

TRANSCRIPT:
Michelle Obama Remarks at American School Counselor Association's
2018 School Counselor of the Year Award
Feb. 2, 2018
Washington, D.C.

Hello everyone! How's everyone doing? Oh, c'mon you can do better than that. See now that's how I feel. I'm back! This is what back looks like.

I am beyond thrilled to be here at the Kennedy Center with all of you to honor the amazing people joining me here on this stage – our 2018 National School Counselor of the Year and State School Counselors of the Year. Let's give them another round of applause!

These men and women are transforming the lives of young people across the country... and as always, I am in awe of them... I'm inspired by them... and I am so grateful for everything they do.

And I want to start by recognizing a few of the folks who helped to make this day possible—thanks so much to Richard Wong, Jill Cook, and all our friends at ASCA for their continued support of our school counselors and for hosting this event today.

I also want to thank the Lethal Ladies for that phenomenal performance. Those ladies blew me away when I first saw them last spring and they once again took my breath away. They are just outstanding. I am so proud of them.

And Kyla and DaMarcus – I don't know if you hear me or if you are out there but you guys were amazing... and we are all so proud of you. You did a great job! Just keep working hard in school. You are going to be up here one day doing all of this.

And of course, I want to give a huge shoutout to our special guests who have done so much for Reach Higher over the years: Ted Allen... La La Anthony... Connie Britton... Amanda Freitag... Carla Hall... John King.

Time and again, no matter what we asked of these folks – from joining social media campaigns to getting on planes and coming to events – they always say yes.

And I know Eric Waldo was wondering whether anyone would return his calls once he left the White House.

But once again, these folks and so many have stepped up... because they weren't in this just for a visit the White House... they were in it because they believe in these counselors and they care deeply about our kids... and I am so grateful for their commitment and their friendship.

And the same is true for all of you in this room today – all the folks on our Reach Higher Advisory Board and all the advocates and experts who've been our partners every step of this journey.

We absolutely could not do this without all of you... and I can't thank you for everything you do to make our work possible.

Now, it's been about a year since we came together at the White House for the 2017 National School Counselor of the Year ceremony... and a few things have changed since then.

But if you recall, that was my last official speech as First Lady. And I made a personal promise to all of you back then... I promised that I would continue working on the issues I took on at the White House for the rest of my life.

Yes, despite all of the changes going on around us, we have continued the work of Reach Higher to help young people attend college.

Thankfully, that work did not end.

And in the year since we left the White House, Reach Higher has gotten a lot done! They have hosted 1,500 College Signing Day events in all 50 states – hundreds more than last year... and we have tripled our number of social media impressions.

Through the Better Make Room campaign, we've sent over 1.7 million texts to over 100,000 students to help them register for standardized tests, apply to college, and get financial aid.

We've also hosted training summits across the country to provide professional development for more than 550 counselors and educators serving more than 250,000 students.

And these are just a few of the highlights – there's so much more.

I'm proud of Eric Waldo and his team and everyone who made it happen. Very proud of them.

And make no mistake about it, we're supporting efforts like these because we know where the real work of changing kids' lives happens... it happens on the ground, in classrooms and communities, in those face-to-face, heart-to-heart interactions and connections between our kids and caring educators and counselors like the folks on this stage.

But too often in this country, we lose sight of that basic truth.

Too often, we get caught up in thinking that real change only happens through the White House... or by passing legislation... or signing some big executive order.

We think that only the President or First Lady can make big national statements, or shift culture, or impact public debate.

And don't get me wrong, all of that is critically important to bringing about change.

But one thing Barack has always said – one thing we've both seen throughout our careers, especially during our time in the White House – is that real change does not happen from the top down here in Washington... real change happens from the bottom up in communities across this country.

And that is particularly true when it comes to our kids.

I firmly believe that the men and women on this stage – our counselors and educators – have a far bigger impact on our kids' lives than any President or First Lady... it doesn't even come close. It doesn't come close.

Just think about it for a minute: think about who our students are exposed to nearly every single day – all of you, counselors and educators.

They watch how you dress... they watch how you carry yourselves... they watch how you treat others.

They listen to the language you use... they see how hard you work... they notice whether you show up on time or not, whether you do what you say or not. Whether you do what you say, or not.

Hour after hour, you all serve as living, breathing examples of the kind of people they should aspire to be.

And trust me, I know this work isn't easy, especially right now.

I know there's a lot of anxiety out there.

And there's no denying that our kids– what they see on TV...the kind of behavior being modeled in public life – all of that has an impact on their behavior and on their character.

But at times like this, the work you all are doing is even more urgent... it's even more critically important.

See, you all have the power to teach our kids what it means to go high when others go low. You have that power.

Every day you all have the power to shape and mold these kids; to inspire them when they feel discouraged; to remind them that they belong; that no matter how much money they have or where their family comes from, this is their country too. You have that power.

You have the power to show them that no matter what their race, or faith, or walk of life, they are valued for who they are... and no matter how alone or afraid they might feel, they are seen, and they are loved.

This is what our school counselors do every single day.... and our National School Counselor of the Year, Ms. Perry, is a perfect example.

Kirsten is the sole counselor at the Lawndale Community Academy in Chicago, a school where 99 percent of kids come from low-income families.

This school has faced its share of challenges... but from day one, Kirsten was undaunted.

As one of the teachers at her school said about her... this is a quote: "Ms. Perry is all about action. She takes the lead on almost every initiative at the school."

And this is no exaggeration.

In addition to individually counseling students, monitoring their academic and emotional progress, and helping these kids apply to high school, Kirsten runs peer tutoring programs and workshops for parents... she's created afterschool dance programs, basketball and running programs.

She's organized assemblies, and field trips and job fairs to get students excited about college and careers.

She's brought in speakers on topics ranging from Internet safety awareness to HIV awareness.

She's implemented schoolwide initiatives that have improved attendance and reduced fighting.

She's convinced organizations to donate everything from mental health counseling to warm winter coats and she's raised money to buy dozens of laptops and projectors so that all Lawndale students now have access to technology.

Since Kirsten came to Lawndale, the percentage of students on track to graduate from high school nearly doubled.

And with her help, Lawndale went from a Level Three school – the lowest level of performance – to Level Two.

And Kirsten has accomplished all of that in just two years! Two years! It's amazing what we ask of these men and women, and what they deliver.

As for the impact Kirsten has had on individual students, well, you all just heard straight from the mouths of babes...from Kyla and DaMarcus...about how she transformed their lives.

And they are just two of nearly 300 students who Kirsten serves every single day.

So to Kirsten and every school counselor and educator in this country, I hope you all know that you have far more influence on our children than people they don't know in places far away.

Because our kids know you and they love you... and they know how much you love them... and they understand that you'll always be there for them, that you'll always have their backs.

And let me tell you, nothing is more powerful than that – nothing.

That's what sticks with them... that's what they'll take with them for the rest of their lives.

And I know that that's what keeps you all going every single day.

You see, folks like all of you don't get dragged down by the headlines; by the false claims made about our children and neighborhoods... you don't have time for any of that nonsense...because you're out there doing the work.

Instead of being distracted by the negativity, you are buoyed by the truth that you see in the eyes of our children – the truth that every single one of them has something to contribute... you're looking at young people like Kyla and DaMarcus, and you ask yourself every day: What can I do to lift up this child right now, today?

And see, that's why we all must remain hopeful – because no matter what's going on right now, you know that our young people are the future... and the most important thing we can do, as individuals and as a nation, is to believe in all of them... to invest in all of them... and to build schools and communities worthy of their boundless promise.

That's what you all are doing. And that's what we're celebrating here today – we are celebrating that passion and determination and unyielding hope.

And while it was nice to hold this event in the White House last year, this was never about the White House...it was never about me, or Barack ... and it's never about the handful of people who happen to be in power at any given time.

It always was, and always is, about folks like Kirsten, and these school counselors, and all the people in our communities who wake up every day, educate our kids, and run our businesses, and protect our streets.

It's about our faith leaders and school board members, the parents and neighbors... folks who step up and coach that team, cook that meal, welcome that family into the neighborhood that's been through so much – folks who model decency and dignity and integrity for our kids every single day.

See that's who we are... that, more than anything else, is what shapes our children.

And that's what makes America great – the work that folks like Kirsten are doing for young people across this country.

So, it is my pleasure and honor to celebrate all of you, and to introduce Kirsten here today... so ladies and gentlemen, the 2018 National School Counselor of the Year, Kirsten Perry.