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 finalists, Ashley Wright. Ashley is the school counselor at Lucille J. Bradley Elementary School in Spring, Texas, a school that serves 10,018 students, grades pre-K through fourth. Ashley has been a school counselor since 2017, and is a graduate of Sam Houston State University for both her bachelors and master's degrees. Welcome, Ashley, and congratulations.

I hear you say that every year you provide your administrative leaders and teachers with a comprehensive counseling scope and sequence outline for the year. Can you talk more about what that is and what it looks like and the impact it has?

Ashley Wright:

Thank you, Jen. I'm so excited to be here.

Yes, I do. It is actually my most favorite thing to do at the beginning of the year because our comprehensive counseling scope and sequence outline really provides information on my role, who I am, my identity as the campus school counselor and the program and activities that we're going to do throughout the year. And so I always make sure that I meet with every single grade level. And when I am building that comprehensive counseling scope and sequence, really it's driven with lots of different lessons and lots of different character traits. And all of this information is from a previous data tool that I use, which is called the end of the year comprehensive counseling program survey that I give at the last school year so that it can drive whatever the current school year's initiatives and school counseling program and activities that we're going to utilize.

So when I sit down with teachers, it is a presentation format. And I go through, of course, my role. I go through for what a school counselor is supposed to do, what school counselor isn't supposed to do and how I can be more supportive to helping be that connection, that connector in the classroom.

And so I really love this part because my teachers, my administrators really feel that they've had a voice into how I facilitate the counseling lessons, how I work with teacher consultations or parent consultations or conferences and how I'm educating through various different platforms where, whether it's social media, whether it's some in house PLCs, whether it's RTI response to intervention regarding behavior or academics. Everything is incorporated within the scope and sequence.

And so using the data that I use from the end of the year school counseling program survey that I do in May, I ask my teachers and voice where we are, what needs do you feel that you would like to see more of for next year? So it's basically taking everything in account that has happened during that previous year. And then when I come to the table, back in August, to sit with my administrative team, to sit with my grade level teachers, we dive in and dig deep for what lessons or what topics am I going to be teaching from using those mindsets and behaviors and why?

So it's not, should I say, I love when we talk about the scope and sequence. It's me, the facilitator, on how I'm driving these lessons, but the voice in itself, the data in itself, the outcomes that we are wanting to see are from the voices of the teachers, because they are in the classrooms, and they are seeing issues that have to deal with, maybe friendships or self-control, or maybe it's something academic goals, like we're having trouble with kid staying organized and understanding organizational skills, or just that motivational effort that there's a greater purpose to why they're learning for career development, things of that nature.

And so since the teachers are always working with them eight hours a day, whether academically, socially and emotionally in their classroom, I'm able to take all of that data, sit down, plan through the summer. Yes, I plan through the summer, and I sit down, and I start researching different focuses that we need and come up with a plan, propose that plan to my administrative team, which is my principal and my APs, and then drive it with my teachers. And the teachers love it because they know what's coming. They know what I am doing as far as the counseling lessons that are there.

And then in addition to that, they also know that there are sometimes going to be those classroom lessons on the elementary level that maybe more classroom specific, like there may be, hey Ashley, I know that you are teaching about defense mechanisms and protecting your feelings in the right way, but I am really, really, really struggling with organizational skills in my class. The kids are not completing their work. The kids don't know how to finish X, Y, and Z. And so not only do they have a regular year long calendar of counseling lessons according and differentiated between each grade level, but they also have that additional access to me that they know using through email or Google forms that I can also ask Ashley for something specific for my class.

And so whatever I am doing, or for whatever lesson, the key goal of the scope and sequence in itself is to remind them that what I am counseling, you can use that and apply that in your classroom. So the kids see that the whole school is cohesive. The whole school has school connectedness. The entire school from the administrative team, from the counselor, to the teacher, they're all working on the same team, and they all want to ensure that we're going to be successful.

Jen Walsh:

I love that you involved the teachers. I think you make a really great point that teachers really are the ones that spend the most time with the students. So they are really able to often identify the issues that are most pressing. So I think that's a great way to really target your interventions that you're doing and also build relationships, build relationships with other people in the building.

So how does this work with the administrative conference that you do? Does this essentially kind of builds on that, I imagine, right?

Ashley Wright:

Yes. I love it. Every year, I'm pretty sure nationwide, all principals get that end of the year school data. It's state testings and different feedbacks. And I love being able to take also my data that I pulled throughout the year from feedback from my teachers on counseling lessons and for what they are wanting to see more, because I'm able to bring that piece to sit down with my principal and really talk about what is the mission? What is the vision for the next school year? So being with my principal, Dr. Butler, which I adore, she and I, working as a team to say, hey, here's this data that I have received from the staff on my end, as far as our comprehensive counseling program. And I'm hearing some of the data that you shared with me as the counselor and the APs. What do we want this to look like? What goals do we want in place? And how are we going to achieve them goals? How can I be an asset to you also to drive, instructionally or academically or socially, emotionally, of what's happening on our campus?

And that is a time also, Jen, that I feel that serves as the best type of advocacy because you are not only empowering and encouraging and teaching your principal about your role, but you're making sure that she understands the importance of your role, and that you're kind of like her sidekick or his sidekick, that y'all are working as one. Because I always say, my principal's like, she's the queen of the castle, and I am part of her advisory. So she's looking to me for some feedback as well.

So when we sit to do that administrative conference, we're putting the program goals in place. I'm coming with her for ideas. I'm not telling her, oh, I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. Hey, look at this. Tell me, what are your thoughts? It's really coming to the table to let's talk about it. You think that this is something that we can do? If I spend some of my time here working in this area or whatever it may be, or maybe fourth grade is where you really need to dive in to do some other things within the counseling program, how can we bring that to fruition? How can we also help using our parents? I know in Texas, we do almost identical to the ASCA model, but we have that part in the system support where ASCA always encourages that you bring those stakeholders involved with your counselor advisory team. And so what we do is bring parents too involved. What is it that you're wanting to know? What is it how you want to thrive? Things that you need more information on, things that could be more collaborative.

And so it's really important at the beginning, at the beginning, Jen, of the year to sit down so it's understood that everybody's working. Everybody's working consistently. Everyone's working towards a goal, and you're formalizing, you're evaluating formally all throughout the year. What's working? What's not working? What do we need to add? What do we need to address?

And so that administrative conference is so powerful because, at the end of the day, once you're sitting with your principal, you're writing these things, I use the template from the ASCA model all the time, which is mind blowing, powerful, because it really checks and balances my role and what I need to do. We're able to look at the end of the year and see what are the things that we did to meet this goal? Did we include everyone that we could? What are some other things that we could do to be better? If this didn't work, let's not shut down. How can we make sure that we attack it even more for the next year?

So there's power in that because a lot of people will sometimes state, my principal doesn't care. My principals don't know it. Is it really that the principals don't care, or could it just be a lack of knowledge? Could it be just a lack of knowledge of not understanding, hey, when I am in and doing this component of the model, these are the things that I'm doing, and this is where I'm spending my time. All of those things are important, Jen, when you're advocating for your role, because we can spend all day saying I should be doing this, and I should be doing that. But when you're coming to the table with data, when you're coming to the table with a purpose in mind, and then also, last but not least, I preach this to everyone, you have to make sure that it's clear that when you're speaking to the administrators, that you are stating that this is not my program, this is not the Ashley show. This is not the Ashley's counseling program. This is our campus comprehensive counseling program, which includes everybody. Everybody has a say so.

And so, of course, the final approval goes through the principal, but when it's all about your delivery. So when you're speaking in that nature, and you're sitting in your conference, and you're going through all of those things, and you got it in writing, and you're saying it from a standpoint as I want to work as a team. How can we do this? We may not be able to do all of it, and that's okay. But now, Jen, the principal knows exactly who you are, what you stand for, how you're going to serve, and you're working as a team player. And there's a way better understanding of the school counselor role.

Jen Walsh:

Definitely. All very good points.

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 Encourage is to 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.

To kind of shift gears a little bit and focus on your interactions with students, I know that it's important to recognize and acknowledge students who are modeling the mindsets and behaviors that are detailed in the ASCA students standards. What is one way that you celebrate student success?

Ashley Wright:

We celebrate student success by, my most favorite time of the year that's monthly, is our One and Only You awards. And I brought this idea, initially, when we first opened this campus, it is a process that allows teachers to really find at least one amazing thing that a student has done. What I love about, because every campus has awards, we've got honor roll. We've got all A's, all B's. Sometimes we have perfect behavior. However, I would say that our award process is very different in that it's three in one, well not three and one. They're three separate ones, but under one, which is the One and Only You awards program, but it really allows teachers to zoom in and find one amazing thing that a student has done that has stuck out.

And what I love about it is that the descriptions in itself that a teacher can recognize a student for, and it can be anything, Jen. It could be, hey, I am so proud of you for moving up two reading levels. I am so proud of you for your resilience this past month to get the job completed. I am so proud of you for being an amazing friend and learning how to work out problems. It is limitless in what you want that kid to be recognized for. So that's the first one, and that's all teachers, all staff members, including our special elective teachers, which we call camp, computer, art, music and PE. And they find one unique thing.

The second step of the award is the character, which we all know as school counselors, very well, whatever the character trait is of the month, should it be confidence or practice? It is just as what it says it is. So if I'm recognizing someone that has been extremely confident and really mastering that trait and knows how to show it, then I can recognize the student for that one.

And then the third one, oh my goodness, we just added this one recently because we wanted to create more opportunities for students to be acknowledged and understanding that there is something in you that is truly there, powerful and positive. So this last one is the Classroom Peer Choice award. So this is not teachers recognizing students. They get two opportunities to do that. This third one is by their own classroom peers. And so we have something at Bradley called Bear Essentials. And The Bear Essentials are just basically those statements that we abide for, kind of like our creed. And so students within the classroom pick one peer that has been working really hard, following those Bear Essentials.

So with this type of initiative, it has allowed more students the opportunity within their five years, if they've been here from pre-K through four, or from kinder to four, to earn some type of recognition, some type of recognition. Because you'll realize that when you kind of keep awards small and only heard to a certain majority or specializing in only high academic achievement, well, Jen, not everyone may just be achieving high at that standard. So these are just three different types of awards just to give to perspective and differentiation towards really recognizing the uniqueness and the unlimited potential that every single student has and that you can help them along the way, at least one of the years, Jen, they will achieve this award for something.

Jen Walsh:

I love the student nomination piece of that. I think that's great.

Ashley Wright:

And it's so cute too, Jen, when we do the awards, parents have given us amazing feedback. It is one powerful moment when you see other kids praising other kids because it's like, I voted for you, and I've seen what you've done. And so it's one thing for adults to tell a kid, you're so awesome, and you are just been doing it. But it's another thing when you hear from your own friends, and they say, I'm proud of you. So then, for the people that may have not gotten a Peer Choice award, it really empowers them to be like, well, if he can do it, or she can do it, I can do it too. And I want to work hard to get it.

Jen Walsh:

So as we know, advocacy is one of the four themes of the ASCA national model. And you've talked a little bit already about advocacy, but I hear that you use your social media platforms as advocacy tools.

Ashley Wright:

Yes, absolutely. Mainly, like I said, and I used a lot of Twitter and YouTube. I started using these platforms to really put into perspective what a school counselor does. And it's mind blowing how when I was first putting out videos, first putting out different lessons and different clips, that people were honestly amazed. I was receiving emails. I was receiving texts, like, wow, you do this in elementary school counseling? Absolutely.

And so that created a fire in me because what I also was getting some feedback is from other school counselors that really just didn't understand what does it look like? It's almost like, Jen, I know in really advocating for our role, I know you're telling me to have this administrative conference. I know you're telling me to plan these different lessons and activities, but what does it look like?

So in order for people to truly understand and really take in, because not everyone can maybe listen to a podcast or listen through a whole webinar or go to a specific training, I felt that I could put out small blips of what a comprehensive counseling program looks like. And as I do that weekly, it really has inspired other school counselors to dig in deep and say, oh, I can do a lesson like this. Oh, I can build a student leadership team. Oh, I can talk to my principal about this.

So using that really has opened the eyes and the mindsets of people that really just didn't understand what a school counselor does, or who is a school counselor? And I have many, many, many parents that tell me, oh my gosh, my kid comes home, my kindergarten comes home, and they know their school counselor. I couldn't tell you who my school counselor was.

And so I think, at a time, and not speaking negatively of the past, but we're at a time, Jen, where we can create visual representations of our profession. We can do that. And so by using Twitter or Instagram or specifically YouTube that I also do with my parent educational talk shows, really allows the counseling program to come into the home, really is that connection with parents to realize that, oh, I know what you're learning in school from your counseling program, how to deal with your emotions and how to set these academic goals. I see what Ms. Wright's doing. Let me take a little piece of that from what you're doing at school, and let's practice some things at home.

So like I said, it's helped all the way around. It's helped with administrators. It's helped with other school counselors. And then the advocacy in itself has just helped with the parents just bringing that in. So everyone, as they like my tweets or see my tweets or see my videos, they are really understanding the impact, the positive impact of having a comprehensive counseling program and how I am also letting my district, my administrators know, and other school counselors around the world know that, hey, we do exist. This is what we should be doing.

And it's helpful because if someone says that maybe you should be doing this, or I thought school counselors doing this. Well, Nope. That's not it. Here's what it can look like. Doesn't necessarily mean perfect. But just imagine, what if we had more of these type of presentations or these lessons or I spent more time in this area? Our campus would thrive. The students would thrive. So it's really important to me, professionally and personally, that I continue to put out that type of content to inspire people, hey, don't give up. Don't become complacent. Here's how you can advocate. Show them what you're doing and let it be known.

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.

So collaboration is another theme of the ASCA national model and is a theme of this year's National School Counseling week that are together. Is there a particular collaborative initiative that you're especially proud of?

Ashley Wright:

Yes, I am. One of the things that I started, especially since about my first year of being a school counselor is my parent education talk show, Get Right with Ms. Wright. I found that before, when I was doing several parent presentations with some topics with our PTO, that parents just don't come. And sometimes, I felt that it's not that they don't want to come, but we live in a very, very busy society. And so oftentimes, when a school counselor, or I'll just speak for myself, if we want to do a really great topic on academics, or if we wanted to do something on grief, or if we wanted to do something on holiday safety or whatever the topic is, it's really hard to get people to come to campus. I know some people say, well, maybe offer food, but times are very hard right now. Everyone's really, really busy.

And the other flip side of that that I found is that when I wanted to present on very sensitive topics, the parents that would come really had a hard time processing within. And so it just broke my heart because I want everyone to feel emotionally safe. I want everyone to understand. So I had to figure out, well, how can I do my part as a school counselor to provide parent educational knowledge through these presentations?

Aha. I can go virtual. And so when I decided to do virtual, I decided two things. If I'm going to do a talk show, maybe surrounded by the same topics, I want to make sure that my community that I'm speaking to, that knows that there's this school connection piece, that I'm not preaching to them. I am trying to collaborate with them. And so with the Get Right with Ms. Wright, it allows me, the school counselor, whatever the expert of the topic is, and one parent to be all on a panel, all talking about the topic, because I think it's important for the school and the education system to build a bridge with the community to see both sides, both sides.

When we see both sides, it doesn't become a lecture. It doesn't become a preaching engagement. It becomes this collaboration, this sense of cohesiveness to where we're understanding more of what parents are going through right now in their positions. And then parents are understanding more of what we as educators are going through in our position, and how can we take both together to work hand in hand surrounding whatever that topic is going to be.

So for instance, like our holiday safety, I love to do the holiday safety. I've done it with our Sergeant [inaudible 00:27:20] of our Conroe ISD police department. And what I specifically chose for him is for people to understand how district police work different also than regular community or neighborhoods or city police and what their role is and how they help. And so most of my parents that even watch the videos that I would do with him ensuring safety, or even, Jen, if something is happening at home, if you're in a crisis, and you don't know what to do, or you heard your kid's neighbor make some threats or make some self harm, or whatever, it's really, really important, jen, for you to know who to turn to, who to talk to, sometimes how you can stay, remain anonymous or what needs to happen.

And so when I bring outside experts, as well as our own district school people that are leaders in that central office, in that district role, it really opens parents' perspective to understanding what we have in place matters for the best interests of their children. And then also that perspective from the parents on, we understand what you're going through. We can understand some things that we need to change, but here's how we can work together.

So when I started that talk show, last thing, it was also mind-blowing how much feedback that parents thought it was better because they couldn't always make it to campus. So why not listen to something in the comfort of your home? And if you needed to cry, or if you were very frustrated at something, you can be vulnerable and feel still safe without fear of judgment of someone living in the community and someone wondering, oh, why is she going to that grief presentation, or she must be going through something. So it creates this amazing atmosphere of love, of understanding, of resilience and empowerment on how we move forward as a team.

Jen Walsh:

You make a good point about how not every parent can attend in person meetings. A lot of parents are working at that time. And like you said, it's not like they don't want to attend. It's they're physically unable to. And I know that that's an equity and access issue that we often see. So I love that you listened to that, and you addressed it and converted to virtual when it made it sense, right?

Ashley Wright:

Yes. You have to fight the good fight and refuse to give up by just continuing to soar and find a way, because that's the only way that you're going to create change. And so when we move from the reactive piece of all of these problems that we're having in our school systems and provide a platform to where it's very preventative, it's very accessible, like you said, that's how you get the school and the community of parents and other stakeholders all together. We're not always going to be kum ba yah or always seeing eye to eye. But if you create an environment to where every perspective is respected, valued, and understood, then us, Jen, as the school counselor, we're the connectors. We bring both sides together.

And then we take in that information from what we know what we have to do as a professional educator and know what the parents' responsibilities and what they're going through, and we bring them together as one in that virtual setting that makes it access for all, that we can continue to look at it. We can continue to reference it, which is important because I don't want to do these talk shows for it to be swept under the rug and never referred to. So like when I have new coming families that may be struggling, I love, Jen, being able to tell them, hey, I've got this show that I've done, and it really talks about this. You should really take a look at it.

Jen Walsh:

I know that your comprehensive school counseling program, like all school counseling programs, is student-centered. What do you do to ensure that students are always at the center of your school counseling program?

Ashley Wright:

If I could say it in the most shortest words, go back to our counseling mission statement. I mean, is what's happening, helping or hurting our comprehensive counseling mission statement? Our goal is to serve our students. And sometimes that may be doing what's not always comfortable, maybe not always receptive, but every single choice of what we do is in reference to how is this meeting our mission, which is really, really powerful into making sure that through the lessons, through the administrative conference, through the parent consultations, teacher consultations that I have, as well as anything in creativity that I do, is it helping my students thrive? And is it meeting those expectations? And if it's not, that means that I need to go back to the drawing board. I need to go back to the mission.

Jen Walsh:

What inspires or motivates you?

Ashley Wright:

Oh, I would say just my unique gift and ability to serve and to heal and empower souls. I love humans. I really do. And most of all, I love kids. I really, really do. I love just being able to bring connection and unity among all of us humans, like helping our children to really be world changers, helping them to discover their own resilience, and then using that resilience to pour love and serve and heal others, being that positive role model that they can always remember, creating that resilience within themselves, but then using that to turn outward and really becoming amazing servant leaders. So that inspires me every day because I have that gift to do that every single day with my students, with my staff, with my parents. And I just love it.

Jen Walsh:

Really well said. Well, thank you, Ashley, for joining us today, and congratulations on being a School Counselor of the Year finalist this year. It's a huge accomplishment and achievement, and we hope that you're proud.

Ashley Wright:

Thank you, Jen.

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 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.