling and Livingston. And so, I went from being a counselor to serving a dual role as a counselor, still at middle school, but also a school counselor coordinator for our district, for our new team that would be five school counselors.

Initially when I was hired in the district, I was hired for a specific function and that was to adhere to Assembly Bill 1802, which talked about meeting with students and their caregivers about student's academic progress and high school requirements and post-secondary options. That was one part of the job.

But in my district, they felt like, "Well, we'll get a better candidate if we can make this a full-time position." And so, it became a full-time position, and I applied for the job, and I loved the work. I had an opportunity to meet with every seventh grade student in my district and their family. And I really enjoyed that and was able to help support and guide students and families through their educational journey.

But what I found at the elementary schools that I was serving was really the importance of early intervention and prevention. And so, here I was, one school counselor serving three elementary schools, and then one of two school counselors serving the middle school. And so, my ratio was one to 2,500 students, and it was this bandaid, and I really believed that my student's deserved better.

And so, I had an opportunity to attend my first ASCA national conference, and I learned about the model, and I did not know about the model as a graduate student. And so all of a sudden, my colleague and I realized, "Oh, my gosh, there is this guide that tells us how to create and manage a comprehensive data driven school counseling program."

And so, we were both committed to doing that. And so, that conversation that we had back in 2015 with my superintendent and district leadership, I had an opportunity to really talk about the role of school counselors in academic achievement, in social emotional development, and in college and career readiness.

And I said, "There could be a lot of great things that happen for our students and our community if there were to be a school counselor in every building." I was armed with some great tools. Again, I had just come from that ASCA conference and so I knew about the position statements. And so, I was able to articulate our role as a school counselor in almost any question that came my way.

And so, one example that I remember from our very first year was we were also having some administrative changes. And so in our district, three of our four principals were new, and some had come from the high school level and they really believed that the school counselor should be the SST coordinator. And I had that ASCA position statement that talked about the role of the school counselor are on the SST team as a vital member, but not necessarily as the coordinator.

And so, I was able to articulate that to our principal team, our district leadership team, and they agreed. They wanted to ensure that the majority of our time was spent on a direct service to our students. And so, they fully supported it. Someone else a part of the team became the SST coordinator, but it did not land on the lap of the school counselor.

We're a member and we attend and we contribute, but we're not the lead on that team. And similarly right now as we're learning about multi-tiered systems of support, I've pulled that position statement that ASCA has, and I use that in the conversations that I'm having with my principals, with teachers, with our district leadership. And so, I think that ASCA has many tools that the school counselor can use that are simple to use. You look at those position statements and they tell you, "Here's the role of the school counselor. And here's the why." And when you can share the why with folks on the team, they understand, and then we can be moving forward in a shared way with a shared vision to help all of our students. And so, I think I'm very grateful for my learning that I experienced with ASCA.

Jen Walsh:

How has implementing a district wide comprehensive school counseling program based on the model, the ASCA national model, expanded your ability to serve your students, and to serve all of your students?

Alma Lopez:

Yes. Well, the very first thing is right there, Jen, right? Servicing all of our students. And so, that's one of the primary things that the ASCA national model allows us to do. And so, by having a school counselor in the building means that there is access and opportunities, right? And so, I think that's the very first thing is getting that school counselor in the building.

When we were able to do that in our district, that meant that our students were going to now have access to a school counselor, and they were now going to have opportunities for education, activities, college and career readiness, social emotional wellness, in a way that hadn't occurred before.

And then secondly, again, was those tools. I think that was a key ingredient, is having the tools that ASCA has provided for school counselors, some with a slight cost and most for free, and then using those tools.

And so, we have a work calendar similar to an administrator here in Livingston. And so, this allows our team to come together well in advance of the school year to do some of the work that has to happen when students are not in the building. For example, we come together and we review the data. We look at our school's Spark report card. We look at doing an improvement plan that the principal's have worked on, and we'll look at that LCAP and what are the goals? And then we start planning.

And we really offer a very intentional and tiered system of support. We're in the classroom offering counseling instruction to our students seven times a year. We focus on areas like graduation requirements, giving that education to our students. We focus on helping our students develop self competency and self-efficacy, and then we spend time with our students talking them about the signs of suicide and how to make sure that they acknowledge what they hear or see in themselves or their peers, to care about it, and then how to talk to a trusted adult about it. And of course, college and career readiness.

We also plan our school-wide events. And so district wide, we do The Great Kindness Challenge. We do a suicide awareness campaign. We do a mental health awareness campaign. We do a diversity and cultural awareness. And so, we plan these things all before the school year starts and we divide and conquer as a team, and I think that's really crucial.

And then we look at our tier two services, right? And so, we're able to look at that data. Before the students are back in the building, we look and we say, "Hey, who were the students with Fs last year? Who were the students that had a chronic absenteeism rate? Who were the students who were suspended or had office referrals?" And we start to create those initial groups and/or look to see what other resources we might have available on campus that some of those students might benefit from.

And so, we begin creating our groups. And of course this year, we spent some time in the beginning of the year talking about, "We're going to need to have a group based on grief and loss because of all of the grief and loss that has occurred and continues to occur in the current moment that we're living."

And lastly is that tier three service. Really looking at those students who were high on the radar the previous year, and making sure that we're monitoring and connecting with them regularly, and then scheduling time for that crisis intervention. And that's tough, right? We don't know when those things are going to come in, but the more things that we can front load that are preventative and that we put in the beginning of our planning and our action plans, then when things come up, we have some room to be able to adjust. And so for me, I have found that following the ASCA national model is actually what allows us to service every student in the building in a very intentional and purposeful manner.

Jen Walsh:

The ASCA national model states that really 80% of our time should be spent in indirect or direct services to students, right? It sounds like for you implementing it has allowed you the time to proactively provide these services and these amazing activities.

We are going to pause for a quick word from one of our sponsors, myOptions. MyOptions would like to relay a big thank you to all school counselors, and a happy National School Counseling Week. You help shape the world of our future as the nation's largest free college and career planning program, myOptions Encourage is here to help you blaze innovative approaches to meet your students emerging needs. We have an evolving portfolio of apps and tools for students, parents, and school counselors to build college lists, track progress, match with scholarships all in one place, and it's free. Check us out at MyOptions.org.

We're now back with Alma. Your school is also a recognized ASCA model program, or a RAMP school, and you serve as a RAMP reviewer. Having gone through that process, what are three tips that you have for individuals who are interested in applying for RAMP?

Alma Lopez:

Yes. So, the RAMP process is a wonderful experience. It tells your story, and it's a way to highlight both your successes, and an opportunity to reflect on areas of growth. And so I think, Jen, this is my favorite a question so far.

The first tip I would say is start by familiarizing yourself with the ASCA national model if you are not familiar with it. I was not familiar with the model as a college student. So when I first learned about it, I was elated. I was so happy that there was something out there that could guide my work.

And so, I remember purchasing all of the books for my counselors, the new team that we were building, and giving it to them and saying, "Read these books." And they looked at me and they said, "We read those in college." They had them as part of their curriculum, and so we were a step ahead because I was really the only one on the team familiar with the model, and the team that we were putting together was familiar with the model and had even practiced as a graduate student creating their own comprehensive school counseling program.

And so, when we talked about exploring RAMP and considering applying, my team was on board. And so, that first tip is to invest in the ASCA books. And there's four. There's the ASCA national model, there's the implementation guide, there's the Making Data Work, and there's a leadership book. And I think that making sure you read and review and reference these books throughout your process of learning about RAMP and then actually applying are key.

The second tip I would have is to calendar time in to review the templates, to review the questions that are going to be asked, and to review the rubric. The process to apply for RAMP requires a lot of preparation. And so, it's important for you to know what's required. For example as a school starting our new program and having counselors in every building, we did not have a school counseling vision statement. And so when we reviewed the rubric, that's number one, right?

And so, we made sure that we set time aside to create our vision statement. And at first, we actually created a district school counseling vision statement, which was okay. But for RAMP purposes, we learned in reviewing the rubric that we actually needed to have a school site specific school counseling vision statement. And so, we went back to work as a team and created our school site's vision statement. And ASCA has these great tools that can help organize and calendar things.

I remember we used a questionnaire helps to determine, "Do you have all of the components?" For example, "Do you have a vision statement? Do you have a school counseling advisory?" And this helps you because then, "Okay, yeah, we have the vision statement, but we don't have an advisory. So, we need to create one this year," and you can calendar what that would look like. And there's also a monthly guide that I remember we're using that helps guide month to month what that road to completing the RAMP application might look like.

And then the third tip that I personally found very useful and might make us a little vulnerable, is to actually have someone who's not in the school counseling world to review your application before submitting it. And I found this to be twofold. One is, it gave other people who are not in our field, but who are part of our school community, an opportunity to learn about the role of a school counseling program. And so, that was a little bit of advocacy.

But two was that when you have someone who's unfamiliar with school counseling, they actually can ensure that the way you're answering the questions and that the information that's being provided aligns to that rubric. And so, I had a couple great friends from within the district that I turned to and said, "Hey, can you review my application and give me that feedback so that I can turn in the best product?"

And so, I would say those would be the three tips I have for exploring that RAMP process.

Jen Walsh:

I especially like to your tip number two, with just reviewing the RAMP rubric. I think even if you're not immediately ready to who apply, the RAMP rubric really spells out what is needed so that you can start looking at implementing those things, and also implementing them at an exemplary level. It really details what is exemplary, and really includes all of those components so that you can be working towards that goal the entire time.

Alma Lopez:

Yes.

Jen Walsh:

So, I know that you're a rural school counselor as well. So, what are two suggestions that you have for other rural school counselors out there?

Alma Lopez:

Sure. Thank you for this question. As a rural school counselor, you wear many hats and you play many roles. And so, the first thing is really know your role as a school counselor in the building. Know that you have an expertise that is valuable and worthy of being shared with the team.

And so, one of the things that we do here in Livingston is we have, at my school, we have a principal bulletin. It's called the Cougar Bites. We're the home of the Cougar, so we call it the Cougar Bites. And I've asked my principal for space on that newsletter that goes out every week. It's a school counselor corner. And in that school counseling corner, we share our counseling activities that we're doing from week to week and we share data.

"We were running a group for trimester one and we had 25 students that participated in our academic small group, and out of those 25 students, we had 20 of them that no longer had an F their end of the year or end of trimester report card." We also share about the activities that we're doing. And so, I mentioned for example suicide prevention in September. So, we make sure that the whole month in September, every opportunity on that Cougar Bites bulletin, there are resources and information that teachers can as they work with students. And also, that teachers can use as many of them are parents as well. And so, information that they might use with their own child.

So, I think knowing that in a rural school setting, you are this highly sought-out expert. And so, own that. Own that, and share what you know in shared spaces like a monthly newsletter, whether it's your own counselor one, or I like doing it with the principal because everybody reads what he's going to send out, right? So, I like to have my shared space with him so that it gets out to all the teachers.

And then secondly is to get to know the community, and to become a part of that community, so that you know which resources are available and which resources are still needed. And so, when you are able to go out to the community... We had a Veteran's Day parade, and if I'm available, I make it a point to go out to the parade so that other people see me. And then all of a sudden, I get to know The Veterans League. And then all of a sudden, maybe we start building a relationship. And then when there is a need, I could think about, "Oh, who do I know in the community that might be able to help me fill this need?" Getting to know local churches that might offer food banks, getting to know who works at the clinic and who I would need to call if I need to help make a specialized referral to a specific service.

So I think in rural communities, really being part of the community is essential because you end up being this liaison to all of the other resources available in communities.

Jen Walsh:

So your principal, Jorge Arteaga, said that you are "passionate about supporting your students in succeeding in middle school, and that as you plan and organize student services, you always think of equity and access to ensure your needier students get the support that they need to be successful." So, what are some ways that you can consider equity and access when serving your students?

I know that sometimes this can be a really daunting thing to think about, so are there any easy way that a school counselor can be sure to consider equity and access immediately in their building today?

Alma Lopez:

Yes. So, when I think about this question, I have more questions, and I think about something that I came across about five or six years ago, and it was a YouTube video by Harvard Dean of Education, James Ryan. And it was called Five Essential Questions, and it is a five minute, six minute video.

But I think that what it did for me was to help me ensure that I am considering equity and access for all students. And so, I often lean into all of my conversations with stakeholders with these five questions. The first question is simple. It's just, "Wait, what?" And that really allows us to slow down and try and understand. And so, I might be in a meeting with a group of teachers and we might be talking and I'll just stop and say, "Wait, what? Am I understanding that not all of our students have access to an elective?" Or, "Wait, what? Am I understanding that not all of our students have access to an advanced course?" And I'll just post that question for the group.

Question two that Dean Ryan talks about is, "I wonder why, and I wonder if." And so, I'll sit in the meeting and many times it might be a meeting with teachers, a staff meeting, or it might be a meeting with a parent group. And I'll just say, "I wonder why the students are saying at they're bored. I wonder if we can make the lesson more engaging somehow." And so, I'll just prompt some of this thinking.

Question three is one of my favorites, and it says, "Couldn't we at least?" And that lets us move towards progress. And so at my school, I often say that. I often say, "Couldn't we at least agree that all our students can be successful, even if we're not sure how to get that success out of them just yet?" And it's actually one of our district belief statements is that, that our students can all be successful regardless of their individual circumstances.

And so, this district belief statement really drives our team. And so, when I bring it back to, "Couldn't we at least just agree that all our kids could be successful?" Then it puts us all in the same playing field so that we can move forward with that in mind.

Question number four is, "How can I be of help?" And so, remembering that as a school counselor, that's who we are. We are helpers, and we do not need to assume that we know how to help. We need to ask that question. "How can I help? I hear you saying that you're having a hard time focusing in class, or I hear you saying that your mom is always nagging at you about something, or I hear you saying you don't like your teacher, right? How can I help? What can I do? Or how can we help?"

Because I always remember that the only expert about someone is that someone. The individual knows those answers, and our job as a school counselor is to be that helper and help them work through to getting the resolution that they need for themselves.

And then the last question that Dean Ryan talks about is, "What truly matters?" That allows us to get to the heart of the issue. "What's the point?" And so again, when I'm in conversations with different stakeholders, I will ask. I'll say, "Does it really matter whether the assignment is turned in one day later? Does it really matter? Does it really matter that the camera was off when the student was talking to you on the chat box or turned in their work? Does it matter that their camera was off?"

And so, I had have found that this little YouTube video that I came across five or six years ago from Dean Ryan of Harvard really helps me be able to consider that equity and access for all students, because we're asking these questions that are reminding us to slow down, to try and understand, to make sure we're moving towards progress, to being able to help, right, in a way that matters. And so, I would definitely recommend that school counselors watch this video if they haven't. It definitely is worth it, and I would say that it has really been a game changer for me as I have conversations with different stakeholders.

Jen Walsh:

Yeah. I mean, it's a video you watched six years ago and you're still able to reference it and think about it daily. It sounds like an incredible video. I will try to link it in the show notes here so that others can view it, but they're really thought provoking questions.

And now for a word from another one of our sponsors, the United States Marine Corps. The United States Marine Corps is honored to partner with the American School Counselor Association. "As educators concerned with the advancement of young Americans, we believe that you provide your students with the knowledge they need to thrive, the discipline to apply what they have learned, and the desire to achieve more. Just as you make every effort to prepare your students for life beyond the classroom, the Marine Corps strive to help every Marine reach his or her potential. We look forward to building relationships in your school community and working with you to identify those individuals who possess the fighting spirit to take on the challenge of securing our nation. Please accept our invitation to learn more by visiting Connect.Marines.com."

And we're now back with Alma. Though I hear that creating a post-secondary readiness culture is extremely important to you, this can be particularly challenging at the middle school level. So, how are some ways that you foster post-secondary readiness culture in your building?

Alma Lopez:

The first step, and I think as some folks may already know, for me, it took a t-shirt. I saw a classmate wearing a Fresno State t-shirt and I asked a question about like, "What is that?" I really didn't know about college, and I didn't understand it. And I saw this t-shirt, and I thought about college. And so, I always remember that.

And so what I do is I make it a point to use a lot of those free samples that we get at conferences or trainings, or even on vacation, or when I go to my mechanic and they have a free pen or pencil, or I go to the dentist and they give me a toothbrush. So, all those free incentives have a logo. And many times, they have a website. And so, I use those as freebies, as little giveaways to offer my students, and even staff that just, in a very non-threatening and very easy and effortless way, sparks that interest, right? That curiosity.

Like, "Huh, look at this logo. What is this about?" Right? And maybe the student will Google and learn about, "If I want to be a mechanic," what that looks like, or maybe they'll Google UC Davis, and see, "If I go there, can I become a lawyer?"

When we're in adolescence, and so at middle school, right, the prime time of adolescence, we're curious, and we want to explore, and we're trying to figure things out. And so, it's equally important that our master schedule and our program offerings are diverse. And so in our middle school, we offer electives like AVID, and band, art, and technology.

And this year, because we were able to move towards a seventh period day in our attempt to offer equity and access to electives for all students, we had to do a lot of work and we were able to add some great additional electives like video production, guitar, Spanish, and forensics to the master schedule. And so, making sure that opportunities to explore different interests and to learn about a specialized skill are available to our students.

And then of course we offer programs like California Junior Scholarship Federation, CJSF, and we have a UC scholar's program, so that our students also learn about college opportunities. Additionally, making sure that we're part of the conversation about after school programs, so that it's not just sports programs that are available, right?

Sports programs are great for those student athletes, but there's other students like myself who, we weren't athletes. And so, having clubs like the book club or the math club or a robotics club or a community service club also allows to encourage students to consider what they might do in their future as they're exploring different areas of interest.

We also ensure that in our classroom counseling instruction, we host two lessons a year. So at the end of their middle school experience, that would be six lessons where our students complete an interest inventory and then begin to explore, "What jobs are available? What careers might I able to do that are around my interest, and how much does the job pay?" That's always an important question for our students. And so, getting them interested is really key.

We also hold college and career fairs for our students, and they are organized in great part by our students. They do some research and then they present to their peers. As a school counselor, I really believe that it's my responsibility to ensure that the student interest, the student voice is considered, and whenever possible, infused into the master schedule or the afterschool program offerings. And so, we try to, once a year at least but sometimes every other year, have our students complete a survey about their interests and their needs. And we review that data and then we have those conversations. And so, our students were the ones that were interested in robotics and in forensics. And so we talked about, "How could we make that happen?"

Jen Walsh:

I hear that your district and school has seen several administrative transitions throughout a short period, and I imagine that this makes it really hard to build those collaborative relationships with administrators that are so critical. How have you been able to still build these collaborative relationships despite these challenges?

Alma Lopez:

Yeah, so it definitely is difficult, but what I've found is that we have two big strengths that we are armed with in my district. And one is actually thanks to ASCA and to us adhering to the ASCA national model, and it's the administrative conference template. This is one of the best tools. It's both a conversation and an informal contract, if you will, between the administrator and the school counselor. And so, this tool has actually been essential for us in working with the changing administrative teams that we've had.

So my colleague and I, we create the first initial draft and then we've already, like I mentioned, we've reviewed all the data before in July, usually in July. So then when our administrative team joins us, we're like, "Hey, here we have this agreement. Here's our plans, here's our goal. We've reviewed everything." And so, we definitely use that tool to help us build that relationship.

And our administrators are like, "Oh, you looked at my goals. Oh, you want to help me with my goals? Oh, this sounds great," right? And so, it's basically a wonderful tool to use to help build that collaborative relationship. And so, our administrator might suggest a change or two in that annual administrative conference and in the template. And so, we work on it together. But in essence, we're creating our own contract, our own job description. And so, it's a great, great tool that I have found really allows our new administrators, when they get to know us, to know that we're serious about meeting the needs of our students, that we've done our research and we're ready to roll up our sleeves and work. And so, that has been the first tool that I think really helps build that principle counselor relationship, because, "Hey, we have this contract. Let's agree together." So, I think that first.

And then second in our district, another one of our belief statements says, "People, not programs make the difference." And so, each administrator that we have been fortunate actually to secure in our district, they're wonderful human beings with compassionate hearts and visionary leadership. They want to help us move forward. And so, I think because the right people for us are hired into our district family, then we're starting together from this shared vision, right? We want to serve our students and our communities, and we want these young people to become great contributors to society in the future. And so, we're on the same page. And so, I think those two things really have been what helped us in our relationship with our changing administrators that we've had.

Jen Walsh:

In what other ways does collaboration impact your school counseling program?

Alma Lopez:

Sure. So again, in adhering to the ASCA national model, we created the school counseling advisory. And the advisory is made up of all the stakeholders; students, parents, staff, district leadership, community members. And so, this has really allowed us to move forward on several initiatives. One was making a significant change through many conversations with this team, with this advisory on our graduation.

That moved us from a 78% graduation rate to an almost 96% graduation rate, because we listened to the different stakeholders, we adjusted and made changes and recommended changes to the board, policy on graduation that made a significant difference.

And then second is that we've had community members that had given so graciously of their time to our school. We host an annual Rachel's Challenge event each year, pre-pandemic, and it required 25 adults to volunteer an entire day of their time to engage with students for a full day. So, it was a 25 adult to 100 students. Well, Jen, we always secured the volunteers. We had police officers, city council members, church pastors, former teachers, retired administrators. We had a lot of adults from our community who wanted to be a part of our students lives. And so, the collaborative efforts of our team here in Livingston, of our community, is really pretty impressive. I think.

Jen Walsh:

So, you do all of this incredible work, what motivates or inspires you to do this every day?

Alma Lopez:

Sure. So, I am motivated by the fact, Jen, that I absolutely know and believe that one person can make a difference and can change the trajectory of someone's life and of their family's life. John F. Kennedy said one person can make a difference, and everyone should try. And so, that's what I try to do. I try to make a difference every day, and I think that maybe one time it will count for someone. And so, that's what motivates me.

Jen Walsh:

Thank you so much for joining us today, Alma, and for sharing your experience and insight. We really appreciate it. And again, congratulations.

And thank you all for listening. We hope to have you back on our next episode, but until then be sure to check out our website, SchoolCounselor.org for school counselor resources.

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