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 and college and career readiness needs. Today, we sit down with one of the 2022 school counselor of the year finalist, Teshia Stovall Dula. Teshia is currently a school counselor at Hall Middle School in Duluth, Georgia. She has been a school counselor since 1998 and with Hall Middle School since 2017. The school serves about 1300 students, grades six through eight. The author of "STEAM for the School Counselor," Teshia earned her bachelor's and master's degree from Hampton University and is currently working on a doctorate degree. Welcome, Teshia, and congratulations. I hear you say that advocacy is so important to your role as a school counselor. Advocacy is also one of the four themes of the ASCA national model and a big topic of national school counseling week every year. What does advocacy mean to you?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Well, advocacy to me is when you believe strongly in someone or something and you really want the world to pay attention. And I have always believed that it's up to me to be the change. And maybe that comes from my family, how my parents raised me, but I always try to do my best to advocate for my students and to advocate for school counseling. Advocating for my profession is very important to me. I believe that we must be visible and we must use our voice.

Jen Walsh:

What are some ways that you've been able to advocate for the school counseling profession?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Well, the school counselor's role is often unclear to parents and even community stakeholders and some educators. My team and I use the ASCA national model templates to answer how students are better because of the school care counseling program and initiatives. I believe that's the best way for school counselors to advocate using the calendar, creating goals, presenting program results to staff, administrators, and critical stakeholders is very important to school counseling. I've also been able to hold parent workshops. I've done that. Present to stakeholders. I have made sure to present at conferences and even been asked to speak for different organizations about school counseling and my role. I think that it's very important for school counselors to do these types of things.

Jen Walsh:

Advocacy within school counseling isn't just about advocating for the school counseling profession. Though, of course, that is a big piece of it, but it's also about advocating for all students. What are some ways that you've been able to advocate for all of your students in your building?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Yes. I think by building relationships with administrators, teachers, and other staff members, leaders, that's very important. We can provide them with the information that they need to make decisions and we can even influence decisions. I think that it's important for me to definitely create a safe place where my students feel respected, connected, and valued, but also to work with the staff, the administration, parents, and other important stakeholders to ensure the success of all of our students. I think those are important things to do.

Jen Walsh:

How do you create that safe space for your students?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

I think it starts with respect. I respect my students. I love them. They're my kids. And I know you hear a lot of educators say that, but they are. They're my kids. And I want them to feel comfortable coming to see me. I make a point to go out into the hallway in the mornings and in between classes to speak with them and see how they're doing. And I also, when I go to the classrooms for core curriculum, I remind them that I'm here for them. I try to listen to them, any ideas that they have. I'm very hands on, so I do a lot of projects and problem based learning. And so it opens up discussion. It allows for me to walk around and really talk to my students. I get to know them in a different way because I'm not just lecturing to my students.

I believe they learn better with hands on experiences. I think that helps. Being visible, morning announcements, programs and things like that. And also when they come to my office, I want them to feel comfortable and at home. I try to make sure my office looks friendly. And even for any elementary school counselors listening, when I was in elementary school, I would give them a field trip to my office so that they could see it was not a scary place because oftentimes little bitty kids, they will associate the school counselor with administration and they might get intimidated. I would have a field trip, walk them to my office and show them, Hey, is Miss Dula's office. It's a friendly place. It's colorful. I do have light covers on my lights because I feel like that they can make some people feel nervous. I have toys. Even in middle school. I have Legos. I have Jenga blocks.

I have lots of games, lots of arts and crafts activities, so that they can feel welcomed and comfortable. I think with all parts of what we do, you have to make sure that your kids know that you're friendly, approachable, that you respect them, whether it's in the hallway, whether it's individual sessions with them, core curriculum, assemblies, morning announcements, anytime. And if I'm having a bad day, because we all have them, that's a normal part of life, I say to myself the kids aren't going to want to come talk to me if I am not looking friendly or happy. I come into my office. Its something I learned from my social studies teacher in 11th grade. That was a really long time ago. But whenever she would get upset with us, she would look at us and fuss and say whatever she had to say. And then she would turn around, just a circle, just turn around, come back. And she would just say, "Okay, hi students. Now this is what we're going to do." It was like her whole attitude just changed.

She just had to get herself together. That's what I do. I literally come into my office. Close the blinds. Turn in a circle to get myself together. Say, "Teacher, you can do this. Go back out there." And I do it. Because in this pandemic I've had to do that a little bit more. It's been difficult, but I feel like I really want the kids to know that they can come and talk to me. I need to be a safe place for them. And I have had even more kids to come that wouldn't normally come to my office because they just need time. They just need a break away from the noise. Some of them are so overwhelmed. They haven't been here since fifth grade and they just need a break. And I feel so blessed to be able to offer them that space and to be here for them. This is really a ministry for me. I feel like I have learned even so much more about myself and about school counseling, even with this pandemic and learned so many things and how to help the students.

Jen Walsh:

Yes, definitely. And thanks for sharing. 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 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 and Courage 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. And we're now back with Teshia. I think often people are intimidated by advocacy and what that means. What are three easy or quick ways someone can immediately begin advocating in their school building today?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Well, the first thing is put children first. I learned this in the very beginning of my career, really over 26 years ago. I've been a school counselor for 23 years, but I started out in graduate school as an instructional assistant in an elementary school. And the vision for that school system in Virginia was put children first. And I do believe that's the most important thing. In doing this, you will always at advocate and do what's in their best interest. It will just come naturally. I also think developing professional relationships with staff because remember they are the people who can help you in your effort to help students. And you aren't always going to be given the positive response. You do need to be able to bounce back from a negative response. But if you develop those professional relationships with them, they'll respect you differently and you'll feel better even when you're told no.

And participate on leadership teams to help influence decisions. That hasn't always been as easy for me in all of the schools. Some schools, the administration is a normal thing for the school counselors to be a part of some of the leadership teams, but in some schools, I think that you really have to advocate for yourself and for your profession and help the administration see your value so that you can become a part of their team. Those are my three things. Remember, put children first, develop professional relationships with staff, and participate on leadership to teams to help influence decisions. And with that though, don't forget, we have to listen. We have to listen. We have to be willing to learn. We have to think about our goals, not just with our department, but the school goals. We have to show value. We have to be able collaborate, be open, and be okay with different messages and different ideas. Be able to be a team player.

Jen Walsh:

You actually brought this up already, but another theme of the ASCA national model is collaboration. And it's also a theme of national school counseling week this year, which is school counseling better together. In one of your three tips, you talked about developing relationships with other staff members or other stakeholders. Can you talk about ways that you can build those relationships and the importance of those relationships?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

When I worked in elementary school, I developed a great relationship with a community and it was for a mentoring program for my elementary school. And it was absolutely phenomenal. We had training. They came to my school once a week. They were paired with one child and they spent an hour with that child every week. And then throughout the year we would have holiday celebrations. We had a beginning of the year reception and played games and then an end of the year reception. When I came to middle school, that program did not exist for middle school. We tried everything to make it work for middle school and the person that was the link had some personal things going on in her family. And she was the only one that was willing to help. And it was a national mentorship program. I like having an organized mentorship program, something that's been board approved.

And that just helps me to feel more comfortable with adults coming into the school with so many things happening nowadays. I was thankful to know that we actually had one and ours is a community based mentorship program. And the people who work in the program, they are employed by Gwinnett County Public Schools, but it is a community based mentorship program. They recruit anybody else, community members to participate in the program. They train them. They give them a background check and then they paired the volunteers with students in the local schools. Well, I wanted my own people for my school and I wanted also staff members to be able to participate with certain students that may need that ongoing support daily, like a check in, checkout type of situation. I developed the Lions mentoring program and I collaborated with my administration, the faculty, parents in the community, and I am the lead.

I spearheaded it, but I did collaborate with these important stakeholders. And we work in collaboration, as I said before, with the community based mentorship program. And the goal really is to connect caring community members with students. And the focus of the program is building resilience, character, and leadership. The county does provide parent workshops and I do participate in some of those because, like I said before, I do think it's important for school counselors to be visible, not just in their school, I want to be visible in the community. I want people to know what school counseling is. I do attend. I do participate. It's all volunteer, but I'm able to strengthen relationships that way. And then I can eve call on those staying volunteers for career day or junior achievement volunteers. It's helpful in many ways. The county also has a career summit and I encourage my students to go.

They have life skills lessons, which I participate in with that too. I teach what would be considered maybe similar to a core curriculum lesson. I'll teach that on a Saturday with other students at other schools because my students from my mentorship program will go and attend these life skills workshops. And the program is just phenomenal. Most of the mentors that are volunteer, not necessarily from the school, but outside of the school, like community members, they will even spend quality time with their mentees outside of the school. The difference I think, too, with my program, is that normally when we're not in a pandemic, I have different community members from either that group or other community members that have been referred to me or who are in leadership positions, I have them come and talk to my students at my school in an assembly situation.

Those particular students in Lion's mentoring will get a pass to come in the morning and their advisement lesson for that particular Friday is to hear this community member speak and then they can ask them questions. And I think that's important for students so they just get a little bit more than just the individual mentoring. Oh, and I forgot this part. Some students have individual mentors and I even mentor a student at another school in a high school. We have that, but I also have group mentoring, small group mentoring. That looks like a small counseling group, but it's a community member doing it and you can provide resources to help them out, but my county actually gives them ideas on things they can do. A lot of those ideas to me that they give them look very similar to what you might see in Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts, something that you might do in a meeting and not necessarily out in the community.

I do have that also because right now especially, it's been pretty difficult to find individual mentors. Some of my students, unfortunately, only get the small group entering and the people from the county, a few of the people that work in the county office for us, we're blessed it's right down the street from my school. And we're a large school district. We're almost 190,000 students. The fact that they are right down the street from me is a true blessing for me. They will come over and also provide every other week, a small group mentoring and it's done during their advisement time. I'm not taking away school, academic time. For that particular Friday, they won't get the advisement lesson that they normally would get. And for those of you who don't have advisement, I want to explain advisement is like a counseling lesson, but it's when another caring adult in the building teaches it. We have what we call pride time. And Monday through Thursday is academic pride time. But on Fridays they get advisement in the form of a life skills lesson usually, or study skills lesson or a career lesson. They have advisement.

Jen Walsh:

That's definitely such a great example of collaborating with the community. And that sounds amazing.

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Thank you.

Jen Walsh:

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 strives 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 Teshia. Another theme of the model in national school counseling week is leadership. What does leadership mean to you and what makes a school counselor a leader?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Well, to me, a leader is someone who cares about other people, is ethical, and can influence or motivate people. I also believe that a leader is someone who develops others and I truly believe in developing others, that's another reason why I truly enjoy teaching college. I teach master's level students at Grand Canyon university. And I also love being the site supervisor for interns and practicum students. Because if we don't help the next generation of counselors, who will? We have to help them. I think that school counselors are leaders because we are advocates. We model high standards of behavior. We provide consultation and advisement, and really we have a huge responsibility. We help students to become college and career ready. I think all of lose characteristics is what makes a leader.

And it bothers me when my college students tell me that they can't be a leader or they don't understand how they can be a leader right now because they're fresh out of college or they just finished undergrad and went straight to graduate school to become a school counselor. How can I be a leader? You can be a leader because you care and you are going to do everything you can to put that student first and to advocate for that student. You are going to have to share your leadership and your influence. You have to. That is a part of your responsibility as a school counselor. And veteran school counselors, we have to let our new school counselors know those types of things because sometimes they may not always get all of that in their school counseling program.

Jen Walsh:

Leadership is similar to advocacy in that it can be intimidating. What are some quick ways that somebody could practice leadership as a school counselor in their building today?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

I believe that leadership, advocacy, and collaboration really go hand in hand. And the first thing that school counselors need to realize is to always listen. Listen even when you're not in a formal meeting because sometimes there's hidden meanings behind messages. Pay attention. I would say, listen to others first. Join leadership teams. Make sure that you can get your foot into at least one leadership team and consider having an open door policy, especially with your staff members and your administration. Just being open to talking about different things that are going on could be huge. You could come up with an idea. I have a great example. The principal of the school, actually, one summer, couple years ago, we were just talking about the discipline data and it was bothering her that our numbers had gone up slightly and she was looking for solutions.

Just talking with her about it, together somehow, and really, I try so hard to pinpoint exactly how we came up with the idea. I just remember the day and I remember us talking about it and it was very casual. It was in the summer, like I said, so it wasn't during work time or anything. We just started talking about it and came up with the idea of having advisement in the in-school suspension room. That was really new for our school. I'm not sure if other schools have had that idea or maybe now even more schools may be participating, but we came up with that idea and she put me as the leader of it. She has a lot of other things on her plate and she just wanted me to take it and run with it. I found the curriculum that I thought that might be easy for a teacher who's the in-school suspension coordinator or even if it ended up being a parapro, retired counselor.

Whoever was in there, it would be easy to implement. I found this curriculum to use so that the students in the in-school suspension room would have advisement every day. Remember earlier I said that our students have advisement on Fridays. Well, if you're in the in-school suspension room, you have advisement every single day. They're learning something related to behavior, life skills, personal social, every single day. We did that and that's how we got started with it. And then it has morphed into a restorative practice. Now we have restorative circles. We have had training. I've had training on restorative practices and our ISS coordinator who currently is a parapro, she has taken county restorative practice workshops, and we have done restorative circles and we have done so much more with the program. Now, sometimes we don't have a lot of behavior issues. Sometimes we may only have one student in there. On those days, we don't necessarily do the whole advisement lesson, but we will just make it more individualized for that student, but I'm very proud of what we've done. And I do believe that came about because of the advocacy, collaboration, and leadership.

Jen Walsh:

Definitely that really ties into the fourth theme of systemic change. What does systemic change mean to you and how can one school counselor create systemic change? It seems like such a daunting task, but it's possible, so what are some ways that that can be done?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Yes. I think that the best thing a school counselor can do is to follow the model. It just makes it so much easier to change things that need to be looked at or changed in your school. And I guess you're right. That was systemic change with the in-school suspension room.

Jen Walsh:

I think the important thing about the model is that it really emphasizes the importance of looking at data and having all of the decisions that you make, be data informed. And that is what can lead to systemic change.

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Yes. And just to piggyback on what you said, it made me think about with data, we can shift mindsets and behavior, by using the data. And I think that also making information accessible and reporting what we're doing. I think all of those things contribute to systemic change.

Jen Walsh:

Absolutely. We wrap up each episode with what inspires or motivates you?

Teshia Stovall Dula:

That's a really good question, Jen. I think that the things that motivate me the most are probably faith and people. And I say that because I can't really decide on one group of people. I'm a very spiritual person and I believe that school counseling is a ministry for me. All of the things that I do, it's nice that I get a little check every six months or so for the books that I've written. It's nice that the university I work for they give me a little check for teaching practicum students. I love my salary for my job. That's all nice. But I feel like that it's more about helping other people. I can't really decide on one group of people, but my family, they've helped me through hard times, been supportive and encouraging. My husband is amazing. I've been married to him almost 25 years and he's my biggest cheerleader.

He tells me I can do anything and be successful at it. I feel that those people that help me, I appreciate them. And I also want to help other people. I think it's important for me to help, not just my students, but my students in school counseling and also my students on the university. Also, the people in the school, the people in my community, the people in my sorority, we do a lot of charity work and community service. It's important to me to help the vulnerable. I feel like that is something that I am supposed to do. If I were to just sum it up in one sentence, I would say that I am motivated the most by my faith and by people.

Jen Walsh:

Amazing. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it. And congratulations again on being a school counselor of the year finalists this year. What an achievement and happy national school counseling week.

Teshia Stovall Dula:

Thank you so much, Jen. I enjoyed it.

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 on Facebook at the American School Counselor association, Twitter, @ASCAtweets, and Instagram @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.