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 who devote their careers to advocating for the nation's students, and addressing their academic and social emotional development college and career readiness needs.

Today, we sit down with one of the 2022 school counselor of the year finalists, Matthew Berry. Matthew is the lead and district school counselor for Ritenour Husky Academy in Overland, Missouri, where he serves 736 students, grades six through eight.

Matthew has been a school counselor since 2007, and he received his Bachelor's Degree from Southwest, Missouri State University, and his Master's Degree from Missouri Baptist University. Welcome Matthew, and congratulations.

I hear that you've presented several sessions for the Missouri School Counseling Association conference in the past, one of which was on the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program based on the model. So, implementation with intent. What does implementing with intent mean to you and your program?

Matthew Berry:

Thank you, Jen, for having me today. I have, and presenting at the conference and just presenting in general is such a great opportunity just to show leadership, and it's something I enjoy to do.

That presentation around implementing with intent is something that is integral to what I do as a school counselor. There is a Calvin and Hobbs where Hobbs asked, "Is it better to do the right thing and fail, or better to do the wrong thing and succeed?" And Calvin responds with, "The truth is, most of us discover where we are heading when we arrive."

Well, I am not one of those individuals who like to know where I'm heading when I arrive. I really believe implementing with intent is about having a destination, and a plan on how you'll get there. And so that presentation, and also just the work that I do as a counselor in building a program, is all about me having an intentional approach within that program. So, it's about planning out my day, planning out the week and the month and the year so that I know what that path is to getting to the end and meeting those program goals that we created.

Another example of that is just some of the work that you do with individual students. As school counselors, a lot of times we are on the go. Students are coming to us with a lot of different needs and different things, and I learned that I am better prepared when I find a proactive approach in working with students. I had a student one time, we were doing some planning for transition, students that were moved from fifth to sixth grade with us.

And every year I give students a survey and I ask students to tell me something about themselves. And then that year, I was giving a survey to students that were moving from fifth to sixth, sixth grade. And I had already looked over some of those survey surveys and results, but it happened to be a fifth grade parent night where the fifth grade students were coming to the middle school, and the students happened to be there too.

That night, I saw this student that I had read his survey previously, and I went to that student and I said, "Hey, on your survey, you had written that you were going to be BFWAC." And I had no idea what BF WAC meant. I said, "What does BFWAC mean?" He looked at me, remember he's a fifth grader, looked up at me at that time and said, "Mr. Berry, that meant best friends with a counselor."

I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. This kid, he got me." Right then, right? Best friends with the counselor. I thought, how awesome. Later that night I'm walking around. I come back, he's in the library. And as he's in the library, I'm watching him. And I see, he's running around the library, he's knocking over books, jumping off tables, knocking off chairs. And all I could think was, "He's so right. He's going to be best friends with a counselor."

So, what I learned was that I need to be proactive. I need to be intentional in how I work with kids. And I need to ask kids, ask teachers, ask parents, "What are the needs?" Right? What needs do your students have? What needs do you have as a teacher. My administrators, what needs do you see that we have? And then plan and be proactive in approaching that.

I could have waited for him two months in, or two weeks in to show me that he needed to be best friends with the counselor, but he told me up front. And so, those things are what I see that's important into understanding how we take an attention approach around counseling.

Jen Walsh:

Well, you already touched on this a little bit, but we know, when you talked about proactive counseling, we know that implementing a comprehensive school counseling program allows for more time for direct and indirect student services. So, one such service in your school is the Ritenour Attendance Program. So I love this, and I know that attendance issues are something that many counselors struggle with. So, can you talk more about this program, how students are selected, different interventions and results?

Matthew Berry:

Yes, most definitely. Yeah. So, each year my co-counselor and our counseling team, which comprised of a counselor, a social worker, we have some other individuals that work with students; we gather and look at what our goals are. And we're looking at, "How do we set goals for attendance and achievement?" And also, to address any type of behavior concerns?

So, attendance was definitely one of those areas that we wanted to put some focus on. And as we really dig deep into some of our attendance data, we realized that there's this population of students that we really wanted to see an opportunity to see growth in them getting to school. And we understood too that, that part of that getting to school was also about having the feelings of belonging and feeling connected. And so, as we took all those things in consideration, we identified a group of students that we knew that possibly we could move to increase their attendance over a period of time.

What that looked like was that we identified students in each grade level. We had a sixth, seventh, and eighth, and we had probably about seven, eight students for each grade level. And in the beginning of the day, we have this really awesome time in the beginning of the day, it's called Husky Time. We are, at Ritenour Middle School known as the Huskies. And so, during that time was an opportunity for us, across the buildings, to connect with students.

And so, those students actually that we identified, came to the counseling center. We designed a program where we were doing connectedness lessons; connecting them to school, connecting them to their learning, connecting them to their future plan. What do they want to do in the future? And trying to find ways to help make learning relevant to them.

And so, we spend time with them. I have breakfast with them, talk about the things that are important to them, and did a lot of also hands on activities with them. And as we began to do that work, each week they tracked the progress. And so, they're tracking their progress throughout the week; documenting how they're doing, talking about how they feel about being at Ritenour Middle.

And over that time what we saw was just by really connecting with them and them and creating a space for them that they can come to start their day, we saw an increase of 50% of those students who participated increased their attendance over that six week session. And many of the times when we had to dismiss those students out of that program, they wanted to come back, because they enjoyed starting their day like that.

And so, that was definitely a great program for us just to find a way to connect, because I think that's what we find a lot of times is at students sometimes don't feel connected to learning or connected to their school for a lot of different reasons.

Jen Walsh:

Definitely. Do you see that attendance issues can often be rooted in not necessarily the students, but maybe in some issues at home? And if that's what you were finding, how did you address those and how did you work to collaborate with parents on attendance issues?

Matthew Berry:

That's definitely true, and I think part of that initial piece of them participating in that program is that communication that we did with the parents. So, really reaching out to them and talking about what successes that we are looking forward to celebrating with their student as far as being present.

Things have changed obviously in the past two years, and we've really also through even that program increased opportunities for us to even visit families even at their home, and tried to work with them where they all are. And so, a lot of times with families that was the work that we'd do.

In all the work that I do with families, I always start with a relationship, that's number one, and know that regardless of what our end goals are that we start with that relationship. And also all, I also know that families, they're the expert over their students. They know their students best. And so, I really want to collaborate and align with them about what those needs are. So, that enabled us to really connect them to even resources that maybe hadn't been addressed in the past. And so, those are the things that, within that program and also just within our school counseling program, that we are always are looking to add and improve upon.

Jen Walsh:

We are going to pause now for a quick word from one of our sponsors, myOptions. MyOptions would like to relay a big thank you to all school counsel counselors, and wish you 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 student's emerging needs. We have an evolving portfolio of apps and tools for students, parents, and school counselors to build college list, track progress, match with scholarships, all in one place, and it's free. Check us out at MyOptions.org."

So, collaboration is so important to the school counseling profession, and it's one of the themes of the ASCA national model, and it's a theme of National School Counseling Week this year, which is, "School counseling: Better Together." So, can you talk about a particularly effective collaboration effort that you've spearheaded or been instrumental to?

Matthew Berry:

Yes. The collaboration starts with that relationship piece. And one of the things that I do, just in general in how I approach working with students and families and teachers, for me it's also about being present. I think just being present, it speaks to the work that we are doing as school counselors, and the work that we maybe want to do to try to improve student's successes.

One of the needs that I have seen within middle school is just an opportunity for us to improve upon more male role models within our schools. There's very few male school counselors, and very few African American male school counselors. I work in a school population where we have a large majority of African American population, and also Hispanic population. And so, I just really saw a need for us to have more opportunities to have those male role models.

And so, one of the things that we began to work on, and then that I spearheaded was, trying to bring volunteers to our school. And those volunteers were fathers, they were grandfathers, brothers. Could be a coach, could be an uncle. But what we wanted to see is opportunity for them to be involved in that learning, and have our students have exposure to more male role models.

That has been just a delight to see. What we saw from that is that these father figures were able to work one on one with students, have conversations with them outside of the classroom. I had a particular grandfather who had collaborated with a ELA sixth grade teacher, and this teacher had spearheaded this new curriculum, and this grandfather was able to collaborate with this teacher and work with a small group of students and pull them out of the classroom at times and help them work through that curriculum, and that's something that he would do each day that he came.

There's so many great opportunities through that program for students to just connect and to build upon even social skills and, and build upon their academic success. It was something that we've seen to be very successful and are looking even more ways how we can expand that across our district. The purpose of that program was really about twofold; help increase opportunities for school safety in our building. And so, they did at times walk the hallways, they were present at lunch, present in the classroom. So, an opportunity just to have more bodies present at school is something that we know, this year, is definitely lacking. So, to have that available is such a great, great asset.

And then secondly, it was to mentor. Everybody in the building knew that they were there and that we would have those individuals come in to the school. We'd make those announcements across Intercom that, "Hey, we have this volunteer here today." And so, they're looking for them and knowing that these father figures are there to work as a mentor, talk with students, to be present, and just to have another ear for them to listen to.

Jen Walsh:

It sounds like you're very intentional about how you plan, collaborate, advocate, and lead to ensure that your program is one that is comprehensive and supportive for all students. How has developing a school counseling calendar for the year impacted your ability to support all students?

Matthew Berry:

In speaking about implementing to intent, one of the things I always talk about is that; if you don't plan your plan, someone else is going to plan it for you. And so, I think as counselors, we know what that looks like.

For me, that intentional practice of planning and building a calendar was so important. One of my co-counselors, my first year in the building, she had asked me, "I know that you're really good with technology, and we need this transition video for students that are moving from fifth to six, and I'm wondering if you could work on that?" And I thought, "Yeah, I would love this. This is totally up my alley." And I asked her, I said, "When do you need it by?" She said, "We need it in two weeks." 'Oh, my goodness. I'm going to see what we can do to make this work."

After that year, we began to sit down and really plan out our year about, what are the needs each month? So, we began to do that, and so we created that year at a glance and created a calendar for us.

For me, I began to just really take that a step further. I do plan out my month. So, I'm looking at what direct instruction I'm teaching. What am I teaching in the classroom? What are my small groups going to look like? I'm planning those out on a calendar for the week.

Also on my weekly calendar, I'm planning out individual time so I can be accessible for students that have individual needs. While I plan things, does my plan always work out the way I planned it? Not necessarily. But what does happen is that because I do write it down and I'm intentional about that, then I am more likely to meet more needs because of that.

What I see with that is, I'm able to meet some of those program goals. One of our goals was to increase small group intervention over the year, and we had set a goal to meet with 20% of our student population in a small group intervention.

I can just plan that we're going to do that, but when I write it down and I planned it out and I shared that with all my staff and all my administrators, then it's most likely going to occur. We actually even surpassed even that 20% number. We met with 30% of our student population in a small group setting. So, having a calendar and having a plan like that really speaks to meeting the needs of students.

The other thing I look at is, month to month, and I think about, "How much time am I spending providing direct services to students this month, and how can I increase that from this month to the next?" So, those are the things I look for as far as try to be intentional with that practice.

Jen Walsh:

Yeah. So, calendars are a form of communicating, essentially, what your school counseling program is doing, but what are some other ways that you can communicate the work that is taking place within your program?

Matthew Berry:

Yes. Yeah. As I've planned that work, one of the things I do quarterly is put together a quarterly memo. I've done that actually monthly, I've done it quarterly, and I send that out to everybody. My administrator gets that, all the staff get that. And on that, I let them know, "These are the numbers. These are how many students I've seen. This is how many small groups I have ran, and these are the topics and the things we're talking about."

If I've done any survey pieces with students or staff, I'm sharing that data back with him also. And the comments that I get from that usually is, "Can you continue to send this to us? I really appreciate that." So, I think that we forget, I know at times we think that we are communicating what we're doing and hopefully people are seeing that, but we really need to let people know that.

And that's part of what National School Counseling Week is about, right? It's about promoting the programming that we do because that's so important, so that everybody that we come across has an understanding about this important work and how this has an impact on student achievement. That's just one way that I do that.

Additionally too, some of the things that we just planned proactively in our counseling program was, we meet yearly with our administrative conference, with our admin, and we talk about what our plan is for the beginning of the year.

Additionally, our counseling team is part of our administrative team, and the aspect that we meet weekly, it's called the ACT, the administrative counseling team. And we talk about building-wide goals and needs. And how does our program, how can we influence some of those pieces? And so, we're part of that.

We also attend regularly the PTO meetings and present to our families there, and we talk about things that are related to what we do. And we have School Counseling Advisory Committee, quarterly that meets, and we share that data with them. During the time when we actually were virtual, we continued to have those counseling advisory committees, but we also did a lot of parent meetings every other month, and we did those virtually and presented a lot of different information about how what we do as counselors in our program and how that has an impact, and also received a lot of feedback from families about what some of their needs were. So, there's just a wealth of different way is to do that. But what we found, what worked for us were those things.

Jen Walsh:

And now forward 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 strives to help every Marine reach his or her potential. We look forward to the 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."

Communicating, again, common theme here. So, communicating with your administrators, which you touched on a little bit already with the administrative conference, but communicating with administrators about your program is really important. Can you talk a little bit about that, and the impact it's had on your school counseling program?

Matthew Berry:

Yeah, so it's definitely... I don't know how successful us meeting some of these needs and goals would've been, had we not had great relationships with our administrators, and our administrators understanding the work that we do as school counselors.

My first year at Ritenour Middle, I had been counselor previously for eight or 10 years, and I had come back to Ritenour Middle. It was a place that I had worked at before, but I hadn't been a counselor there, but I'd come back to a school where I knew a lot of people. And my first year, I just really watched and listened. I just wanted to see how things were and what the school climate was and get to know, again, my co-counselor, and how we did things there, and get to know my administrator and what some of their needs and ideas were.

My second year there though, I began to really see that need and wanted to increase opportunities for us to meet with students in a small group setting, and we were able to find space for us to do that, had a classroom and saw an increase of us working with students in a small group setting.

In the beginning of my third year, my administrator shared with me that that space was no longer going to be available. And at that time, our counseling department, me and the other counselor, we were back in the office where the administrators were. And there's advantages to that, but at the same time there, our office space wasn't very big. We couldn't have really private conversations and do some of the work that we wanted to do. And this was probably about three days prior to school starting.

I had asked my administrator, I just said, "Hey, I know you you know the work that you want us to do, and the work that you've asked me to do here. I'm just not sure, I'm just asking, what that's going to look like this year just with this office space I have. Can we look at other opportunities for us to maybe have different space here in this building?"

And Dr. Rich said, "Yes, let's go take a walk." And so, that go take a walk was so critical. And we looked around the building and just tried to identify additional space that could help us grow this program. Before the end of the day, he found a space that had been tucked away close to the teacher's lounge, and I was able to open up and be in that space. It was probably three times the space that I had had.

And what came from that, just that work and him understanding that we've done all this other work together and we built this relationship and he understood what counselors could do, gave us a space for me to do work that year, where I was able to meet with more students in that small group setting. And had it not been that opportunity, that would really limited the opportunity for us to serve students in a proactive way.

He saw that. Throughout the year, he saw what that looked like. He saw me and students out of lunch, the lunch room and working with them, and working more proactively with students and saw the increase of that. The following year, there was another room right next door. The other counselor moved right next door. They tore down walls. They rebuilt some walls and created our own counseling center space, so that our counseling center and our counselors could be right by each other, working with students in a more proactive way.

What I can say to that is that it really was about us sitting down with him at the beginning of the year, talking about our goals and knowing that, hey, we knew our destination and we knew where we wanted to go, but we had to really have hard conversations about how we're going to get there with our current reality. He was able to work with us and collaborate with us to give us a reality that now we have results to show from.

Jen Walsh:

Wow. That's amazing.

Matthew Berry:

It is. Yeah, it is.

Jen Walsh:

Tearing down walls and everything. Wow.

Matthew Berry:

Yeah.

Jen Walsh:

Incredible. So, we close each episode with, what inspires or motivates you?

Matthew Berry:

Well, I mean, what inspires me and motivates me are the students. I recall myself being a student when I was younger, and knowing a couple teachers that had such an impact and influence on my own life.

I had a first grade teacher that you would almost drag me to class each day. I would cry and didn't want to go to class, I didn't want to leave my mom. I remember this in first grade, and Ms. [Loverby 00:26:21] would drag me to class.

But in fifth grade when I was in her class, she also was the one that when my mom couldn't get me to my bowling and could get me someplace, she was the person that also took me there. So, she showed that she cared outside of school. That was something that meant so much to me, and it's something that I kept with me throughout this time when I finally got into education. For me, I wanted to make sure that I also continued to do that and found a way to have an impact for students. They inspire me, and I hope to inspire them in that way.

My mother, in middle school, something she said to me was, "Matt, it doesn't matter what anyone says to you or does to you, as long as you know who you are." That's been something that's been just ongoing working with middle school students and working with high school students, is to help them find who they are. And middle school's such a critical time. That's really that question you're asking is, "Who am I?" And so, the ability to be able to do that every day as a school counselor, and to get up and know that that becomes your that's your why, is what continues to motivate me each day.

Jen Walsh:

Well, thank you so much. We appreciate you taking the time to join us today, and congratulations again on being a finalist.

Matthew Berry:

Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate the opportunity to be able to be here today, and I thank you.

Jen Walsh:

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. We'd also love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us Facebook at the American School Counselor Association, Twitter at @ASCAtweets, and Instagram at @WeAreASCA. Thanks, and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh, and this has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counselor Association.