Jen Walsh: From the American School Counseling Association, this is, I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, Director of Education & Training here at ASCA. ASCA School Counselor of the Year Award honors professionals who devote their careers to advocating for the nation students and addressing their academic and social, emotional development and college and career readiness needs. Today, we sit down with the 2021 School Counselor of the Year, Olivia Carter. Olivia is the school counselor at Jefferson Elementary School in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. She is a graduate of Southeast Missouri State University and has been a school counselor for eight years. Congratulations and welcome Olivia.

Olivia Carter: Yeah. Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Jen Walsh: I wanted to talk a little bit about the demographics of your school. I hear that it is 100% free and reduced lunch. So can you talk about the demographics and what those demographics mean for you as a school counselor?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. So when I started at Jefferson, it was about 98% free and reduced lunch. These demographics have changed over time because of open enrollment, but I think what our district did with this was really great. A couple of years ago, they got a grant to provide breakfast and lunch for all students, whether they were on free and reduced lunch or not. So there was no minimum income, they didn't have an application process. And I thought that was really great. And it inspired me to think differently about meeting students and families needs. I think I've learned not to make assumptions about our students' experiences, just because they live in a certain neighborhood. I've learned that we can center our students who need the most in a really dignified way, in a really dignified and non-savior [inaudible 00:02:05].

For example, the weather is just now starting to turn cold here and we held a warm clothing drive right before our break. But along with that in the last week of school, we put together warm outfits to send home with each student, no matter if they were open enrollment kids or if they were from whatever neighborhood. And so we put those together with a book and we sent a note saying, "We're thankful for you." And so this way we're not making any assumptions about any certain families, but we are working to help meet the most basic needs and center those who are most vulnerable. So that's really what I've learned from working in a school like this.

Jen Walsh: I think that we're seeing that, I was actually just watching the news yesterday morning and it was talking about how food pantries are seeing, just record numbers. And I think pandemic has really put families that may not have been in that position before into that position now. So that's definitely a great point, that you can never make assumptions about a student or a family. So what unique challenges do you have to address the needs of your students?

Olivia Carter: The challenges would be, I think probably helping kids see their own potential, helping kids actually feel seen within a school, help them feel safe and just dignified and loved because so historically, even recently at my school students and families really didn't feel that way. It was a very adversarial position from family to school. And so just building that trust between the community and the school has been a challenge, but it's been so great to see that growth. And that's really what we're fighting against with COVID, being open, gives this false sense of security, I think. And so ensuring that we're not gaslighting our families basically, to help them know that we're doing everything we can to keep protective measures, but we know that times are not "normal" anymore.

Jen Walsh: Definitely does. So I'm really intrigued by the language that you're using. You keep saying dignified approach. Can you kind of elaborate on that, what that means to you, what that means to your building and what that means to your approach that you're taking?

Olivia Carter: I think of dignified as, we never looked down on anyone for what experiences they have or what trauma they've experienced or whenever we think of a dignified way. So speaking of the warm clothing drive, we asked for all new clothing because we don't need our students to be walking around in someone's dirty, old jeans. Like that's just the reality. Our students deserve new clothing, just as much as anybody else's kids. So dignified to me just means honoring the humanity in the families and the students that we have. And if it's not good enough for my loved ones, it's not good enough for the students that I work with and for.

Jen Walsh: You talked a little bit about building trust between the community and the parents and the school, what are some ways that you all have taken that approach and made an impact there?

Olivia Carter: So we've worked really, really hard to be an open line of communication with families. A lot of times, I think of the past, the only time you'd get a phone call from the principal at most schools was when your kid was in trouble, but we focus very heavily on, if a student receives a positive referral, they get a phone call home from the principal. So you're building that trust between and you, and then you and the families. So I think that's been really, really important, but also knowing that we're going to stick to whatever we say as a school. So if we say we're sending clothes home this week, we stick to it. And sometimes it's hard because crises come up and different things happen and you've still got to teach lessons and all that. But at the end of the day, honoring your word and honoring our word to our families has made all the difference.

Jen Walsh: We'll hear more from Olivia in a moment, but for now a quick word from one of our sponsors, myOptions. As the nation's largest free college and career planning program, myOptions is thrilled to celebrate your work, shaping the future of young people. They're here to help you blaze innovative approaches to school counseling. That's why myOptions has launched 21st century planning and mentoring apps at no cost for every student, parent and school counselor. Use our tools to build college lists, find scholarships, track progress and manage applications, all in one place, check them out at myoptions.org.

We are now back with Olivia. And so you are at the elementary level, there is a big interest and big need for career development at the elementary level. I know that you've done a lot of work around that. Can you talk about the community partnership that you have and the project around financial literacy and giving back to the community?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. So in my school we talk about having mirrors and windows for our students. And by that we mean having students see themselves, so a mirror, seeing themselves in the culture of the school, but also windows into what their future could look like. And so we've been really expanding our career development at our level. Now it's with what we would consider upper school students. So 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade at this point, but our big project, and we've just kind of labeled it, the Impact Project. It actually started in spring of 2019 where a community partner, and it was a bank that reached out to us and said, they want to do a project, we had to do this pitch for them. And we're not going to say no to free help and free money for our students. So we went ahead and said, yes.

And then our STREAM specialist brainstormed this idea. And when she was telling the leadership team about it. So when she was talking to me about it and our principals, it was about careers and community partnerships and job shadowing. And I was like, "Wait, this is definitely within the realm of school counseling. This is something that we need to work harder to focus on." So we really partnered up on this project and like I said, it's called the Impact Project. And it all started in spring of 2019 with our then 3rd graders. They did a career inventory and she and I met with them on an individual basis and just kind of talked about career paths and where they might go with those different career paths. And then of course we had summer break.

So during that time, we did a lot of behind the scenes work with partnering up with the community to job shadow. We were matching the students, we were making lots of arrangements with a local golf course. It was just a lot of the behind the scenes work. But during that time, our teachers were trying to make this implicit world of work explicit for our students. So how to dress like a professional, how to shake hands and greet someone, how to ask appropriate questions. So on the day of the big project, our students, they put on their polo and it had our crest on it and they wore khaki pants. And what's funny about that is that now when they think of an event, so my students actually held a parade for me a couple of weeks ago for being a national finalist. And they were like, "We've got to get our crest shirts in our khakis out. And so it's funny that they've like internalized the sense of like, when you have an event, you dress professionally.

And so on that day, they met the professional that they would be shadowing and they left with them to go to their job sites. They went to tech startups, banks, photography studios, radio stations, like anywhere you could think of in the community, we were sending kids out there. And then we all met up, like I said, on a local golf course where we had a working lunch. So they got a box lunch there and they learned from the community partner, the bank, they spoke about pay checks, saving money, giving back to charities. It's just such a big encompassing project because kids also researched charities that they could give back to. And they had money in their piggy bank when they left, they got to cash their checks site, they picked a local charity and they gave back to that charity. And so it was just this huge project.

And I feel like it hits so many mindsets of that feeling of success that kids can have. But what was really great about it is that we then moved on and did another career project with the same group. And they did a student led career fair. And it's so amazing to see the leadership skills that developed from these two projects for these kids. And yeah, it's nothing short of magical. Like I have a highlight on my Instagram and I forget how much work went into it, but it's definitely worth doing again, hopefully, whenever times are back to more normal.

Jen Walsh: That sounds so incredible. And it sounds like a ton of work, but it sounds like you were able to work with teachers though, and then obviously the community, how were they able to help you? Or how were those partnerships and how was that collaboration able to help get things done?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. I have to give a huge shout out to the 4th grade teachers who just took on all of these extra things that maybe they didn't know they were getting themselves into when we pitched this idea to them. But like I said, they did such a good job of teaching explicitly those social skills and getting the kids ready for that day. But the community partners, it was really great to see people from outside of our small community, within the building, and they keep coming back to us. Like they keep checking in with us, "Hey, what do you need?" So that collaboration continues and that's been so great to see something so sustainable because it impacted not just our students, but the community around our students. So it was great.

Jen Walsh: We talk a lot about ASCA mindsets and behaviors, and then the student competencies, really the work of the school counselor can tie directly into the work of what teachers are doing within any given subject. This is a prime example of that working with teachers towards that same goal that you all have. Just kind of a logistical question, the students shadowed different careers and they actually went to the job site with those folks. Did you have to go through like an approval process with the parents or guardians? How was the transportation arranged? That sort of thing?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. That really fell on our STREAM specialist. But I can say we had to have background checks for every volunteer, every community partner that we had, as well as signed permission from parents, because ultimately, yeah, the kids rode in that person's vehicle to the job site and some of them were so cool. We had some of these tech people, they brought their Mercedes.

Jen Walsh: I bet the kids loved that.

Olivia Carter: Yeah. But it was extensive to get that logistically planned out. And that's one of those little details that it has to be done exactly right, or it's a liability. So we're very lucky that we have some hands on deck that can handle those things

Jen Walsh: I'm sorry, who was the person who helped with that?

Olivia Carter: STREAM. So we're a project-based learning school, very recently. We're still dipping our toes in, but it goes along with that collaboration that you were talking about where so many of our things that teachers are teaching, they want help from a school counselor on because they overlap. So projects are like the perfect way, but because we have project-based learning, we have someone called a STREAM specialist. So it's science, technology, research, engineering, arts, and math.

Jen Walsh: Collaborating is so important. You may not have a STREAM specialist, but perhaps working with other educators in the building to meet your goals is an important point. I love the part about financial literacy and giving back, donating to charities and that sort of thing. And that is something that I missed out on. It's something that students really need to learn about. What are some of the interventions or activities that promoted that financial literacy?

Olivia Carter: So the main things that we did to help with this portion was teachers had guests from each of the charities come in. So we had Humane Society of Southeast Missouri. We had, it's called SNAP, it's Stop Needless Acts Of Violence Please. So each of those had a representative that came and talked to our students, shared about their organization, told what the money would be going toward. And there were a couple other organizations, but they were really imperative in that we knew we wanted to give back to a charity. And we wanted to instill that in our students because it's just important to us to give back to the community. So anything that's important to us is going to bleed into what we teach.

But the day of when they were doing this working lunch, they were talking about... And like I said, they got to sign the check that they made for shadowing, they cashed it. They had a bank that they could put a portion of the money in. They had, I think it was like 10 or $15 that they could spend at our swag store. So anything with our crest on it, they could buy. And then they gave back to the charity of their choice, but it was a very research decision. They didn't just walk up to the basket and put it in. It was something that they were very intentional about that they knew it was their passion. So that was the main part of the financial literacy piece for our students.

Jen Walsh: That's great. Such a critical lesson for students to learn. And it's so awesome that they're getting that at your school at the elementary level.

I know that you have done a lot of work surrounding taking a more trauma informed approach within your school. So how did you identify that need, how did you get buy-in?

Olivia Carter: I started learning about trauma informed practices and it started with the book, Fostering Resilient Learners. I decided to "take my show on the road" pretty early with it. As I dug into our school data, I knew that that data was stagnant. We just kept having increased office referrals. You could just tell the culture of the school, the teachers were run down, we needed something different. So as part of National School Counseling Week, I offered this after-school professional development for my teachers who were curious about it.

And I remember very specifically, it was snowing that day. And in Southeast Missouri, when it snows, people do not stay where they are, they go home or they go Walmart, I guess. So I had about seven people show up out of a building of about 50, but those seven people were super receptive to it. And actually advocated that I do another training with the whole faculty. So I had the opportunity to do that. And it was really just a basic overview of like fight, flight freeze, what it looks like in the classroom and what we can do at the time that we could do to mitigate it. And the teachers who came were really excited about it for the first time in a long time, I felt like our staff was kind of excited about something.

So our school responded and went in all the way. We had an additional team that went to another national training and we did an overhaul to discipline that year. We also had a new principal who just really scaled everything up. So we changed how our cafe was set up, because the kids were in rows facing the wall. Like they weren't allowed to talk to their friends during breakfast and lunch, which we wouldn't expect of an adult. So why are we expecting kids to do that? We also ripped up the tape on the floor that we had tiger tails and bubbles because we're the tigers. So it kind of looked a little bit like [inaudible 00:19:07] when kids were walking down the hall, we ripped those up and in their place, we put little paw prints and positive affirmations.

We changed the way we greet students. Before, if kids weren't at school by 8:30, they didn't get breakfast. That changed, if a kid shows up at 10:50 and their lunch is at 11:30, we're still giving them breakfast if they need it. And so there were just little things that change the culture of the school. And I started sending out these newsletters... Oh, we also started class meetings in every room. So every class had a class meeting with their teacher. And actually I started class meeting several years before that, just to build relationships, because that's what trauma informed practices is all about is centering around that relationship.

Jen Walsh: Can you elaborate on class meetings?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. Some people call them morning meetings, but our class meetings, it's the only thing that we're... We don't say non-negotiable very often in my building anymore because, we laugh, but it's a trauma trigger word for some of our teachers. So we each have to do those though, and they can look however you want. Like, I start out my class meetings with singing and doing sign language to the song, The More We Get Together. And then I have this little like feelings buddy, where the feelings are actually in the back pocket of this fox. And so if kids don't want to share out loud how they're feeling, they can at least show me like the color zone that they might be in, but it's just a way to build relationships.

And you could ask, some teachers do like silly questions. Some teachers use that time to talk about the social skill of the week. it can really be whatever you make it, but it's just a time where it's not so academic and it's meant for building the relationship, getting centered before the school day starts.

Jen Walsh: Thanks, Olivia. I'd like to hear more about that, but first, a quick word from one of our sponsors, the Student Success Agency. For the past eight years, the Student Success Agency has worked side-by-side with school counselors, teachers, and principals to build Student Winbox, which is your one-stop shop to capture students' moments throughout the busy school day, collaborate with staff to turn moments into momentum and celebrate school wins. What makes the Winbox unique is that your school counseling teams can increase support for students anywhere, anytime through a network of mentors who assist in exposing your students to the social capital and opportunities that already exist for them in your local community.

To activate your school's Winbox, go to studentsuccessagency.com and click on the Talk to an Expert button in the upper right-hand corner of their website. From there, they will walk you through how to utilize. So the Winbox to elevate, mobilize and include school staff in strengthening all students' academic and emotional wellbeing.

We are now back with Olivia. I'd love to hear more about the little trauma informed practices that you implemented that made a large impact in your school's culture and climate.

Olivia Carter: Yeah, I'm trying to think of what else we changed. It was so swift. We did it all in one summer. Oh, we didn't really have anything on the walls of our school, out in the hallways. We had some bulletin boards, but we took the time to put posters up of influential people and specifically around people of color or people of different nationalities. So that again, windows and mirrors, students can see themselves reflected in that. So that was one of the things that we did that was really important. We're just constantly thinking of ways that will make students feel more loved.

So the trauma team got involved in teaching how to co-regulate, like use restorative practices within the room. One of the things that I did that was really powerful with our new teachers this year was we did a restorative circle. And so it was twofold. The restorative circle was around COVID, like all of the things that COVID has taken from us because it feels like this time has really harmed us. And so we could use COVID as kind of the instigator. And then the second reasoning behind it is so that they can see how a restorative circle would look in their classroom so that if they ever needed me to come in and do one, I could do that with them.

So other things that we did is I sent out a trauma-informed Tuesday email every week, and it just has reflection questions around self care, bias, trauma responses, literally anything you can think of. I put like the Brene Brown empathy video in them at least once a year, I don't know if anybody realizes I keep putting the same thing in it, but it's just so good.

Jen Walsh: Who does this go to?

Olivia Carter: It goes to all of our staff, it's been a really big vehicle into moving forward to that anti-biased, anti-racist teaching, promoting restorative techniques and self-regulation because we know that we can't claim to be trauma-informed if we're not trying to remove blind spots and move forward in that way too.

Jen Walsh: And how are you able to get the buy-in for these programs?

Olivia Carter: Yeah, I think it was the trusting. We've seen the changes that we made and we see how they've impacted our mental health, our students' mental health, our families relationships with us. And I think now there's a level of trust with me as a school counselor that maybe hasn't been there. I don't know, I think they just trust that I'm trying to do what's right, always.

Jen Walsh: Right. Not doing something just for the sake of doing something?

Olivia Carter: Yes. [crosstalk 00:25:00].

Jen Walsh: Right. So you talked about the impact. So what did the data say about these initiatives?

Olivia Carter: Gosh, I don't have the data in front of me right now, but I remember whenever I was actually filling out this application for School Counselor of the Year, the data is astounding. We went down by the hundreds in office discipline referrals, and I think that is great, obviously. But the reason that data is so important is that it shares a story of what's happening for our teachers. It's shares a story of what's happening with our students and ultimately it shares a story about what's happening for the culture of our school. And that's, what's most important to me. But yeah, the data really is when you look at the numbers, you're like, "Oh my gosh, how could this have caused this?" But knowing that we've come together as a collaborative school building to make those trauma informed practices, part of who we are is the reason that's happening.

Jen Walsh: So you really saw this in discipline. Can you talk about specific changes that you made to discipline?

Olivia Carter: Yeah. So it's not that our referral process has changed so much, we still have red slips like any elementary school does, but how we approach those students who may be having a hard moment in the class rather than, if a kid is stomping their feet and they're "throwing a fit," we think about, what is causing this? What in this moment is going on with the student that I can help them with. So we put in all of our classrooms, calm corners, or some people call it Antarctica, whatever you want to call it. We've given them a space and we've given them the knowledge to be able to calm down. We talk very specifically about how our brain works and flipping our lid and how just talking about our feelings can help us regulate.

So that is a tier 1 intervention for me to help implement with teachers. Some teachers are much more receptive to it than others, but they all get that lesson from me. And then the teachers reinforce that. So knowing that we're teaching those things. And also just our expectations, safe body, safe space, safe voice, would be my expectations for a classroom, instead of the very typical, prompt and prepared, act responsibly, because what does safe voice mean to someone? And why do you think it's important to use a safe voice in the hallway? Who could we be affecting? So asking kids to think more deeply about those things, and they can, even kindergarteners can think more deeply about those things. And that shifts the focus from compliance to empathy for those around us. And so the tier 1 supports have been what have changed drastically. And I think that's where we see the next level sort of reduce. Those tier 2 and tier 3 behaviors get smaller because we're better at tier 1.

Jen Walsh: Absolutely. So are you going into the classroom and teaching this?

Olivia Carter: I am always willing to teach teachers about this, but I also very explicitly teach kids this every single year. That way there's never a doubt if a kid has received this information. But if we are, we do have transient students. So that way the teachers know how to teach that in that moment. Hopefully we get them before it's too late. But yeah, so I've done it both ways, but I feel like that part, especially the brain science, because I love it so much, the neuroscience, that part falls on me.

Jen Walsh: And you mentioned that some teachers are more receptive than others, for those teachers that are a little less receptive. How have you worked with them, get them at least to implement some of the basics?

Olivia Carter: I'm trying to think if there's anyone not super receptive to it at this point, most of our teachers have seen the benefit. And a lot of times... Like we have several new teachers this year. And what has been most beneficial is partnering them with another classroom teacher who does understand these things really, really well. So letting them shadow for a day, which is very difficult during COVID because subs are such a commodity right now. So that's been hard, but even if I go into the classroom and I teach a lesson and they step out and they go to another class meeting, just to see how that tier 1 support works in a different classroom, that's been easier than me saying, "You should really try this." Because my role is very different. And I understand that. And we never approach it as like a top-down, we want to wrap love around the teachers that are struggling just as much as we wrap love around kids that are struggling. So that's kind of been the approach.

Jen Walsh: You just said, it was hard for you to think about a teacher that's not on board. So that shows you the great strides that you've taken and the impact that it's made. So what is the most important lesson that you've learned in your career as a school counselor so far?

Olivia Carter: I think the most important... Okay. I'm going to have to.

Jen Walsh: Go for it. It's your podcast.

Olivia Carter: The most important lessons I've learned is one, I have learned that people are doing the best that they can, and that's on every aspect of life. Especially right now.

Jen Walsh: I was going to say, that's the motto of 2020. And while this is playing in 2021, it'll probably continue for a little bit, at least.

Olivia Carter: Yeah. So I try to see everyone working from their best potential in that moment. And also knowing that 1% better every day is still making growth. Right? But the other thing is that I will have to keep learning. I have to keep uncovering my biases. I have to keep working toward learning on how to center our most vulnerable populations, because that's the most important thing is ensuring that all of our students feel safe and loved and respected and really seen and valued. So for that to happen, I have to keep learning.

Jen Walsh: Can you share a story of a student that you've impacted or a student that has impacted you, your life or your career?

Olivia Carter: That's kind of a hard question. There have been so many students that I feel like have impacted me. One of the students that I'm thinking of, he was the reason that I started researching trauma informed practices because I knew what we were doing was not teaching him. And so I found like I said, Fostering Resilient Learners. And I started just talking about the brain with him and he was so receptive to that.

So he really inspired me to continue learning. And unfortunately he moved the year after I started working at Jefferson, but I remember getting phone calls from his counselor at his school and actually his counselor and I had the opportunity to meet. And even though I'd only worked for this student for a year, she sang my praises, and I was just like, "I don't know what I did." But like looking back, I changed everything that I did for this kid. And he saw success in through middle school and that's been hugely impactful in my life to see that he's gone on to be successful because of some of the things that I taught him through our relationship.

Jen Walsh: Following up on that a little bit, with you sharing something that motivates you or gives you hope.

Olivia Carter: I find a lot of hope in the conversations that educators are having around trauma informed, anti-biased, anti-racist work. I feel like this is a great time to be a school counselor. And that's what I have so much hope in is that school counseling is about to have its moment with the rest of the education world, because it needs to have a moment, it needed to have a moment several years ago, but here we are. And so that gives me hope that what we've had, the success in my building that we've had, isn't just in my building. I think this is happening all over the place. And that gives me so much hope for students around the country.

Jen Walsh: When we say the same thing, this is a really exciting time to be a school counselor and to be working for an organization that represents all of you and all of the amazing work that you do. So congratulations on becoming a School Counselor of the Year. We are super excited and be proud of the work that you're doing and the impact you're having on students.

Olivia Carter: Yeah. Thank you so much.

Jen Walsh: Thank you so much, Olivia, for joining us today, and thank you all for listening. This has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counseling Association. We hope to have you back for our next episode, but until then, be sure to check out our website, schoolcounselor.org, for school counselor resources. Also, we'd love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook at The American School Counseling Association, Twitter @ASCAtweets and Instagram @weareasca. Thanks, and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh, and this has been, I Hear You Say.