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 2021 school counselor of the year finalists, Megan Bledsoe. Megan is a school counselor at Discovery Middle School in Vancouver, Washington, where she and two other team members provide school counseling services to the urban school's approximately 700 students. Grades six through eight. So welcome Megan.

Megan Bledsoe: Hello. Thanks for having me.

Jen Walsh: Thanks so much for being here and taking the time to talk with us. I hear you say that you have some unique challenges with your school, and your school demographics. It sounds like you have a really transient population.

Megan Bledsoe: Yeah, we are a school of about 700 and that is at about 73% free and reduced lunch. And we have a pretty high mobility rate. I would say we average something like a hundred new students a year. So a lot of mobility, and some of those hundred are students that we've had before, but of course it's still just an element of transition and change for those students. And so that definitely is a large obstacle that our students have to face, and also for our program, how we have to help build a consistent program and launch those students as they work through and navigate all of those changes in their life.

Jen Walsh: You talked a little bit about transitions. We hear a lot, how can I help my students in various transitions within their academic career. So how have you helped new students make connections?

Megan Bledsoe: Well, one of the things that I did early on when I started at this school was an ambassador program. So the ambassador program is pretty straightforward. It's basically just me partnering a student with a new student, because when I first came, it was sort of just a real modge podge of me walking students around, introducing them to other random students and their teachers and walking them to class. And it was definitely not the most efficient way nor I think the most engaging for our students because the primary goal for a new student is they want to make a connection with a friend. So I started an ambassador program where I take requests or nominations from staff members of students they feel like would be good at connecting with peers and helping them.

Also, I opened it up to all students too, because I try to have programs that are open to all. So that way I can find students who can self identify, but maybe their teachers don't necessarily identify that they could be a real good helper or supporter, but also the students that might not see themselves that way, but their teacher does. So through the nomination process and just the self nomination, I would have sort of a training with those students. I would go through the basics of what I would want them to do and the importance of connecting with their peers. And it was really sweet, because most of my ambassadors were a new student at some point. And so they definitely can relate to how scary it can be coming into a program, or coming to a school for the first time and not knowing what the program is, or what to do or who to sit with at lunch.

So those are sort of the obstacles and the fears that I want to take away for my students. And so it definitely is a big relief to new students. When I meet with new students, as they're enrolling, they're of course like a ball of nerves, understandably, and one of their biggest things is, am I going to get lost? Am I going to walk into the wrong class? And who am I going to sit with at lunch? Those are the three questions that I almost always get from my new students. So I figured, well, I'll just design a program where those three things are just simply solved. So I have my ambassadors meet them on the first day and we do sort of a brief little orientation. We get their schedule, we go over the basics and then I let them go. And my ambassadors are the ones that take them to their first class, introduce them to their teachers.

I even have little things that I have them do. I have the ambassadors walk into the class first because I hadn't realized at the time, but it's a real significant fear for our kids to be the first person to walk into a room because all eyes turn on them and they're the first person that's looked at. And so I noticed that was a huge anxiety point for my new kids. So I trained my ambassadors. You're the first person to walk through the door so that all eyes go on you first. So it's a little less scary with all the eyes in the classrooms then shift to the new student and they introduce the new student then to the teacher and then they leave. But they have sort of a pass system where they leave their class early, so they can go pick up the new student.

So as soon as that class is over, that new student knows once they walk out that door, their ambassador's right there waiting for them to walk them to their next class. And they go through the whole day that way. We do two days, sometimes longer because, hey, I have some new kids sometimes that are, I still don't have a handle on things. Can I have my ambassador still take me for several days? And I'm, go for it. It's totally fine. And then the other key role I have for my ambassadors is lunchtime. So their job there is you take them to the cafeteria, you walk them through the lunch line, you help them punch in their key code. All these little things that we might forget about, or we might not think is a very big deal, ends up being a really scary thing for the new student.

So I have them walk through the logistics with their new student and have them sit at their table. And so I tell them, you've got to make space at your table. If you don't feel like that's something you can do, then you can't be an ambassador because that was one of the biggest priorities, is that there's always a seat at their table so that the new student has somewhere to sit, has someone to talk to and introduce them to their friends or introduce them to other people they think they would connect with. So maybe the ambassador isn't really into volleyball, but the new student is really into volleyball, but the ambassador knows some friends or some peers that are on the volleyball team. Introduce them to that so they can make that connection and take those next steps. So it's really helped alleviate it.

I know that I had many students tell me that they've started at lots of new schools and this was the least scariest start for them. I had one student one time coming to me practically in tears by the end of the day, they were just so happy because they said they've been to three schools already that year. And they had never made a friend at all that year. And that at the end of the day today, being their first day, they already had two friends. They had their ambassador and their ambassador's friend, and that it just felt so much safer for them to come back to school, which I think helps for that engagement piece that we're looking for, and that attendance piece, because if students feel safe and accepted, they're going to be more likely to come to school and engage in the learning.

Jen Walsh: Safe, accepted, and not stressed out, or not struggling with anxiety. Just kind of A logistical question, with the mentors do you pair them with someone in their own grade level?

Megan Bledsoe: Good question. I forgot to clarify that. I definitely pair the students by grade level because the goal is I really want them to meet peers in their grade level and make those connections in their grade level. I also generally connect them by gender. On average, I ask the new student if they care and they usually do, but sometimes they don't and that's great. And if they don't, then I'll be somewhat random. But most of them would like to have a same gender or gender identified peer. So I'll connect them that way. If I can learn about the new student, sometimes I get a lot of information from my new students, sometimes not. Sometimes it's quite scarce, the information that I'm getting at enrollment, but I have some information and they can tell me a little bit about themselves. I try to match them with someone who I think they would have a good connection with. They have similar interests or hobbies.

Jen Walsh: I like that you include all grade levels. Sometimes with ambassador programs, it's more upperclassmen, but having a sixth grader be a leader, even though they're maybe the youngest in the school, they're already kind of developing those leadership skills. Have you seen that as an indirect outcome?

Megan Bledsoe: Definitely. And I think the program is a sort of a two-way street in helping. My favorite ambassadors are my students that we might consider sort of those fence sitter kids. They're great kids, they're fantastic. They're maybe not the kid that you think of right off the bat, as they've got everything figured out, they're doing everything right all the time, because also that's not really realistic. Most middle schoolers are struggling at times and are not always having their best days, but they might have a real genuine desire to be their best self. So those are my favorite ambassadors, and to see them take on a leadership role, a lot of them have not been given an opportunity to take on that capacity and they really step into it. And it builds up their self-confidence and their self-esteem and allows them to see themselves in that role that they have that capability.

I mean, granted, there still are some bumps in the road for sure. My sixth graders are ambassadors. It's not unlikely that they will forget that they're an ambassador halfway through the day and forget to pick up a new student. But we have a contingency system in there, where new students come to my office. If their ambassador forgot to pick them up and I'll connect with the ambassador and they're usually quite apologetic and excited to start up again. But hey, there's a lot going on in their lives too so...

Jen Walsh: I can relate. I forgot my locker code probably once per month in middle school, and it was my school counselor who had to help me with that. It just happens.

We'll hear more from Megan in just a moment, but first, a quick word from one of our sponsors. The nation's largest free college and career planning program, My Options, 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 My Options has launched 21st century planning and mentoring apps at no cost for every student, parent, and school counselor. Use their tools to build college lists, find scholarships, track progress, and manage applications all in one place, check them out at myoptions.org.

We're now back with Megan, and we had been talking about sixth graders. I'm curious to know how you've helped sixth graders transition into a new school and especially now in a virtual environment.

Megan Bledsoe: Great question. That has definitely been a significant challenge because the pandemic started prior to me visiting the fifth grade classes. Traditionally, I visit them in person. I do my whole song and dance, and that way they have that initial connection and understanding of who I am so that it's a smoother transition, but unfortunately that step had not happened. So I did get pretty creative. I try to make as interesting and engaging videos as I could. I've got a talking cat in there. That's my cat. I pretend to be a newscaster at one point for giving the tour. I tried to make it as engaging as possible so that they would have some familiarity. It was less ideal, but I definitely try to work around that. And then once we got started, I visited the zoom classes so they could see me just like back when we were in person, I would do classroom presentations at the beginning of the year.

Because they would remember me being there, but they would, of course, not necessarily remember any of the specifics of who I was, and how I could help them. So I traditionally would go to all of the sixth grade classes and re-introduce myself and my services and how to see me and the kind of things that I do and how I support them. So I did that virtually by visiting zoom classes, so they can see that. I also continue to put out videos. I have monthly videos that I put out to their families and to them, where I kind of go over sort of the monthly newsletter kind of stuff and put it in a format that maybe is a little more digestible and I've set up a lot of clubs. So I have a myriad of clubs and I've advertised that every which way that I can. They can sort of just casually and informally drop in and potentially meet other students as well.

So that if they are passionate about dance, maybe they drop into the dance club. That's one way of trying to help and connecting them to each other. There's a lot of students who know little to no one else. And so they're starting in this virtual world with knowing no one. There were very few people because the classmates they had in fifth grade all went to different schools. So the clubs is one way they can kind of try to have that connection and also create an informal and casual way to get to know me because it's understandably kind of a scary thing to start at a new school. And there's all these new faces and they don't necessarily want to just immediately feel comfortable with me, understandably. It's something that a normal student would need to take time and feel more comfortable with. So, traditionally, even in an in-person setting, I would have a lot of things like lunch groups and various lunch clubs, and I visit the classrooms and pop in so that it just becomes something that's very informal and casual.

So that I'm seen as someone that is just part of their whole school experience, that I'm there to help them out with just anything and everything. Maybe it's just finding a classroom, maybe it's meeting other peers, maybe it's that you got your shoes totally dirty and you need help cleaning them, so that when I do need to engage with them on something that perhaps a little more significant, like their struggles that they might be having at home, or with their peers, or with their own mental health, it's a lot more normalized, and that they feel a lot more comfortable having those conversations with me because I've become a normal part of their life. I'm not just this person that all of a sudden is dropping into their life to talk about their thoughts of suicide that they might've shared with someone. This way this is like someone they already have known.

And so when I have to have a more significant conversation, there'll be more comfortable to open up and share with me. So as much as I can, I try to sort of put myself out there in a lot of different ways, in a different context, so that I'm seen as something that all students see, and all students get help from, not just the ones that are quote unquote, really struggling. So in the virtual world, I'm trying to do that through my drop-in hours. I have times where I encourage kids to just drop in and say hi, and check in and get me tech help, and those clubs. I've also had a universal screener that I gave to all students, and I'm going to be starting groups. I'm going to do a little more targeted intervention where I'm targeting those students that sort of screened in on having those additional needs and reaching out to them to try to start some of those groups.

Ideally, they'll be more inclined to engage in those groups because I'm someone that they know and they feel a little more familiar with, instead of just sort of someone out of the blue coming into their life, going, hey, you want to come to a stress busters group? They'll be, okay, this is Ms. Bledsoe. She's cool. She's fine. It's not that scary. Maybe I'll come to this zoom group that she's setting up and we'll just see where it goes.

So that's kind of my end game and my end goal to try to familiarize myself with the sixth graders and that they can get familiar with me, that they can feel more comfortable and make connections among themselves because that's honestly, one of the most important things in middle school, is that social development. Figuring out who you are, what kind of interests you have, what kind of friends you want to make. The friends piece is a top priority, and I see the struggle and I hear the struggle. And so I'm really trying a lot of different creative ways to try to help them engage and still have that social connection, even though we are still remote.

Jen Walsh: It's so important. What you just talked about is relationship building and building trust, trust that they can see you when they need to, but also just for fun. You talked about clubs in a virtual environment, how are you planning on doing that? I am intrigued by this. Can you do a dance club virtually?

Megan Bledsoe: Well, the funny thing is the club idea actually came to me because a student accidentally emailed me asking me about when they were going to start costume club. And so I was, well, that's an interesting thing. I reached out to the teacher it was supposed to go to. That was at a different school. And I was, hey, tell me about this. You're doing clubs. How is this working? And the teacher explained, yeah, we're going to have times before school, afterschool, at lunch, where we're just having various topics and students can join these clubs and we'll engage in the various topics or whatnot. I thought, well, heck, I mean, I did clubs in person when we were in person. So I basically, when I did my classroom presentations, I surveyed kids to say what topics are you interested in?

So I collected all the topics then sent out a survey to all students. And they all selected sort of the clubs that they wanted to join based off of what they had previously given me for information. So from that, I picked the ones that got the most signups, and I just have advertised that I have these clubs for students that they can join to meet other people. And we have a platform called canvas where the students can easily access my zoom links and my information. So right then and there, they can view all the different clubs and what it looks like is I kind of told students is that it kind of depends on them.

These clubs are for them, by them, and as much as possible, I want it to be sort of led by them. So it looks different depending on the club. We have an anime club, which we've kind of fallen into somewhat of the routine is that we do quick check-ins, just like how everyone's week is going and then show and tell. So some of my anime club students like to draw anime. And so they take some time to share their screen and show various anime that they've been designing or some of them just love to take pictures and they modify it.

Then we usually hit up the kid's channel on Netflix and start watching an anime. And they just sort of talk about the anime while we're watching it together. And then we leave a little bit of time at the end to kind of talk about what did we like about it. Who'd seen this, favorite things about the anime, so that one's luckily the virtual format kind of works pretty well for that. For dance club, admittedly, that one is a little bit harder. I'm having a hard time getting them to get up and dance.

I'm often the only one dancing. I'll have them pick some favorite songs and I'll, okay, let's dance, let's do this now. Let's make it a little, have some fun and make some dance videos. They're warming up to each other. We're getting a little more comfortable with each other and getting up there and dancing a little bit.

Admittedly, Ms. Bledsoe is usually the most enthusiastic and ridiculous dancer among the crew, which I'm always telling them, hey, look at me. I look ridiculous. Don't worry about what you're doing because you can not look any more ridiculous than Ms. Bledsoe. That's what I figure my role for dance club is, being the max level of ridiculous so everyone can feel comfortable with their own level. But we're working on that right now. We wanted to kind of make it a little zoom box dance video. I was showing them how I saw someone kind of made a fun little dance video where each person in their own box did a part of the dance, and they're warming up to this idea, serving their songs. They mostly like to admittedly just watch music videos and talk about the dance in there, but hey, that's fine. In the end, it's really their clubs, so...

Jen Walsh: I love it. A dance club is great, especially in these times where stuck in front of a computer all day, if you can get them up and moving for a second, even a second.

Megan Bledsoe: At one time during dance club, one of our staff members was coming into the school, and I just put my mask on and I opened up my door and I ushered him to come in. And I was, just jump in here and do some dancing real fast. So he just popped in, made a little quick dance before he was headed out on his way, but it's, let's try and make it fun. As much as we can, the more ways that we can make it so that it's somewhat normalized and that you create sort of a culture and a climate for the school, I think the more that kids feel invested.

Jen Walsh: Thanks Megan. In a moment, we'll talk more with Megan about chronic absenteeism in her school. But first we're going to hear 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 the student win box, which is your one-stop shop to capture student moments throughout the busy school day, collaborate with staff to turn moments into momentum, and celebrate school wins.

What makes the win box unique is that your 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 win box, go studentsuccessagency.com and click on the talk to an expert button in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. From there, they will walk you through how to utilize the win box to elevate, mobilize, and include school staff, and strengthening all students academic and emotional wellbeing. We are now back with Megan.

Many school counselors struggle with their students being chronically absent. And I hear you say that this is an obstacle that you have as well.

Megan Bledsoe: So definitely attendance is a big priority and it's also one of the hard data points. So it's one of those things that we have pretty solid, concrete data to pull from to identify students that are at risk and usually attendance issues indicate needs for something else, either mental health, or housing, or whatnot. So it's a good sort of screener for looking more in depth. So that's something that we regularly as a school and as a counseling team access our attendance data to find our students that are chronically absent, and then we reach out to them and their families to find out what are the obstacles, why are we having trouble coming to school? And can we address some of those obstacles? So if anxiety is a big issue in why a student might be avoiding school, well, can we connect them with a counselor? Are they already connected with a counselor? Are there some accommodations that we can make to have them feel more comfortable and less anxious throughout their day? Is there something in particular that is sort of their high anxiety point that we could problem solve and work around?

Sometimes that's where we'll first find out that a student or a family is facing homelessness. So they might be absent a lot because they're currently houseless and in transition. And so sometimes this calling and checking on attendance is when we first find that out. So we have some great resources and supports in our district, but we have to first know about the needs. So once we find that, we can connect them with a program specifically targeting and helping those families and get them those supports because as you know, with McKinney-Vento, transportation can be provided, which not all families know that. So sometimes they are dealing with some transition issues and they're not coming to school because they don't have consistent transportation and they're no longer in our school boundaries, so they can't get the bus transportation, but if we find that out, we can set up a system and we can get bus transportation for our students that might be currently in transition.

So identifying those barriers is a big step. It's time intensive, but it's an necessary step. And honestly, probably the most successful intervention that I have had, just the simply daily check-ins. It's pretty uncomplicated and it's not unique. And it's just very straightforward. I completely got this idea from going to a school counseling conference and someone was sharing about how they had increased attendance by over 10% for their chronically absent students by literally just having that student check in every day and getting a little gold star every time they checked in and using those gold stars to earn a piece of candy or something like that. It's a pretty simple, straightforward reward system. And I thought, well, I should try that. So sure enough, once I launched that program, and I kind of modified it, that was an elementary intervention, but modified it to make it a little more middle school oriented, where they can earn various privileges, like extra recess time or pizza with their friend at lunch, the attendance for my chronically absent students consistently can go up 10%.

I mean, pretty consistently. I run it regularly and I collect the data and just simply having that daily check-in for students will increase it by over 10%. The longitudinal look at it is a little harder to follow because so many of our students end up moving away and out of our district, and then I can't follow up on the data, but when I can follow up on the data for longitudinally, when I look at how those students are doing a year or two years later, they're still having some of those attendance increases, not quite to the full 10% that they had during the intervention, but they still will have 5% or higher attendance rates continuing on past the intervention, which is pretty exciting. So I'm hopeful that, of the students that I've worked with, they continue to take that on and they create habits and see that priority in themselves.

Jen Walsh: Which is such a valuable life skill to have. So you're not only just helping them with getting to school, but helping instill a skill that is needed for a lifetime, essentially. What motivated you to become a school counselor, or what was kind of your journey to school counseling?

Megan Bledsoe: It was not something I exactly would have predicted for myself. Admittedly, I have little to no memories of school counselors growing up. I'm not sure, honestly, if my elementary or middle schools in Idaho where I grew up had school counselors. And in high school, I do remember we did have them, but I think I maybe only saw my school counselor for getting my transcripts, which admittedly, they probably had a caseload of 501 or something like that at a high school setting. So they had limited things that they could do. So it certainly was not on my consciousness that I would be there, and I also didn't necessarily love school. I didn't dislike it per se, but I felt that I was someone that was other or different or some of that sort of outcast culture that was in the nineties. I was part of that whole grunge, antisocial category of kids.

I definitely saw schools as something that was part of the system and part of the man. And I didn't want to be part of the system. I wanted to be doing my own thing and taken off in my own way. So definitely, I would have never predicted that I would have been in a school since it wasn't something that really drew me early on, but I was really interested in mental health. I have a mother that is a mental health counselor, but I would help out in her office. Sometimes she would often talk about her work and what she was doing, and I would read her books and kind of look through those things. And I was really interested how to help people on a really personal and significant level. I would sort of somewhat try to play therapist with my own friends in high school.

And I found it really rewarding to be there to listen to them, to have them feel like they were heard and feel better just by the process of me being there and listening to them. And I thought, wow, I enjoy listening to them and talking about ideas and things that they can do, and it makes me feel good and it makes them feel good. Seems like a good path for me to go. So I went to school sort of expecting that I would go the mental health route. I volunteered at a women's shelter through college and I was in engaged and interested in that and thought I'd continue to be in that path of working with women and women empowerment. I kind of somewhat Doogie Howsered made my way through college, graduated really young, and so I was much too young to work with adult women that had significant trauma in their life.

There's no way, being very young and having honestly no life experiences. I had a completely sheltered life where things were very easy for me and I had no real depth and knowledge of the world and helping people in a significant point in their life. So I recognized that myself that I couldn't yet be a mental health therapist because I had not lived enough life to be of any help. So I thought, well, I'll start with teens. It's a little more relatable and so I initially got a job at a counseling clinic working with teenagers and I found, Oh my gosh, I love teens. They're so much fun, and they're interesting, and they're just like on the precipice of adulthood, which is just a fun and exciting time to be. And then I started to realize, well, you know what, to make real change with these students, I really need to work with their whole family.

So, thankfully, I was in a clinic that really had a family focus. And so I kind of recognized, I got to work with a whole system to have these changes. And so I worked with whole families, but then I realized I was really just working with population where things had already gotten to a point where it was quite challenging and very intense, but I thought, I want to roll it back. And I want to be able to work with students perhaps before it gets to this level of intensity, before we get too severely depressed or before we get to having had multiple suicide attempts. If I had been able to see these kids in a school setting back in elementary or middle school, maybe I could have worked with that family earlier on and things could have gone on a different track for those students.

And so I realized that to have significant change, I needed to work with a larger population, a whole population and younger, so that's where I kind of sort of branched into the school setting because it's a capacity where you can see a whole community. A lot of other jobs and careers, you're only working with a limited view of people. You're working with people who choose to come to you, but for the most part in a public school, that is a whole sample of that community. And so I found just inspiring that I could be part of the base level, the ground level, of a community to help build from the ground up on making that a better place for students as a whole community. And so I could still work with those high needs students, but I could also work with some of them on a preventative level or just even our students that are having transitional times where they just need that little extra support throughout.

So that's kind of how I ended up as a school counselor, I guess. And I did not think that I would like middle school necessarily. My first job in a school was at a middle school level, and I somewhat wanted it because of the start time because I thought, holy cow, high school starts at what time? Pump the brakes there, that's too much. I can't. So I thought, well, I'll start in middle school and I'll see how I like it and I'll maybe transition to high school, but I just fell in love with the middle school age. They're just so silly and so ridiculous. And they're right at that big stage of identifying who are they, and what does it mean to be them, and what is their world and identity outside of their family? So there was something about it and they're also just quirky and funny and I laugh every single day.

Jen Walsh: That is really awesome. And what gives you hope today?

Megan Bledsoe: I think the thing that mainly gives me hope in this career is seed planting. I like to think about how a lot of what we do as school counselors, we do not see the results of immediately. We don't even see them sometimes within a year or two, but we often are doing significant seed planting where you can really see the fruits of your labor much later on. And maybe you don't always see that, but that's happening. A lot of my former students will stop by and see me and they'll tell me how helpful I was and good they're doing and how the things that I did really helped them.

And it's great to hear, because I'll often honestly, admittedly, some of the students that I felt like, jeez, that this was the kid that was always given me the side eye and nothing I ever said got to them in any significant way, but those are the ones that really actually felt like I was helpful. Well that's great. I'm planting seeds that I don't always see, but that I know that now those things are happening. It's those things that bring me hope and joy, and keep me going.

Jen Walsh: Thank you so much, Megan, for joining us today and congratulations.

Megan Bledsoe: Sure.

Jen Walsh: And thank you all for listening. This has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast, from the American School Counselor 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 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.