



## **Mindy Willard, Sunset Ridge Elementary School Counselor, Named 2013 School Counselor of the Year**

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**ALEXANDRIA, VA** – Mindy Willard, a school counselor from Sunset Ridge Elementary School in Glendale, Ariz., has been named the 2013 School Counselor of the Year. The award, presented by the American School Counselor Association, honors the professionals who devote their careers to serving as advocates and often lifesavers for the nation’s students.

A school counselor since 2004, Willard is continually looking for new, innovative ideas to support students and teachers and make Sunset Ridge Elementary School a better place, said Carrie Prielipp, principal, Sunset Ridge Elementary School. Sunset Ridge is a Title 1 school serving 650 students in the Pendergrast Elementary School District in the west valley of Phoenix. “Her decisions and areas of focus are always guided through the analysis of data. She has developed both social and academic groups and lessons based on data while monitoring and adjusting the needs of these groups throughout the year.”

One of her most successful programs is a girls group, a grant-funded program for seventh- and eighth-grade girls. “The group was born out of frustration with the amount of relational aggression on our campus,” Willard

said. Annually, Willard plans activities focused on increasing self-esteem, body esteem and overall confidence of the girls in the group. Speakers from area agencies discuss eating disorders, gender in the workplace, dating violence and more. After hearing a particularly inspiring speaker from a local domestic violence shelter, the girls wanted to take action to help these families. Under Willard's guidance, the girls planned a field trip to volunteer at a local thrift store, Hope's Closet, which funds the shelter. "The girls were amazed at what they saw and wanted to do more," Willard said.

"The next year, as we kicked off year five of our girls group, the girls begged to return to Hope's Closet," Willard said. In discussing options for volunteering, the girls came up with the idea of a fashion show, with outfits from Hope's Closet, to benefit the domestic violence shelter. Twenty girls volunteered to be models, eight served as masters of ceremony for the event, and others served as paparazzi or thrift store workers. Each outfit the girls modeled was for sale after the show. All proceeds from the sales went to the domestic violence shelter. "The courage and confidence these girls displayed as they walked down the aisle in their thrift store clothes is exactly what I had dreamt about in 2006 when the girls group began," Willard said.

The School Counselor of the Year winner and finalists are judged by a select panel to be the "best of the best." The candidates were judged on several criteria, including: creative school counseling innovations, effective counseling programs, leadership skills and contributions to student advancement.

"School counselors make significant contributions to the overall well-being of students and their success," said Richard Wong, executive director, American School Counselor Association. "They have unique qualifications and skills that allow them to address students' academic achievement, career and personal/social development needs."

Willard, along with the four School Counselor of the Year finalists, will be flown to Washington, D.C., in late January 2013, for three days of celebratory events. The honorees will have meetings with their members of Congress, attend a congressional briefing and be formally recognized at a black-tie gala.

### **About the American School Counselor Association**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) professional organization based in Alexandria, Va. ASCA promotes student success by expanding the image and influence of professional school counseling through leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide their students toward academic, career and personal/social development to help today's students become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. Founded in 1952, ASCA currently has a network of 50 state associations and a membership of more than 31,000 school counseling professionals. Learn more at [www.schoolcounselor.org](http://www.schoolcounselor.org).