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, Sarah Flier. Sarah is the school counselor at Willow River Elementary School, in Hudson, Wisconsin, where she provides school counseling services to the urban school's 320 students grades K-5. Congratulations and welcome, Sarah.

Sarah Flier: Thank you so much.

Jen Walsh: So I wanted to talk a little bit about the demographics of your school. I know you're at the elementary level, but can you tell us a little bit about your school population?

Sarah Flier: Yeah, I'm in a K-5 building and we have just over 300 students. We have a 15% of our population is economically disadvantaged. And we've got about 91% white students, with 3% Hispanic or Latinx, and 2.5 black, with 1.6 Asian. And then 1.9% are two or more. We also have 18% of our students are in special education. We are the site-based program for our communication interaction, disability program. And so because of that, we have about 25 students who are coming from around our entire district to receive services in our building. So we have a unique expertise with that, with our case managers who work in that.

Jen Walsh: Great. So are you the only school counselor in the building?

Sarah Flier: I am. So I'm the only school counselor here, but then we have five other elementary schools in the district that I coordinate and collaborate a lot with.

Jen Walsh: That's interesting that you brought up collaboration, because I was looking into the program that you developed, the Literacy Toolbox, and I know that it involved a lot of collaboration to meet the needs of your students. I know you collaborated with teachers and a parent group and your advisory committee. Can you talk a little bit about that collaboration and what that program is in general, actually?

Sarah Flier: Yeah. So we were looking at our state report card and being a data nerd that I am, I love finding those gaps and where we can jump in. And so I was visiting with one of my 5th grade teachers, Kevin Knoke, and we were talking about this achievement gap that we saw with our students who were economically disadvantaged. We had 64% of our students who are not disadvantaged economically scoring in the advanced proficients on our state Forward Exam, in reading. Meanwhile, our students who are economically disadvantaged, we only had 44% of them who were able to score in that. And in fact, none of them scored advanced.

So he and I were kind of talking and he said... We've got a Backpack Program as well, that is through the community and gives families food. And he had mentioned, "Is there a way to tie in, where we're able to give these same kids books that they could read, so that they own these books? And is there a way that we could individualize it, like they could actually pick out what titles they want?" And so we had been kind of kicking that idea around.

And then I had my fall Academic Advisory Committee and I threw that out to the team, which he is on it too. And I have a really great variety of participants on that committee. And one of them has done a lot of philanthropic work throughout his career. Actually, sorry, I should back up, before we went to this point, we had talked with our parent group about, "Is this something that you could fund for us, that we could provide one book a month for these kids? I've got about 15 to 20 of these kids." And they said, "I don't know that we could actually fund that."

So then moving back to that advisory committee, we kind of explained, "Well, parent group isn't able to fund it with their money." But this parents, [Stan Cyrus 00:04:13], approached me after, he said, "You know Sarah, what we could do though, is because your parent group is a non-profit, a 501c3, we could actually have donations run through them and use it because there are companies." He was talking about how his wife's company could match that donation and things like that, that it might give people more incentive to donate to this program and we could share it out with the community to get involved.

And so there was a lot of red tape and making sure that we were following all of our public relations guidelines and everything through the district to get this rolling, but we finally were able to start it last year. And so what it is, is I know a lot of school counselors, they probably see the Scholastic Flyers come home every month.

What I do is I check in with each student who signed up for this. So I invite any parent who wants to participate to sign their kid up. And then I go visit with these kids once a month with that Scholastic Flyer from their age group. So these kids are able to pick out a book that they're interested in and I purchase it for them through this Literacy Toolbox fund. And then they get to keep that. And so they build their home library, they're reading books that they've selected. They take that ownership in it, and it actually has created this really cute kind of connection for me and the kids. Whereas with the backpacks of food, I'm just dropping them in the locker. But with this, I'm actually visiting with these kids about what their favorite book is and what they like to read and-

Jen Walsh: ... what they're interested in.

Sarah Flier: Yeah, what they're interested in.

Jen Walsh: Right.

Sarah Flier: And then I pop this in their locker. So it kind of gets slipped in there, like a little gift. And so these kids that have come down to bus duty and they've got the book and, "Thank you so much for the book." And they're so excited.

So it's probably one of my favorite things. It's just a newer program that we started too. And then of course, we started it last year and it was so excited to see how our kids would grow on our Forward Exam in the spring. And it just didn't happen because of COVID. So I did pull how the kids who are participating on our MAPs testing, which we do in the fall, we had half of them, 50% were actually advanced or proficient on their MAPs test in reading. So I think that that shows hope that it's a small sliver that is contributing to these kids having a passion for reading. So, yeah.

Jen Walsh: And it's great that they have some books to occupy their time. You mentioned COVID and what better time to pick up a good book when you're quarantined. So [crosstalk 00:06:47].

Sarah Flier: Right. And then our school community too. I send this out to all students to participate, but a lot of families then ask, "How can I donate?" So it's a really neat community, families taking care of other families and ensuring that kids have books at their home for them to keep.

Jen Walsh: Right. How do you involve the teachers in this? I know, again, it is a new program and it got impacted by COVID, but are teachers able to include this in their instruction?

Sarah Flier: I definitely have teachers who approached me and will ask, "Did this student sign up? I think it would really help them." What I do as far as like a tier 1, is I work really heavily in 2nd grade on growth mindset, and my teachers are so great at echoing what we teach about that. And in 3rd grade we talk a lot about academic success and how to set really good goals, smart goals. And I incorporate that reading piece in with that as well. And in 4th grade we talk about mindfulness, the entire year, and we also spend time on the seven habits.

So that's the way that teachers are using the instruction of why it's important to keep reading and push through and set goals for your reading. It's not directly linked per se, but all of my students are getting back message about reading being important. And our building as a whole, really, a lot of our building goals revolve around literacy and reading. And so it's supported through that. This is just kind of a side way to help support those students who maybe don't have the financial means to build their library.

Jen Walsh: Yeah. I remember in elementary school, for me, it was like when the Book Fair came to town, it was the most exciting time. And so I can imagine for students who weren't necessarily able to always pick out that book that they want, that this opportunity then would really foster love of reading, which we all know what that can do for one's academic career. And I love it. That's awesome.

Sarah Flier: And that's actually what kicked it off. So we started, in October, we have our parent-teacher conferences, so we had the Book Fair here. And that is a big deal. It's funny that you still remember that as a kid. And so I told the students, "Every month, you're going to get to pick from a flyer, but for this first time, I want you to look around here and I want you to find a book." And I joke around, "It can't be a toy." Because a lot of those things come with toys too, "But it has to be something that you can read." And their eyes just light up, like, "Wait a minute, I get to pick something?" And so that was a really fun way to kick it off. And then every time we've been able to have a Book Fair, I do it that way. Obviously this year is a little different, but.

Jen Walsh: Right. So how have you been able to adapt this program in a virtual setting?

Sarah Flier: I'm trying. We're actually full-time, so we have kids face-to-face full-time. I do have about three students who are at home. And so what I've done with them is I've sent them the link from the Scholastic Flyer and just ask them, "Pick one out that you want." And then the parents come and pick up. These are learners who have chosen to learn distance, parents come in every Friday to pick up materials for school. And so I just popped the book there too. So we're working on it. It's not as fluid as me being able to stop by and visit with them and go through the book choices, but we're trying to modify it so that we can still make sure that those kids are getting books as well.

Jen Walsh: We'll explore data with Sarah in just a moment, but first, 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 counseling. That's why myOptions has launched 21st century planning and mentoring apps at no cost for every student, parent and school counselor. Use their tools to build college list, find scholarships, track progress, and manage applications, all in one place. Check them out at myoptions.org.

So you talked a little bit about data, that you're data nerd, and I love that because math is not my strong point.

Sarah Flier: Mine neither.

Jen Walsh: We often hear that some people find data to be really intimidating. So can you talk kind of about how you approach data and how you tackle it and how that impacted the Literacy Toolbox or any other program that you've created?

Sarah Flier: Yeah. I would say for the first seven years of my career, I didn't understand how I could use data in counseling because it just seems so subjective. And so I struggled with it, I would hear people talk about the data and it took me hearing that message several times before it finally clicked. And so then attaching that to the ASCA model and just seeing what it can do for you, is when it finally turned for me.

We had professional development plans that we had to complete to do our relicensure in Wisconsin. And so one of my goals was to write and submit a Wisconsin School Counseling Program Accountability Report, or a WSCPAR. And this dealt with data. So that was really my dig in with data.

One of my other colleagues here in the Hudson District had submitted one of these before. So she's kind of my data person. And I ran it all by her and was explaining to her what I was thinking. And she was able to help me kind of pull out the outcome data and understand the impact that this could have on students. And once I started writing these, it was easier and easier to brainstorm ways to find data. And now I'm the person like when my Phys Ed teacher was wondering about, "Gosh, I wonder if kids have Phys Ed just before they take their Maps test, if it has any impact." And then it's like, "Oh, let me dig that data up for you. I know how we can do this. This will be great." So it has become kind of second nature as just, it excites me to be able to show data for anything we're doing, as small or as big as it might be.

So one example of how I've pulled data in, where I hadn't really seen it before is the Sensory Path. So you saw them on Facebook last year, or a couple of years ago, about three years ago, and they looked so fun and so colorful. And our PBIS team had sat down and we were talking about, we had this group of little kinders who just disproportionately compared to years past of kindergarteners had very, very high number of referrals. So we were kind of talking about, "Gosh, if we gave them like a body break where they could use the Sensory Path, would that help?" Hemming and hawing.

And then I don't know about you, but the winter of 2018, we had about nine or 10 snow days up here and cold days. So because of that, our district tweaked its schedule to add 15 minutes to every day, starting at the end of February. So we kind of had this perfect storm of, we've got really high number of behavioral referrals coming out of kindergarten. And now kindergarteners, they're going to add 15 minutes to their day and they're going to lose their morning recess.

And that's when I said, "That's it, we're doing the Sensory Path. We're going to try it. Who was in with me?" My kindergarten team is just they're rockstars. They're like, "Yeah, let's give it a try. Let's do it." So there was a Sensory Path over at Hudson Prairie School. And so I tied in with the OT over there, had installed it. And I talked to her, I was like, "Tell me more about this. What do I need to have? What do I need to do?" And I literally left that school, went to Target, picked up a roll of painter's tape, came back to the building. And I pitched this to my principal and to my building director too, my custodian, because that's who you really, really have to have on your side before you put a bunch of tape on the floor.

Jen Walsh: Actually, can you explain what a Sensory Path is, just for folks who maybe aren't familiar?

Sarah Flier: Oh, yes. I'm so sorry.

Jen Walsh: No, that's okay.

Sarah Flier: This is like an obstacle course of sorts, for kids to go through, that involves gross motor to get kids moving. And they think it's an obstacle course, and we see it as a great body break for them. So there's a lot of like jumping and there's cross body movement and a lot of gross motor that's involved. That just kind of is a great release for those students who are having trouble with impulse control, or if they're getting kind of sleepy too. And so lots of benefits from it, but I hadn't seen the data on it. And so I thought, "Ah, I bet I can find data with this."

So what we did is we pulled our kindergarten data, I've installed it. And we just said, "Let's just try it. It's just painters tape. It costs me $6 for the roll. Let's see what we think." And so I took the data from our behavioral referrals for kindergarten prior to installing it. And then my kindergarten team said, "Tell you what, 10:15 was usually our morning recess, but we don't have that anymore. So we're going to take our kids through the Sensory Path at least once or twice. So they might do two circuits of it at about 10 o'clock in the morning. And we're going to see if that made an impact." So then comparing the data, we saw a 34% drop in our kindergarten behavioral referrals.

Now were they also maturing and learning how school works? Absolutely. But it was just a really neat way to see how this helped, it benefited these students. So then with that data, I could talk to my administrator and say, "Hey, can we get one of those really pretty ones, that's a little bit more permanent?" And I got the green light on it. And then now I've got other classes. We use it in different hallways. If we're seeing a spike in behaviors, we've tossed a couple extra ones in other hallways for kids to just do during transitions. And we're collecting data on that.

So I think it's great for when you're testing things out to gather that data, and there's all kinds of it sitting around for you to use. And then when you show your stakeholders that, they realize that, "Oh, there might be something to this." And you're able to recreate it and then share it with others too. So in that same vein, I'm going to do a webinar for our State Association on how to get data on your Sensory Path so that you can have one permanently installed in your school. Because it's easy to put something in like that, and just, it's pretty, and it's fun, but to collect data, that's where you're really able to just demonstrate how effective it is too. And if it's not effective, how can we tweak it or change it?

Jen Walsh: So how are you collecting the data for the Sensory Paths?

Sarah Flier: We utilize SWIS for our behavioral referrals. And so I am collecting on specific grades. We have 1st graders, I just installed a Sensory Path that actually... We have a catwalk, our building is a 100 years old. So we've got this old catwalk that we just put one on. And so with 1st graders, I'm looking at how their behavior has changed. We'll even look at their academic data too, to see if it has any impact on that. Because the 1st grade team has agreed, we want to use this prescriptively where we're going to go and use it at a certain time every day and determine if that's making a difference.

Jen Walsh: Gotcha. That's awesome.

Sarah Flier: That'll be behavioral referrals, office, discipline referrals. Yeah, you can kind of look at everything.

Jen Walsh: Yeah. It's definitely such a great way to gain, buy-in and really just show the results of the initiatives that you're doing.

Sarah Flier: Yeah.

Jen Walsh: What about the data for the Literacy Toolbox program?

Sarah Flier: Yeah, so I wasn't able to gather the gap that we saw was on our Forward Exam or state exam, which was last spring. So last spring, we obviously didn't have our Forward Exam to collect data on, but I did pull how our students did on the MAPs test, which is measures of academic progress, which is a nationally normed test. And so looking at that, the kids that do the Book Club, 50% of them are reaching that advanced proficiency on the reading part of the MAP. So I'm looking forward to see how that's reflected in the Forward Exam, this spring.

Jen Walsh: Yeah. That definitely sounds promising.

Sarah Flier: Yeah. Yeah. A good indicator that there's something to it, and it's helping. Along with everything else that our building is doing. We are a Title I school, so we have that going for us too.

Jen Walsh: Well, I'm excited to hear an update, when we do get back to normalcy here, if that ever happens. So can you share a fun fact about yourself?

Sarah Flier: Yeah, actually, I actually have a little pottery studio in my garage. So when I am not being a counselor or a mom, I am throwing on a wheel and I've got to kiln and all of that. So that was one of my majors in college and I just haven't quite kicked the habit.

Jen Walsh: Wow. That is so fun. What's the coolest thing you've made?

Sarah Flier: Yeah. I like to make mugs and things that people can actually use, but this Christmas, I made a bunch of these dip chillers. So it's like a form within a form and you put ice on it because you got to keep your dip chills when we have social gatherings again. So that was kind of a fun project that I'm excited to give it to people this Christmas, so.

Jen Walsh: Anything that involves dip I'm here for it.

Sarah Flier: Yeah. And then I hand build in my laundry room in the winter months. So it's real glamorous.

Jen Walsh: I love that. That's really neat. How creative?

Sarah Flier: Yeah. In the summertime, I invite my entire staff over to my house, for a pottery party. So I've had my staff out to my place to throw in my garage, which has been a riot because people are like, "Oh, I used to throw in high school, I've got this..." So it's been a fun team building experience.

Jen Walsh: Yeah. And what a great way to build relationships, for sure.

Sarah Flier: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen Walsh: I've never tried it, but I have heard it as much harder than it looks. And actually to me it looks hard. So I'm like, "Ah."

Sarah Flier: Once they get the hang of it, if you ever come from Minnesota, Wisconsin, I'll show you.

Jen Walsh: That would be really cool.

We'll hear more from Sarah in just a moment. 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 the Student Winbox, 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 Winbox 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 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 the Winbox to elevate, mobilize, and include school staff and strengthening all student's academic and emotional wellbeing.

We are now back with Sarah. We often hear that would drive school counselors are the stories. Do you have any of those impactful stories that have stuck with you throughout the years?

Sarah Flier: Yeah, It's a really sad one, but definitely, I learned a lot from it. We had a student who, she was going to be a 5th grader and she died in a tragic accident about a week and a half before school started. And I had never in my life experienced that, and feeling the weight of I'm the school counselor, so I'm supposed to know how to help my students and my staff deal with this, and my parents know how to deal with their students in this.

And after a moment of panic, I'm one of those people who I just need to research and dive in to, "What do I need to do? Give me the answers." And actually, I went to ASCA and their ASCA U Specialist program. And I pulled out the grief curriculum and took that course. And it was so nice to just have at my fingertips, the minute I needed it. And I dug through that and I found so many helpful resources about how kids process grief and how adults process grief and what do you do in a school and all of that. So I felt very, very prepared, very sad, but very prepared.

We, that week ended up going to our welcome back professional development, but then also went to this child's funeral. And our entire school staff sat together. And it was just one of those... Oh, we got so tightly knit together through that process, but it was so tragic and so awful.

And I completely cleared my schedule the first three days of school that we were back. Because I was like, "I'm going to be available to these kids and they're going to need to come in and talk." I went to their classrooms and I just put it out there. "We're all grieving, if you ever need to talk." And no one came. And then Lily's birthday was January 17th. And all of a sudden I had this trickle... And I had met with small groups of her closest friends throughout the year after that. But I had just about the entire 5th grade class sitting in my office with their lunch trays on their laps. They were crying. They were laughing and telling funny stories about her. And it just hit me like, "This is the whole just be quiet. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to even really hug all of them. It's just, they want to be in the space and you just need to provide it for them."

So that was one of those, you can read all of information of how to deal with that, but that was probably one of those stories I'll always remember, is just how powerful that felt to just sit with them and just be sad with them and how that was okay. And that's what they needed.

So that's a tragic one, but one where I learned that you don't have to know it all, you just have to be there. And it's that whole Brené Brown with empathy that, "I don't have to fix this for you. I don't have to reassure you that it's going to be okay. I can just be sad with you." And that's what they actually needed. So that was one story that is on the tragic side.

On a positive story. I had set a goal to help our 3rd graders meet their growth targets in their MAPs math and their MAPs reading. And so I had the whole group, I was talking to, and then I had a small group of 10 kids who had missed their growth target. And what I love about that is it wasn't about kids getting into advanced or profession. This was about beating your own goal.

And I had this one boy in 3rd grade and he's like a football star. He does not like to read, he is just all about the field. And he came running down to my office. It's the one time I haven't yelled at him for running in the hallway. And he just said, "Mrs. Flier, I beat my score by one point." And he hugged me, you would have thought that the kid won a Super Bowl. It was just the coolest moment. And he's a 5th grader now and we've got a really neat connection now, but that was one of those teeny tiny. That won't show up on the state report card, that one point that he beat it by, but the look on his face and just how... That was one of those stories that will stay with me forever as well.

Jen Walsh: It's the little moments I think, that really can make an impact. So what is the most valuable lesson that you've learned as a school counselor?

Sarah Flier: I have learned to try to talk less and listen more. I think it's easy with small people to want to give them more advice. I think that we just assume or maybe make assumptions that they don't know how to problem-solve, but I've learned that the longer wait time I give and the more I listen, the more successful the student is with handling the problem.

So I used to be one of those people, in my grad school and clinical, we all had to sit and do a therapy session with people. And I was wanting to give ideas for how this person could manage what they were going through. And they were like, "No, no, no, no. You're just supposed to listen." It's like, "Great. But I like to give ideas. I like to problem-solve." And I don't think that got worked out of me for a couple of years into being a school counselor. And I'm finding that the quieter and the less I talk when a student comes to me in need, actually the more I'm helping them. So that's been one of those lessons that took some time to learn. But I definitely think that that has helped me connect more with students, learning that lesson.

Jen Walsh: It's funny that it ended up being children where that lesson stuck.

Sarah Flier: Yeah. They, I think teach us more sometimes than... Yeah. I had a student, I've worked with her for a long time and she's a 5th grader now and she's just one of those old souls. And she was talking about, I'd asked how's that friendship going, that wasn't so great last? Year she goes, "I realized that I was more concerned about being her friend than I was about how she was treating me." It was like, "Whoa, that is so deep. That is amazing." So they are, they're very intuitive and they really have some cool stuff to say, and I learn so much from them. Yeah, it's a two way street for sure.

Jen Walsh: And what gives you hope today?

Sarah Flier: When my kindergartners come in in the morning, that gives me hope. Prior to COVID I got hugs every morning and they were just so happy to be in school. And I really think that if we can create these school climates where kids feel like they are truly seen and safe and successful, that they are going to go out into the world and recreate that in their communities. And so that's what gives me hope is their kindness and their generosity right now, because I think we need a lot more of that in this world, and they definitely are going to do amazing things. So those little smiles in the morning, that's what gives me hope.

Jen Walsh: Well, thank you so much Sarah, for joining us today. 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 you soon. I'm Jen Walsh, and this has been, I Hear You Say.