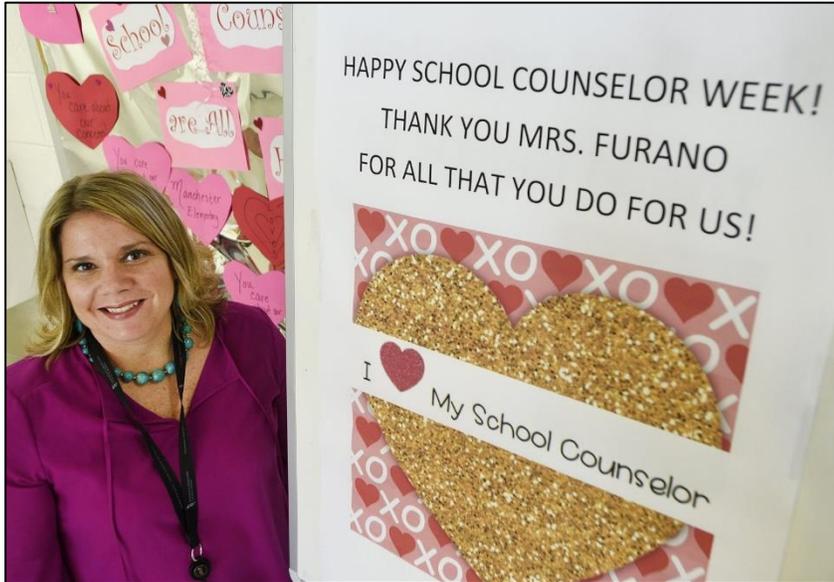


School counselors use collaboration

Manchester Elementary's Furano among staffers honored this week

By Catalina Righter, Carroll County Times



Manchester Elementary School is recognizing counselor, Gwen Furano, for National School Counseling Week, February 4th through 8th.
(Dylan Slagle/Carroll County Times)

Gwen Furano, counselor at Manchester Elementary School, didn't grow up knowing she wanted to be a school counselor.

"I wasn't born thinking this was going to be my thing. I knew I wanted to be a helper. I just didn't know how," she said.

She has been the school's counselor for the past 14 years after finishing her first master's degree at Penn State University.

"I've been able to be here and watch the school grow," she said.

She recently earned a M.Ed. with a Teacher as Leader in Autism Spectrum Disorder Concentration from Towson University and is also a nationally certified counselor.

National School Counseling Week, celebrated Feb. 4-8 this year, is a chance to recognize counselors for their contributions, according to sponsor the American School Counselor's Association. This year's theme for National School Counseling Week is "School Counselors: Providing lessons for life." The goal is to "focus public attention on the tremendous impact school counselors can have in helping students achieve school success and plan for a career."

Over at Manchester Elementary, students and teachers will notice more citrusy decor because Furano chose to focus on the classic advice to make lemons into lemonade for the week.

In school counselor's terms, this is an example of growth mindset — the idea that work and perseverance — a skill for students that she has focused on in the school for about three years.

Many students have been learning these concepts as they take on more complicated schoolwork and personal relationships as they get older.

Growth mindset can help with career, academic and social/emotional development, the three big goals for school counselors outlined by Carroll County Public Schools.

A wall decoration she made in the hallway shows lemon thoughts and lemonade thoughts.

"I failed," reads one phrase written on a lemon. Next to it, a pitcher of lemonade reads, "My mistakes help me grow."

"I'm the best at this," reads one lemon.

"I can always improve and I'm going to keep trying," says the lemonade.

The collaboration between her as a counselor and the teachers she works with is important.

You might be able to tell Furano's feeling on this looking at the teacher's mailboxes in the main office. In each, there is a water bottle and a packet of lemonade mix with a note thanking them for being one of the people who help students turn lemons into lemonade.

Manchester Elementary is the biggest elementary school in Carroll County Public Schools with about 650 students.

Furano is tasked with being the counselor for all of them.

"Carroll County Public Schools is amazing. And I love working here," she said. But the American School Counseling Association recommends 250 students to one counselor, "so we're not meeting that at all. So that means that I have 654 students on my caseload. And yeah, it's hard to meet all the needs of all of those students all the time."

One thing that's helping her is the collaboration of teachers, administration and other members of the school community that she works with.

Through CCPS Supervisor of School Counseling Judy Klinger, there has been a push for trauma-sensitive classrooms, Furano said.

This can help educators recognize when a child is struggling and know what to say.

"Teachers keep on saying kids are coming in with more and more social [and] emotional needs. And there's only one of me," Furano said. "So we have to train the teachers to understand how to handle these students sometimes because we can't be sending them all out of class."

At the free, half-day training offered on the topic, Furano saw teachers, administrators, nurses, psychologists and an assortment of people working in schools.

"So it's getting into the hands of the right people. That's all through Judy Klinger and the school counselors putting all that together and getting that out there to people," she said.

"We have limited resources but we're still trying to meet the need as much as we can. You know, it'll always be great to have more people, but still I think that they're doing a really nice job with this training in particular."

The number one goal is to build a relationship with the students.

"Teachers always ask, 'How do I have time when I have 25 students in my class?'... But in reality, building relationships might just be that every morning, you stand by the door and you greet every student as they walk in. Because maybe they haven't gotten one 'Hello' or 'Good morning' from a single person that cares until they walk in your room.

"And that might be enough to build that kid and make him want to come to school. So it sounds simple, but it can go a long way," she said.

From trauma to everyday outbursts, one of the focuses is teaching kids how to self-soothe. In elementary school terms, this might appear as the calm-down corner, a little space in every elementary classroom where kids can go when they're feeling upset or tense.

"How can you get yourself to the calm down area so that you can self-soothe and then come back to instruction and never have to leave the room?"

And it's not just kids who need a calm down corner. Sometimes teachers use it, too.

"That has been the best teaching tool that I've seen happen," she said.

As a counselor, "I think support from your teachers is huge. And I have that here. My staff is amazing. Support from my administration is awesome," she said.

The need for trauma awareness rises as the effect of opioid use in communities ripples out into the school system with harsh impact on students when loved ones are using.

Furano said she sees higher numbers of students whose parents are no longer able to care for them and now stay with other family members. In the worst cases, students might experience the death of a parent from overdose.

She has seen three overdose deaths from parents this year and five the year before, the most she has ever experienced.

The Handle With Care Maryland program is another new program this year and allows law enforcement to notify schools when an event like an overdose or domestic violence happened in a home with children.

"I mean you want to talk about trauma ... a kid might be acting out and we had no idea what was really going on with that family," Furano said.

Even if they don't know the details of the incident, the program notifies the school and lets them know to give a child extra care after a traumatic event.

The mental health concerns of younger and younger children have also come to the forefront in the years since Furnano has been in the field. The increased awareness is a good thing and can help caretakers intervene early, she said.

"I appreciate that we can talk about a child having anxiety and depression and not make it seem like it's a taboo thing or it's something that's wrong," she said. "We can talk about them going to see a counselor the same as them going to see a doctor for a cold. That did not used to be that way, 14 years ago, for sure.

"If we catch them young and we help them young, then hopefully by the time they get to middle and high school, we've got that under control, and they can stay in school and they can be able to have the services they need," she said.

Right now, there is a need for more outside services. Many agencies have months-long waiting, she said.

"We're getting there," she said. "There is hope. There're definitely ways we need to improve, but there's a lot of good stuff going on in Carroll County."

Her advice for young counselors? "If you want to make a difference and you want to be a helper, then I think that education is a field to go into."

"But I think you also have to have the mindset that you need to take care of yourself," she said. "If you want to be in a helping profession, you just have to remember that you also need to help yourself."

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