

CUSD Cares Podcast

What is a counselor? How can they help you?

Season 1, Episode 1 – Recorded May 2019

Music:	00:00	[Music].
Brenda Ramos:	00:06	Well, greetings everybody. This is Brenda Ramos, and welcome to our CUSD Cares podcast. I'm the Director of Counseling and Social Services. This is our very first podcast which we're very excited to be able to bring to parents and community members, topics that impact parents and students that we need to educate them about as it relates to counseling and social services within CUSD. So it's a great opportunity for us to connect with everybody during a time in which is most convenient for them. Today, we are just super excited because the topic of what is a counselor and what do they do is going to be our topic of discussion today. And we have an amazing, amazing individual with us today Anna Cicero. She is a 30 year veteran of -- actually she's been a teacher as well as a school counselor. And Anna, welcome to CUSD Cares podcast. We're so excited to have you.
Anna Cicero:	01:07	Thank you Brenda. Thank you for inviting me. I'm excited to be here.
Brenda Ramos:	01:11	Well, we know we could talk on and on and go on forever about the role of the counselor and just making sure that people understand what it is that they do and how they can help our students. But you know, we have a limited time today, so we're going to try to keep it to the nuts and bolts to make sure everybody has a good understanding. But if you could share a little bit about yourself Anna, because I know that on top of being, an expert school counselor as well as a former educator and our public schools, you also are very involved with the American School Counseling Association -- which is our professional organization -- and doing still continue to do the hard work even after you have long done the work of being a school counselor at the schools. But share a little bit with everybody about what it was that you did.
Anna Cicero:	02:01	Yeah. And just a little bit, so that we can be here and give the parents what they want to hear. School counselor at teacher from the heart. And all these years of working with students. At

the same time advocating for students. I have spent quite a bit of time doing that in terms of, you know, be making sure that we have plenty of school counselors in the state of Arizona to address the students' academic, social-emotional and career needs.

Brenda Ramos: 02:30

Which is so important. Getting them connected with all those pieces. I'd like to first start off with, because I know your experiences are vast from K all the way through 12th grade. If you could share with us the role of the counselor as it pertains to what it looks like in our schools. For any parents that, you know, are kind of inquisitive as to that extra person that has an office in the main office, and all the hats that they wear -- because we know they wear quite many.

Anna Cicero: 03:00

Yes. Well, keeping in mind that there are various schools, and their operations can be very similar as you well know, Brenda and parents, and the primary reason once again is for the school counselor to be supportive of the student, and to be able to offer that support in the academic area -- if they're passing their classes, making sure their classes are aligned with their future goals, whether a career or college. And second to that is making sure that the students are also socially and emotionally strong so that they're able to handle the stresses of everyday life. And as well as their academic life. A lot of times the students need that trusting relationship with their school counselor, and they need to know, "Where is my school counselor? And, what can they help me with?" So that's what I can see is their major role.

Brenda Ramos: 03:57

And that's half the battle, I think. You know, we have amazing group of counselors over a hundred in the district and I know that they play many different roles within a school setting, and do so many things for -- not just students but our families -- but sometimes it's just the student being connected to know who is that person, what do they do, how do I find them and how can I have time with them? So I know that the school counselor is very strategic in providing classroom lessons, so that they're in front of students, right? So that they can see that, hey, they're an added bonus to that school and providing some instruction. A lot of times it's in one of those three domains, as you mentioned, the academic development side, right? Supporting possibly study skills, possibly organization, sometimes career development, exploring what career options, or what are the things that I like and dislike in addition to that social-emotional piece, right? The personal-social as to, what do I do when I don't get along with my friend, or when my friends aren't talking to me? And putting them right in front of those -- in those classrooms and providing those types of lessons. I don't know if

you can share with us, you know, a typical day, or maybe some ideas as to what we would see in each of the three different levels in which a lesson would be delivered by a school counselor.

- Anna Cicero: 05:24 Yeah, very simply, and because of the time, I would like to just share with you that indeed, because my experience with elementary schools, I love it when my school counselor at the time I was in elementary school would come around and check on the kids, and have that triangle of communication between the parents, the student and the school counselor and the teacher. And that was a wonderful, wonderful experience that I had.
- Brenda Ramos: 05:52 You mean the counselor that knows all the secrets and what's going on on the playground?
- Anna Cicero: 05:56 Exactly. So exactly a visibility there. You mentioned it for us to hang out. Sometimes I used to have to do, you know, recess duty and for the counselor to hang out with the teacher and be able to be out there and saying, you know, we have had a little problem with some bullying, and possibly, there may be some characters out there that we need to kind of focus and keep an eye on. So that sort of strategy and an idea that can diffuse things before they become very, very big things on the playground in a fight ensues or something like that. Now in the classroom, the counselor would always be able to come around and say, "Let me borrow your kids." But it's a structure, actually. It was just a funny way that we would put it, that we would lend each other our students to be able to address what are some good ways... what about respect, about, you know, how do you get along? How do you make a friend, are you having some issues? You know, one of the neatest activities that I saw one of my school counselors do is they had the little white index cards and they would hand one of those to all the kids in the classroom. And then they would ask, answer this question by the end of the day: "I wish my teacher would know that ... " And the students would write something down. Whether it was that I had a headache all day or that somebody called me a name at the cafeteria or something related to maybe a preoccupation they had all day long. And then the counselor would, you know, separate the issues and try to talk about having the kids come up with ideas how to address those, you know.
- Brenda Ramos: 07:36 Open ended.
- Anna Cicero: 07:37 Open ended.

Brenda Ramos: 07:38 Because a lot of times kids want to share so much with us. And sometimes us just by providing that opportunity for them to, hey, here's a window of opportunity for them to share. Right?

Anna Cicero: 07:49 Exactly.

Brenda Ramos: 07:49 And then he wants to be heard.

Anna Cicero: 07:52 Exactly. Brenda, you know, we are talking to parents, too. And the parents can have a stack of index cards and they're, as they're cooking dinner at home and be able to, you know, say to the kids when they're... "Hey, I'm glad we're all home. Let's get ready for the homework. But before you do that, let me give you an index card or something, and write down something that you wish you had told your teacher at the end of the day." So as a parent idea also, not just for the school counselor.

Brenda Ramos: 08:17 Great conversation starters, that's for sure.

Anna Cicero: 08:19 Yes.

Brenda Ramos: 08:19 I know probably the most crucial time, or the time in which I think is most developmentally probably challenging for our students is at junior high, middle school time. And there are so many changes that happen, not just physically, but emotionally. Right, too. I mean, we all can, we all don't, you know, certainly when we think about that time in our lives, don't wish to go back to that time. Right? As you're trying to find yourself, you know, when you think about the role of the counselor in a junior high setting, what are some things that come to mind that you would want parents to know as to what that school counselors being very strategic about and working on in a junior high setting?

Anna Cicero: 09:00 At the junior high setting, we continue to work with the academics. I want to reinforce that. The career development, finding out where the kid's interests are, lining them up with the proper coursework and things like that that are going to go lead them to acquiring the skills that they need to be successful in those careers. And then also the social-emotional, and what the kids in junior high would call the "drama stuff."

Brenda Ramos: 09:25 Yeah, they do refer to it as "drama" sometimes, don't they.

Anna Cicero: 09:27 I guess what I would encourage parents to do, is really listen to their students when they come home. And the counselor is there to have, you know, a short term type of counseling with

the student if they're want to learn some skills in how to deal with a situation a little bit better, how to cope with something that maybe they don't have control over. And we are there for the students. In many junior highs, a lot of the school counselors will do some groups, and once the student is identified. So the communication that I would encourage the parent to have is to really be on top of what that school counselor offers. Not only there at the site, at the school, but also some of the wraparound services that are within the community that they can also be able to use. One phrase that I want to make sure that in junior high is not ignored: "the tattletale."

- Brenda Ramos: 10:20 Yeah.
- Anna Cicero: 10:22 You know, we have many times told our little children -- I'm a grandma, I'm a mom -- that you shouldn't tattle. Well, you know, tattling sometimes is okay.
- Brenda Ramos: 10:33 Right.
- Anna Cicero: 10:34 And be able to say what is going on. Be able to say it at the appropriate time to the appropriate trusted individual.
- Brenda Ramos: 10:41 Yeah. Knowing when to ask for help, right?
- Anna Cicero: 10:45 Yes.
- Brenda Ramos: 10:45 Knowing sometimes is a big, it's a big thing, big message that we certainly want to communicate and them knowing who to reach out to for help, because sometimes it's, "I'm not quite sure if I should say something or not." Right? In that student's eyes. But absolutely, it is just such a pivotal time for a lot of students, that sense of belonging and wanting to fit in, and be like everybody else. Or we're thinking that everybody is looking at you right? When we all know they're very self-absorbed with what's going on with themselves. So we move on to high school. Wow. And you would think, great, four years... But they fly by. I know you've had children of your own that are now grown, and I have as well. But it's such an important time for them as far as planning for their future. When you look at the role of the counselor at the high school age, what would you say is the most crucial piece that you would want parents to know as to how that counselor can be of service to the student and the parent?

Anna Cicero: 11:43 "Engage" is the key word. Engage from the beginning. Read every piece of paper that comes home. You know how sometimes as parents we run out of time to do things.

Brenda Ramos: 11:57 So true. Our lives are so busy.

Anna Cicero: 11:59 And to be able to say that eventually I'm going to get to that little piece of paper that said something about how the parent can be engaged, or how the student and the teacher and the school counselor can work together at addressing future issues or academic issues of the moment. And you know, when you want to review their progress report, tackle it immediately when the school is sending you, you know -- thank goodness for technology nowadays.

Brenda Ramos: 12:27 Yeah, with the online communication, but it's often very overwhelming, especially with a lot of junk mail.

Anna Cicero: 12:33 Exactly. That is, but the student portal or something along the lines of that, staying on top of that, that to me, as the school counselor, I would see that as a really big, big engagement moment for starting with ninth grade all the way through the 12th grade year for graduation. Counselors are there. They're going to work with you, and parent nights are a perfect time to be able to do that. But don't wait for parent night, pick up the phone, make an appointment. Your child has been assigned to a school counselor ,or one that you best work with --

Brenda Ramos: 13:05 Yeah, and knowing who that is. Right and where to find and locate that person or that individual. So that is important. I know there are other topics that we as a department have been trying to put forward. Let me know -- more prevention is making sure to provide parents with education and prevention, you know, from all variety of topics. And sometimes your student may not be experiencing that, but it's good to know and be in the loop as to what's happening on that school campus as far as education and outreach is concerned. So in case a parent - - because we can all learn from each other. Isn't that the truth?

Anna Cicero: 13:42 That certainly is. They can share ideas, and we can just move forward with the students in such a much better way as a team rather than individually trying to figure out things.

Brenda Ramos: 13:54 Yeah. And we know that parents out there, they tend to rely on each other, which -- that's great, because when one knows one piece of information, hopefully they pass it on to five friends, or at least whether to social media and/or actual, you know,

however they communicate -- through a phone call. But making sure that we're all staying connected, so that the student can, you know, have a good, fruitful and positive experience at the high school. Because isn't that what we want? We want them to connect and belong and understand that this is a place for them, so that when they do fly their wings, which -- it seems like it's in the blink of an eye, doesn't it?

- Anna Cicero: 14:32 It goes very fast. It's like my daughter's years went really fast. I know four years go very fast.
- Brenda Ramos: 14:38 And that's why you're still hanging out.
- Anna Cicero: 14:43 And I will!
- Brenda Ramos: 14:44 But what would you know as we think about it, I hope people in listening to this podcast have gotten a little snippet of an idea of what counselors do. I know certainly we could go on and on talking about it more in detail, but what would we want parents to know as far as, you know, whether it's resources or pieces of information that we want them to have as takeaways, as to how that school counselor can best help them or best be of guidance to them.
- Anna Cicero: 15:16 Yes. If we just break it down into three areas in academics, I remember sitting with kids and still teaching them how of study. We have that ability to do that, to review that. And then holding a little bit of an academic plan for them, creating one in the presence of the parent, and being able to say at home, here's what we want them to do and this is what's going to give them better results. Calling for a teacher parent conference at the high school is the most exciting time. Even though the kids say, "I'm too old for that." No you're not.
- Brenda Ramos: 15:51 They certainly do say that, don't they? And "I don't want us to be engaged."
- Anna Cicero: 15:55 Exactly. And I have seen such great results when we finally all come to the table and we sit down with the teachers and the student in front, and sometimes the kids ask, "Do I have to come to that?"
- Brenda Ramos: 16:08 Right?
- Anna Cicero: 16:08 I said, "Yes, you do. You are the key. It is about you. It is about you." And to be able to hear from the teachers and how wonderful it is to close the door behind there, all the other, you

know, noise that the students face every, every day and be able to just focus on what needs to be done -- in something that is realistic. So that would be the academic piece. And the many resources that the school has: to help after school, help before school, academic repairing of credits that have been lost.

- Brenda Ramos: 16:42 And it's a plethora of choices, ideas. Sometimes you know, students don't even know where to begin sometimes, right? Because there's so many opportunities, and sometimes it's just making that connection. I agree with you, Anna, about engagement being highly important. I think the older they get, the more and more they need us even though they want it...
- Anna Cicero: 17:02 And it does become overwhelming for the students. And if we break it down in little chunks, you know that that's always a very good thing to do. And sitting down saying, "This week we're going to tackle that, and next week is going to be this," and then they feel this weight from their shoulders that gets lifted, and they're able to get better results. So that would be in the academic. You want me to share something with you in terms of the social emotional?
- Brenda Ramos: 17:28 Absolutely. Why don't we, I think that'd be a great, you know, just a great example that parents can walk away with.
- Anna Cicero: 17:34 Yes. Parents. Social-emotional things. Well, we all know that suicide is a very, very difficult topic. This presentation is not, this podcast is not about suicide, but that is a ideation that students have in many cases. And the social-emotional piece needs to be addressed. The mental health piece needs to be addressed at the school. The student needs to have that trusting relationship with the school counselor and the teachers that they see every day. And the teachers need to know the resources available, that they can also send the student to the counselor and be able to reinforce that. Teachers are busy, they are on the bell schedule, and sometimes the bell rings and, "Oh, I forgot to get to speak to Johnny. And he had a question about something that happened," and they're down the hallway now. And so the social-emotional pieces are very critical that we address, because students are hurting out there. And I don't have to tell the parents the things that have been on the media, the things that they hear the students intake with technology or the social media that goes on. And the kids are hurting, either by their own peers or by things they hear.
- Brenda Ramos: 18:46 The things are experiencing, which is unfortunate. And we certainly want to convey a message that they can overcome it. That resiliency piece, which is incredibly important for them to

know that they are loved and cared for and supported. So I just cannot say enough about, you know, students being able to know where to go and have someone to trust at the school that they can reach out to, so that next steps can be taken whatever those next steps look like. Because sometimes it's just connecting with somebody and having that opportunity to be heard. And sometimes that's all it takes. Right?

- Anna Cicero: 19:28 Yes, yes. And to the parents, I don't want to miscommunicate that the schools are going to now take over some therapeutic family situation that is going to be longterm. That is not the case.
- Brenda Ramos: 19:40 No, we're there to support the student.
- Anna Cicero: 19:41 Supporting the student, and as well to wrap around those services and community resources that can continue to help the complete family, if the issue has to do with family issues.
- Brenda Ramos: 19:52 And we're so lucky we live in a community, Chandler. I mean, I cannot tell you how incredibly blessed, because we live in a community in which we have so many different services and opportunities for parents to reach out to different organizations and/or professionals that work within our city in which our families can reach out to, to get some extra support for their student, whatever that might look like. So we are really, really fortunate to be in that space. So, I just have to say, I feel incredibly privileged to be able to have this conversation with you, for you to share a little bit of these tidbits about, you know, the role of a counselor, what they do. Some of the things they experience, what the focus should be, right, as far as from a parent lens. And of course every student is different. We know there's no cookie cutter, you know, easy answer. But we also know that, parents know their students best.
- Anna Cicero: 20:56 Yes, they do.
- Brenda Ramos: 20:57 They're at the front line and we rely on them heavily to make sure that we do a good job with their kids because they entrust us with their most precious gifts, their children.
- Anna Cicero: 21:07 Right. That is correct.
- New Speaker: 21:07 So, we, we just thank you parents for trusting in us and, and allowing us to do the important work with your students. But I just -- any last minute -- Anna, you know that, that we want to

make sure parents either know, what parents can do to support their students. Any last minute information?

- Anna Cicero: 21:29 I do have one thing, which would be my third development, that would be the career and college. You know, that is why we send students to school. Yeah, isn't it?
- Brenda Ramos: 21:39 I think it is. I want to know, right? What do you want to be when you grow up? That infamous question in kindergarten that we ask!
- Anna Cicero: 21:45 We'll teach them the skills to get there. The social-emotional will remove the barriers. So they make sure they stay the course, and in the end, the introduction and the exploration in different grade levels of the actual career or choices that they make for college. And to be honest with you, the schools, the high schools provide such a wonderful, varied, career areas. And school counselors will help the students through interest inventories, through planning out their Education and Career Action Plan, which is the ECAP that the State Department of Education has laid out for the students.
- Brenda Ramos: 22:25 Yeah. The Education Career Action Plan is something that we heavily focus at the junior high because we know it's at time to explore. And we know students choose careers that they're most interested in... However, it's because they're most, they are typically the careers out there they have the most contact with or exposed to.
- Anna Cicero: 22:43 Yes.
- Brenda Ramos: 22:44 So if we don't expose them to all the other things that they don't know about, sometimes they don't know what they don't know. Right? And they can't choose it!
- Anna Cicero: 22:50 Exactly. And the community in Chandler provides so many wonderful summer programs they'd tie in to their future goals, and activities like coding and technology and just a whole lot of things.
- Brenda Ramos: 23:03 In the arts.
- Anna Cicero: 23:03 In the arts.
- Brenda Ramos: 23:06 There's so much, right.?

Anna Cicero: 23:06 Exactly. And I want to make sure the parents know that, you know, the earlier we begin to connect a student with the academics, with the things that they're going to have laid out, or want to do in the future, some realistic plan is created... And then that's the hook for them to be able to stay more focused and maybe not so overwhelmed with the fact that maybe they broke up with their boyfriend or you know, some of the other social things that come in the way -- or minor.

Brenda Ramos: 23:36 Yeah, I know, you know, more major at that moment. And what we want students to understand is you don't have to be good at everything, right? We all have talents. And so really focusing on what your talents are and what you're good at and picking things that, you know, eventually careers that focus on those talents and those strengths that you have. Because we certainly want them to walk away knowing it's great to be a well-rounded individual, but what are your talents? What are your gifts? So that that is something that, you know, we can certainly highlight and make sure we take a look and see. You know, I'm so glad you've touched upon the three domains of academic career and personal social, development because that is certainly the focus of every school counselor in our district, to make sure that we're touching upon that and making sure that, you know, we do the right prevention work so that students are able to receive instruction when they're sitting in the classroom, and getting all the gobs of information that they need to get so that they can produce and show mastery of their work. But, we really want parents to know we care about your student, you know. And the counselor is just another person that's part of that team that's there to help and support. So we are just incredibly appreciative that you were able to join us today, Anna, and sharing a little bit, you know, your expertise and your world of knowledge as from the school counselor lens. And parents, there's more information to come on our school district website under the Counseling and Social Services Department as there is, a page solely for you parents and community members to be able to connect with us so that we can make sure that our students are acting, receiving and empowering them so that they can serve our community. But, feel free to follow us on Twitter at the CUSD Counseling and Social Services (@CUSDcounseling) and Chandler Unified School District (@ChandlerUnified). But, we hope to run into you at some point or another and give us your feedback, either in regards to this podcast or of course, and into some of the things that we do, whether it's providing training or education or outreach. But, I appreciate your time. I just ask that you join us again at our next podcast at CUSD Cares. So thank you so much. Thank you, Anna.

Anna Cicero: 25:53 Thank your parents and thank you, Brenda.

Music: 25:56 [Music]