

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

National School Counseling Week, school counselors, mental health advocacy, student support, middle school counseling, school counselor role, student behavior, school counselor advocacy, school counselor resources, school counselor appreciation, school counselor challenges, school counselor impact, school counselor initiatives, school counselor celebration

SPEAKERS

Traci Smith, Jennifer Baldwin, Natalie Howard

Natalie Howard 00:03

Alright, everybody, welcome. Welcome to this well. Hello, episode of teaming for well being. We are your hosts. I am Natalie Howard. I am Jen Baldwin. We're so glad to be here. Yup, and we are so excited for this episode on National School Counseling Week 2025, we love our school counselors. We appreciate them. Do not call them guidance counselors. No, you have been warned. I mean, they do not. They are counties stricken from Mercy. Your vocabulary and it is, it is something people still use. So that is my, that is my public service announcement for this week. I love it. If you're ever going to get it right, it should be this week. So to celebrate this week, Jen, we have a special, oh yes, we're so excited. Traci Smith, coordinator student support and mental health from Washington County Public Schools, is with us. Whoop, whoop. She's here to tell us a little bit about herself, and we're so excited she's here. And so she's going to tell us, you know, she's she was a school counselor. She's currently in this new role that she's going to tell us about, but she's also going to talk about, talk about being a school counselor, how she got to this role, and a little bit about what she does in this role that she's got. And we're so excited you're here. Traci, welcome, welcome. Yeah, thank you all so much. I'm excited to be here. Alright, well, we all know that school counselors are so multi faceted, so why don't you tell us about your experience as a school counselor, how you got to your current role, and about your current role. Okay, yeah, sounds good. So just to give you a little background, I am from Northeast Tennessee, and I grew up kind of always knowing, knowing I wanted to work with people didn't know in what capacity, but I had a school counselor in middle school that really impacted my life in a lot of ways that I think he probably didn't even realize, just because he was willing to advocate for me and even just do little Things like, you know, get me into classes that maybe I didn't know that I needed to be in, but he made it happen, and that set me on a path for success in high school. And so that really made a big difference for me. And when I got to grad school, I went to East Tennessee State University go bucks in Johnson, City, Tennessee, and I thought I wanted to be a marriage and family therapist. And then, you know, right? And so,

Traci Smith 02:30

yeah, I was, I was on that track, went to to undergrad and grad school there, and just randomly thought, You know what, I might take a like a whatever the intro to school counseling class was,

I was like an elective. Loved it. Fell in love with the idea of working with kids in a school. And I had, you know, a little bit of a passion for public education at the time that's only grown much bigger now, but that's kind of how I got started. And so I, you know, did my masters in that I could do a dual path. And so I could do school counseling and clinical mental health. And so I chose to do that. And so then I got to the end of grad school and thought, yeah, I'm going to go the clinical route. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be a private practice counselor. Long story short, that didn't work out. Oh, and I was a newlywed with no job. My husband was not making enough money to support our whole family, of course, because we were young adults, and we were like, Okay, I've got to get a job. I've got to be employable somehow. So there was a school counseling job in a middle school that town over, and so I said, Okay, let's I'll do it. I don't want to work in a middle school. I was like, I'm elementary or nothing. But I was like, okay, Middle School is fine. Didn't hear anything. Kind of thought that chip had sailed, and then got a phone call in July that was like, Hey, are you still interested in this job? And kind of went back and forth, and I took the job, and the rest is history, right? I love Middle School apron. Yeah, yeah, I can't imagine working with another group of kids. I love Middle School. If I ever go back into the school setting, that's that's where I want to be in some capacity. But I did that for about seven years as a school counselor. There we were the largest middle school in the division, have about 700 students, and there were two counselors. And so I also had some experience my first couple of years of being split with the high school. And so that was good, because I was able to kind of get a glimpse into. To okay, what are we sending these middle schoolers into? And so that gave me a whole new outlook on how to kind of get them prepared for high school. So that was really a good opportunity. And then now, as you all said, I'm not a school counselor anymore, at least in practice. I'm always a school counselor at heart. So now I'm the Coordinator of Student Support and mental health, and this is a new position in our school division that, oddly enough, I kind of advocated for when I was a school counselor, we had gotten a new superintendent, and he had sent out a survey that was just like, you know, what do we what are we doing? Well, what do we need to improve and and so I said, Hey, you know, I think we need someone that is solely focused on student support and mental health and making sure that our kids are getting the help that they need outside of academics and all that stuff. And so I sent, you know, this big, long, elaborate email that really I poured, like, my heart and soul into, and I was like, He's gonna think I'm crazy. I've never even met this guy. I'm just like a random school counselor here.

Natalie Howard 06:16

Yeah, you know, everybody that advocates, you have to ask, why not me?

Traci Smith 06:20

Right? And that really was the question I was asking myself. And I had some really good colleagues that pushed me. They were like, just, it's just an email, just send it. So I sent a follow up email. And that was, I guess, summer of 2023, and that October, so I started the year as a counselor in that same school. That October, I get a phone call from a former supervisor who knew like I was, he had moved from administration up to central office, and he knew I was advocating for this role. And he said, Hey, you'll never guess what job they're getting ready to post. And I was like, No way. Like, I didn't even have to ask. I knew what he was talking about. I

was like, You're kidding. They're posting this job. And so they did, and I applied for it, and somehow, somehow, they hired me. Well,

Jennifer Baldwin 07:16

and you're passionate. People know it, and

Natalie Howard 07:19

they see you. I think it's amazing. That's a That's a beautiful story. Really,

Jennifer Baldwin 07:23

it is. So tell us about this role, like, what does this mean?

Traci Smith 07:28

So that's a great question.

Jennifer Baldwin 07:33

You are building it. That's the beauty it can be. I mean, the beauty and the beast, the Beauty and the Beast. Because I've been there, and we've talked a lot about that Traci and I have, but I think it's, it's, it's such an honor, but it's a very daunting task.

Traci Smith 07:46

Yes, yes. And that is something that I think about really daily, because I think about the path that got me to this position, and I'm like, Okay, I advocated for this role. I wanted it because I knew that it would help our school division and ultimately help our students. And so it goes back to that question of, why not me, right? Like, why not me in this position and figuring this out and kind of paving, paving this new path? Now, of course, I'm not operating on my own. I have a great team of people around me, but in this role, really, what it's shaping up to be is I just kind of oversee any initiatives that are involved in student support outside of that instructional piece. So that might be student behavior, although I'm not directly over behavior and discipline, but I have a big role in that, obviously, student mental health, our school counselors, that's a big part of my role is just helping support them and helping our schools really just see new ways that we can support kids and make school a place that they want to be.

Jennifer Baldwin 09:00

I think it's amazing. I like, you know, you Traci, and I have talked about, you know, what this could look like, and you it is such a big, daunting task at times. But when it comes down to it, it's about supporting those who are supporting the mental health and well being of our kids, and hoping helping our kids really improve outcomes like we want them to succeed. And so what? What can we do that we haven't done before, in a different or do something in a new and different way that can make this better and easier for our school counselors and for our teachers and for our administrators too, because it's hard work everybody's everybody's work is hard, but I love that you're still involved with your school counselors and advocating for them. And I think it's so critical that you, I mean, it is the why me, but I mean you're, you're the perfect person.

You lived it, you understand it. You have experience with it. People appreciate and respect the boots on the ground work that people do that get them to these places.

Natalie Howard 09:57

And what are just great story to. To You know, this isn't the path you originally thought you were going to take, but you had an inspiring school counselor from middle school, you go through the program. You're like, let's just take this elective class that gets you into school counseling. You find a random job. This happens to be at a middle school, which you don't want, but then you realize, is where you're meant to be, create this, you know, proposal for a new position, and then it happens, and then you get it like all these things, you know, are kind of being manifested in your life. And it's just beautiful to see this, this path that you've taken. You know, so many people say they want to change the world in a way, and they hesitate when the opportunity is there, and I feel like you're knocking down the doors along the way, which is just beautiful to see so well.

Jennifer Baldwin 10:47

I love it well. And the next thing we want to get to because, I mean, honestly, I think we could talk forever how important all of this work is, is that people, even in the education system, don't really understand the role of school counselor. I think if you have done it, even if you are friends with somebody who is a school counselor or a teacher, like I was a teacher before school counselor. I was back in the day. I had to be a teacher first. But I loved that I did because I understood and had a perspective, and it is helpful, but people don't understand the role, really, sometimes, of a school counselor. And so if you were to, you know, give that elevator speech, like, what would be the top things you would say is, is the role of a school counselor.

Traci Smith 11:32

So of course, the first word that comes to mind is advocate, and that's what I would spend a lot of time with my students. When I was in the middle school, we taught a class called Middle School, 101, and we one, and we taught it to all sixth graders. And so I had the opportunity to teach all of our sixth graders at different points throughout the year, and I would spend really, like, the first few days just sharing with them what our role is as school counselors and how we can help them. And I would always start with that word, like, what is an advocate? And a lot of times, sixth graders don't really know what that means. So we would spend time talking about that word and what it means, and thinking about who are the advocates in your life. But then I would move on to talk about, you know, in a school, there's all of these different people, different grown ups, working to make things happen. And so you have your teachers who do a lot of stuff, but their main focus at the end of the day is to make sure that you are learning the content that you're supposed to learn. And then your administrators, of course, they're doing all kinds of things at the end of the day. Their job is to make sure that people are safe and that everyone in the building is kind of operating the way that they're supposed to. And then, of course, you know, they handle when our behavior isn't great, or when things kind of go off the rails and they need to step in. But as a school counselor, my focus is you as a student, like as a whole person, and it's my job to make sure that all of these pieces and all these working parts in the school are working together to ensure that you have the best outcomes possible. And that involves a lot of

advocating and kind of sticking myself in situations that maybe I wasn't invited into, but I know they're talking about one of my kids, so I'm going to be there anyway. And so that's kind of how I'd explain it, if somebody asks me, I guess, I think it's

Jennifer Baldwin 13:26

a beautiful way to explain it. And I've, I think, you know, I we still hear a lot of folks refer to it as guidance counselors, and, you know, just depends on where you go. But I think it's important for school counselors to also be their own advocates, right? We are, our role, really is to advocate for kids and to be there on behalf of them, to make sure that, you know, the whole child is, is what's being focused on. But you know, school counselors also have to advocate for themselves too, because, you know,

13:58

it's, it's a profession, it needs it,

Jennifer Baldwin 13:59

does. And a lot of things, as we have said in multiple places, get dumped on the person who they don't really know what your role is sometimes. And so, oh well, you'll have time for this, so you do it. And so yeah, advocacy is a big part of it, but I love that you explain to your kids that you're you're there to advocate for them. That's huge. So

Natalie Howard 14:20

speaking of advocacy, yeah, it's a great segue. Jen, how do you Traci advocate for your school counselors? And how could others not in that profession advocate for school counselors? Yeah,

Traci Smith 14:34

so that's a great question. In my role now, it's a lot of behind the scenes conversations about what school counseling is, because what I have learned, um, since I've been in this position, is not a lot of people really know. And, um, they think they know, and it's really not their fault that they don't know, but they just don't know. Yeah, and so they have an assumption or an idea of what their counselor should or should not be doing. Thankfully, we have a superintendent who really champions the role of a school counselor, and has kind of come in and said, you know, one huge thing last year was, we're not school counselors. Aren't doing testing anymore in our division, was like, what? Like, I never thought I would see the day, but that was a huge win, yeah, and that, with that, created a lot of conversations about, well, then what are they going to do? Right? You know, what can they do? And so, yeah, part of that advocacy is just being willing to if I hear something or in, like I said with my students, you know, sometimes it was conversations that I may have not been a part of or invited into, but if I hear it or I know, I'm quick to say, well, actually, your school counselor can make a difference with this, because they have these skills. And it's a lot of, like, just hyping up the role and the skill set that they have, because that's really, I think, misunderstood too. People don't realize that we have, like, a very robust understanding of mental health and how that impacts a learning environment. And so I'm just constantly talking about it, I'll probably drive people crazy. They're probably like, oh, dear Lord, like, let's not talk about school counselors when Traci's in the room. But hey, but I just, you

know, it's all I know, and I think about it. You know, a lot in the way of like, how I've advocated for students is just being, again, being willing to say something. And it's not like I'm, you know, constantly just barging into rooms and saying, Well, what about the counselors? But I'm still quick to, you know, just speak up and speak out about what we do. And a lot of it's positive. I try to focus a lot on, and I said this in an admin meeting a few weeks ago. Like, we've spent a lot of time talking about what counselors can't do. Let's talk about what they can do. Like, let's let's talk about the the skill set that we do have and how we can really be a critical component of your school's leadership team. And we've done a lot of educating our administrators on like, if your counselor is not a part of these conversations, they should be, and that might make the counselor uncomfortable, because they're not used to being a part of those conversations. But I also see it as my job, and I'm trying to do this with our counselors, reminding them, you know, like you can do this, like you know how to speak into these situations. You know more about student mental health than probably anyone in the building, yeah. And maybe you've not been like, working those muscles the past few years, but they're still there.

Natalie Howard 17:53

Yeah, yeah. It's really great to empower them to to do that

Jennifer Baldwin 17:57

well. And I think they need that. They need that champion is, which is why you wrote that email and you put this into the universe, because they need that champion who understands their role. And you know, there's such value in their knowledge. As a school counselor who worked with an administrator in my school building who valued my leadership skills and my knowledge in that arena, and really pushed me to be in those positions. You're you're trying to talk to your school counselor about I mean, it was just such a gift. So to have you there to advocate for them, and to have a superintendent, a leadership position at the top that really advocates for this as well, is beautiful. It's so rare it really is. I

Natalie Howard 18:42

always say, Put your money where your mouth is, and the superintendent is the one that can put the money in places. And so a lot of people love to talk about it, but they don't. They either can't or won't put their money in that and where it needs to go. And so that is, you hit the the right person,

Jennifer Baldwin 18:58

yeah. And so even if a school division doesn't have a Traci, right? Yeah, you know, listening to this podcast and hearing, you know, how can even administrators in the building advocate for their school counselors and like you were saying, like just learning about what they're capable of and what they have to offer, and how they could be part of leadership, how they could help with ideas and talk about what they can do, and really take a look at how to utilize them differently. Out of the box, thinking is just so important, because not everybody has a Traci, not everybody had a me and in the division, but I mean, you can do it as a as any leader, really,

Natalie Howard 19:38

really, yeah, I was a 504 coordinator and a school psychologist. And let me tell you, every time I was at a meeting with a school counselor and somebody brought up a mental health concern, I was like, well, guess what? We have a school counselor here who is very well versed in this, and I would make that connection and reinforce the awareness and the advocacy that may have been done from a central office person. And and just reinforced it, because people need to know, and the school counselors would approach me afterwards and just say, Thank you for reminding them. Like I try, I try, I try, but it's like they don't hear me. So it, it really needs to come from all of us in the education community, absolutely, to lift up these people so they can use those mental health muscles. Because as a school it's like, I get that if you don't use it, you may lose it or not feel as comfortable, you know, flexing those muscles and you need to. It's so valuable in the mental health crisis that we have for our young people, when we have the resources available, we gotta use it. Yeah.

Traci Smith 20:37

Yeah, for sure. I think, you know, like you said, the mental health crisis that we're in, I think about this all the time, like we really cannot afford to waste any resources that we have in our buildings on, you know, things that might be important, but someone else might could do, you know. And I think our counselors, unfortunately, in the past, have gotten roped into doing a lot of those things and when really we need them like it is all hands on deck all the time, and we have to work as a team and bring in everyone and make sure we're maximizing those skill sets and strengths

Natalie Howard 21:16

Absolutely. Best time to do it when they're young, too. Love it,

Jennifer Baldwin 21:21

all right, so let's get to the celebrating. So it is National School Counseling Week, February 3 through the seventh. So everybody out there, make sure you are logging in to the Ask a website. They have a ton of amazing resources. So Traci, what are you going to do to celebrate your school counselors? What do you guys have in mind?

Traci Smith 21:42

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I think at least in my role, I'm already kind of hyping them up, you know, I've already been sending emails. I've been encouraging our counselors to take an active role in School Counseling Week, you know, with whether it's just like posting pictures, we have a great social media person here in our division that's really good about getting information out. So I'm really encouraging our counselors to, you know, take some pictures or, like, use the little templates that ASCA gives you that's like, kind of prompts you each day to share more about your role, and then we can share that with the community. And then also, you know, I've got some other things in mind, as far as just little acknowledgements, little things. Of course, you can do things like give them gifts or stuff like that, and I think that stuff's appreciated. But, you know, I was thinking about like, what could we really do at the building level to acknowledge and celebrate our school counselors. And I think even just like that, Administrator taking a vested interest in what the role of a school counselor is right like go

to the conferences, read the articles, listen to the podcasts, share those with your school counselor to say, hey, I want to know more about what you do, and I'm taking an active role in this partnership. And that's something that shouldn't just happen during School Counseling Week. It should be ongoing throughout the whole year. And so I think that's really where it can be powerful, is that if you have someone in your building and in a leadership role, specifically that really wants to learn and understand what you do and what you can do for that school community, and is sharing resources and really just communicating like, Hey, I'm here to support you. I'm here to champion you. I want you to succeed, and I want our students to succeed too, and so we're all kind of working together. And so that's one thing that I'm going to be encouraging our administrative teams to be doing. I'm actually working on some stuff to send out this afternoon, just to make sure they're aware that school count National School Counseling Week is next week, but also just some ideas of how we can have an ongoing effort to make sure that our counselors feel celebrated and appreciated in our schools. Absolutely. I

Jennifer Baldwin 24:07

mean, I think a free gift is always the best gift. You know, you do those kinds of acknowledgements, you know, like your principal calls you into the office, but it's to say thank you for everything you do. I may not know everything you do, but let's, let's make an appointment to meet with each other so I can really learn that, because I see you working hard, and I just need to know more about how we can use those skills, because, and those are the kinds of gifts I think people really want in education.

Natalie Howard 24:34

People just want to feel valued, seen and validated, yes, for their work, and they're not going to turn away a nice Stanley tumbler or coffee or candy, but, but the thing that's going to really sustain them is going to be that validation, absolutely. Yeah, so Well, I

Jennifer Baldwin 24:56

love that you came and spent time with us. Traci, we i. Think this was an amazing conversation. And again, I think we could probably talk for another hour or two about all of the things that school school counselors do and this amazing role that you're in. But we appreciate you, and we thank you so much for being with us.

Natalie Howard 25:12

Yes, thank you so much. Traci, happy school counselors. Week wants a school counselor, always

Traci Smith 25:17

a school counselor, that's right. So thank you all alright.

Natalie Howard 25:21

You take care and we're going to see you guys next yeah, I'll see you next time. Bye.