

Meet the Counselors Coffee

12th September, 2025

The Pyle Middle School Counselors play an important role in your child's experience in Middle School from academic advisement to peer conflict resolution. The Pyle Counseling department is committed to providing educational, social and emotional support for all students. The counselors shared an overview of the counseling department focusing on its programmes and services. The presentation was packed with helpful advice, information, resources and tips that parents need as their children navigate middle school at Pyle.

The following topics were covered in the presentation:

- A. Introductions
- B. Counseling Advisory Committee
- C. Individual counseling
- D. Small and Large group Counseling
- E. Team and academic involvement
- F. Scheduling
- G. Cell Phones
- H. Career Coach
- I. Family Engagement Specialist
- J. FAQs
- K. After school activities
- L. Upcoming events
- M. Unsolicited Tips for Parents
- N. How can you help?

A. Introductions

The School Administration Team of Chris Nardi (Principal), Lauren Stuckey (6th grade assistant principal), Stacey Noonan (7th grade assistant principal), Michelle Harmon (7th Grade assistant principal) and Jason Laraia (Assistant School Administrator) were introduced to the Parent Community.



Pyle Administration Team

The Pyle Counseling Team was introduced to the Parent Community. The Counselors move with the grade so they see the batch of children through 3 years of Middle School. This year, Ms. Castellani and Ms. Vogel will be the 6th grade counselors and Mr. William Dyer has joined the team as an intern, Ms. Huck and Ms. Sonnabend will be the 7th grade counselors, and Ms. Barrios and Mr. Stakem will be the 8th grade counselors.



Pyle Counseling Team



Mr. William Dyer

Intern with Pyle Counseling Team

The counseling secretaries, Donna McLelland and Ana J. Rivas were introduced to the parent community and they can be contacted on 240-740-3510.



Donna Ms. Lelland



Ana J. Rivas

The Pyle Counseling Office's vision was shared which is that students will be equipped to be mentors, lifelong learners, kind and global citizens who will make successful transitions to post secondary options. Every student will leave middle school with

increased 21st century skills including a focus on grit, growth mindset, digital citizenship, collaboration and an appreciation of others. The Counseling department stresses student development in three major areas-academic achievement, career and educational decision making and personal, social and emotional growth. The counselors help students adjust to Middle School, and work with teachers to help students improve academic achievement, assess student aptitude and interests, reinforce problem solving, and decision-making skills, help students discover their strengths and weaknesses and assist students with problem solving and conflict resolution and encourage them to become their own advocates.

The counseling Team set the stage by explaining that adolescent children experience rapid growth than any other time in their life other than from birth to the age of 3. All students experience stress, attention and anxiety issues, they push boundaries and act impulsively. This is a very stressful time for both the children and parents. It was shared that Pyle's counseling team had 125 years of combined counseling experience.

Pyle Counseling Team

Randi Vogel-6th Grade Counselor (Last names A-N)

Christine Castellano-6th Grade Counselor (Last names O-Z)

Katie Sonnabend-7th Grade Counselor (Last names A-M)

Erika Huck-7th Grade Counselor (Last names N-Z)

Julie Barrios-8th Grade Counselor (Last names A-J)

Ricky Stakem-8th Grade Counselor (Last names K-Z)

B. Counseling Advisory Committee

The Counseling Advisory Committee (CAC) introduced the work of the Committee including organizing talks for the parent community on issues that impact the social and emotional well-being of students. The Committee also provides a platform for parents to engage with the student community through Career and Culture lunches, Board Game Lunches and the upkeep of the Zen Den. The Committee shared information about the events organized over the last year including talks by area experts many of whom have authored books. The committee requested parents

interested in volunteering to sign up during the event. Please contact CAC Chairs, Sushmitha Paidi on sushmitha.paidi@gmail.com and Nina Kutty on nina.kutty@gmail.com if you are interested in volunteering for the following. A virtual information meet will be held on **Friday, 19th of September, @ 12 pm for interested volunteers**, and details will be shared on Pyle A to Z in the CAC section.

Culture Lunch- Showcase your Country, share information on your country's history, culture, traditions and cuisine.

Career Lunch-Share your career journeys, talk about your middle school, high school and college experience

Board game Lunches- Parent volunteers are needed to Check out and Check in board games to students during lunch break on Tuesdays

Book Club for Parents- We are piloting a book club for parents this year, on themes that are relevant to the middle school years and the discussion will be facilitated by the counseling office.

Contribute materials to the Zen Den (bean bags, artificial plants, Colouring material, Fidget Toys, Books, Rubix cubes) and Board Games (Chess, UNO, Connect 4, Playing card Decks, Trivia Games, Jenga). You can drop them off at the Counseling Office.

C. Individual Counseling

Middle School Years are very bumpy, the students have lot of things on their mind, and the counselors see students for a wide range of issues-academic issues, friendship issues, issues with parents, anything that takes their mind off focusing in class. Counselors work with them on problem solving, brainstorm with the kid and help them come up with a road map to work through the issue so they can get back to class and focus.

To access individual counseling, the students need to sign up for a meeting with the counselor, colour coded (different colour for each counselor) sign-up sheets with 15-20 min slots are available at the counseling office. The Counselors encourage students

to sign up for time slots that don't eat into their core academic classes (i.e. during interact, panther pause, lunch, before sport or after sport, during PE or electives etc.) where the cumulation of work is not difficult so they don't fall behind in academics and get more stressed. The sign- up sheets are for the next day, so the first period teacher will hand them the blue pass that they hand over to the teacher they have at the assigned time and they are excused so they can meet the counselor.



Student-Counselor Appointment

Student's Name _____

Period / Teacher _____

Conference Date _____ Time _____

Counselor _____

Teacher's Initials _____

Reason/Topic _____ Counselor's Initials _____

YOU MUST CHECK IN WITH YOUR TEACHER BEFORE YOUR APPOINTMENT

If the issue the student is experiencing at hand is more urgent, like the students got into a fight and can't get to the next class, the counselors will prioritize to see them that day.

Students might meet the school counselor for a variety of students, some students are able to advocate for themselves and some are shy, so Counselors also check-in with students. Students reach out to the Counselors for issues such as friendship fires which counselors help navigate one on one, or with the parties concerned, ups and downs in the family, changes in the family such as arrival of a new baby, illness, a sibling going off to college, and anything that causes stress, stress about grades, goals for the year, students might be fixated on getting straight A's, the Counselors help students manage expectations and if there are any general questions, the Counselors can guide them to the right person.

If your child is meeting with Counselor, the Counselors maintain confidentiality so the child knows that what is discussed is between the student and the Counselor, and that the Counselors can be trusted, but there are times when Counselors feel that bringing in the parents or a teacher will help resolve the issue, so the Counselors ask the student if they would like to bring the parents/teacher in. There are exceptions to the

Confidentiality when it involves the child's safety, if they are hurting themselves or somebody is hurting them or they are hurting somebody else, the Counselors will step in and reach out to parents to ensure that everybody is safe.

D. Small and Large Group Counseling

The counseling Department also offers small group counseling to let kids know that there are issues being faced by a larger group of students, and that they are not alone in their troubles. These groups include how to manage stress, what does stress look like, grief groups for kids struggling with big losses in their life, friendship groups, how to make friends and keep friends, solve friendship fires and handle change in families. The Counselors reach out to parents, students and teachers to check if a particular group will be useful for students. The Counselors meet the group once a week over a period of 6-8 weeks with goals and they keep track to make sure they accomplish the goals.

All new students at Pyle in 7th and 8th grade have cookies with the Counselors where they discuss where they are from and share how they are doing, if they are facing any challenges etc.

Apart from individual counseling and small group counseling the Counselors reach out to all students for social emotional learning during Panther Pause on Fridays, where lessons, community circles and discussions are organized based on need. The counseling team survey students and speak with teachers on how things are going. Kids are at a developmental stage where they can and need to be able to talk through how they manage their relationships with one another, how they have healthy friendships, where they set boundaries, their self-esteem is intact and they are communicating effectively. This is a very difficult stage in their development where they are discovering who they are, who they want to be around and distancing themselves from people who are not like them which is not always easy.

Pyle is a school of 1300 students, where diversity is embraced, honored and respected and that is something the school is very proud of. The Counseling team conducts surveys asking kids if they feel comfortable in school, if they have friends, if they feel

students are good to one another, if they feel secure and valued, and in general, kids rate Pyle high on that, which is very heartening as the school puts in a lot of effort into creating that kind of environment. The Counselling Team also reaches out to the parent community to hear what is going on in the community as that feedback informs the programmes. Kids will screw up and make mistakes, and Parents need to be reassured that the counseling team is there to help the kids do better next time.

The Counseling Team shared the following initiatives to promote wellness and manage stress-

Zen Den- a quiet zone, with dimmed lighting, for kids to take a 10 min break and reset. The zone is available for one person at a time, with colouring material, fidget toys, a piano and there is a Counselor sitting outside offering an opportunity to talk so the student knows that there is a Counselor available to talk to them. In order to access the Zen Den, the student goes to the counseling office and requests for time in the Zen Den.

Dog Day -with Therapy Dog Koda is offered on Tuesdays during Interact and Panther Pause, and is a great way for students to unwind and socialize and Koda brings love and joy to the school to access time with Koda, the Counseling Office offers timed passes because he is so popular.

E. Team and Group Level Involvement

Every student in Pyle is a member of a grade level team and each grade has 2 teams, the team leader is the closest to a 5th grade class teacher, so in a large middle school setting of 1250 students, they are grouped into a team of 200-210 students where have feel a sense of belonging. The Counselors have weekly meetings with the team leaders to check in on how the students are doing, if they have any concerns, if the students are meeting behavioral expectations, completing assignments, and based on the discussions, the Counselors reach out to parents and schedule parent conferences, so they can strategies together, and identify what extra support can be provided by the teachers and the parents, and to help the student be successful.

Parents can also reach to team leader and school counselor if they have concerns with homework hour or issues across classes. If issues continue to persist and students are not responding, the counseling team reaches out to Pyle's Student welfare team or Pyle's education management team, which include the school psychologist, people personnel worker, special education team, and parents will also be invited to provide support.

F. Scheduling

Counselors visit classes in January to share courses for next year and explain how to request them. Pyle Counselors meet grade 6 and 7 students and Whitman Counselors meet Grade 8 Students. The course requests are due in February and are assigned by April. They can be viewed on Parent Vue and kids receive their schedule on the first day of school.

G. Cell Phone Policy

The new cell phone policy aligns with the MCPS Policy, and states that cell phones are not to be out during the school day. The new policy recognizes the fact that it is not good for kids to have access to cell phones in schools, it distracts them and impairs their ability to focus and engage in classroom activities. The cell phones can be left at home as the school has phones in the main office that students can use of parents can use to contact students. If the student needs to bring the phone to school, the phone needs to be kept in the locker and out of sight. Studnets cannot have their phones out during the school day, even to check time as we have clocks in the classrooms. If the cell phones are out, the teacher may confiscate and leave them at the Main Office for student to pick up at the end of day.

H. Career Coach

Career Coach Leean Jack introduced herself and explained that she was appointed under the Montgomery County Career Advisory Program (MOCOCAP), a new innovative, collaborative effort spearheaded by WorkSource Montgomery, MCPS and Montgomery College. The multi-phase state wide programme places career coaches in Middle and High School to work with students of Grade 6-12 to explore their interests, values and strengths, and provide them with personalized career advisement to prepare them for college and the workforce.

I. Family Engagement Specialist

Family engagement specialist Lan Nguyen introduced herself and the role she will play to work with staff and parents/guardians to improve student academic performance and overall well-being. She will serve as a bridge to foster understanding and help parents adapt to the school's culture and expectations. She will also help connect families to resources and assist with communication between families and school.

Lan Nguyen can be contacted on 240-550-3954 and lan_n_nguyen@mcpsmd.org

J. Frequently Asked Questions

- **How do counselors and school administrators handle student issues related to online communication?**

If something happens outside of school such as cyber bullying it trickles inside school and impacts students and their ability to focus in School, so it is important the Counselors address it. When students come to the Counselors, they are always reassured that we will not do anything without their permission, so they feel safe and know that they can trust them, and the Counselors ensure that they feel comfortable about the next steps. The Counselors will encourage students to talk to parents, and if it's something Parents notice at home, they could reach out to Counselors or the school administrators and if it crosses a line and is harassment, Parents can speak to

school administrators, or speak to the social media site and ask them to take it down, and if another child is perpetuating it, pls speak to the child's parents, they are first people who can help make it stop. The counseling team takes a team approach and when the student approaches them, or parent come to them, they we will work together as a team.

- **What do I do if my child is having trouble with a teacher?**

If your child is having trouble with a teacher, please encourage your child to reach out to the teacher in person or through email before you intervene. The Counselors would like to instill the confidence in the child that they can handle the problems on their own, parents can guide children, help them construct an email, assist with communication, recommend the next step etc. The Counselors can also help mediate if student is scared/shy to go to the teacher especially with 6th graders, the Counselors help them work on talking points and equip them with tools to problem solve. If all else fails, parents can reach out directly to the teachers, and if the situation is delicate parents could talk to the counselors.

- **How do Counselors/Administrators handle conflict between students?**

Counselors/Administrators empower students and brainstorm with them, help them problem solve, give them a menu of options and, sometime the Counselors call both parties involved and help them resolve the conflict, or they have them fill a point of view form which is an opportunity to write down exactly what happened, what they would like to happen and the administration works with both sides. The Counselors see this as a learning opportunity and involve the Administration when the nature of the problem is such that their intervention is necessary to ensure everything is under control.

Pyle is fortunate to have access to **CRCMC**, a not for profit, which sends a conflict mediation team that come on Fridays to help with conflict mediation between students, and train them in conflict coaching. Students can reach out directly or counselors and teachers can recommend students to work with the **CRCMC** Team.

- **How should Parents Contact the Counselor?**

The easiest and quickest way is through email, parents can access the staff directory on Pyle Website and look for Counselor's outlook emails. You can also call the counseling Office and leave a message.

- **How do I schedule a Teacher Team/Parent Conference?**

If its an individual teacher Parents can email the teacher directly. If it is an issue across classes you can contact the team leader, or you can contact your child's counselor.

- **What do I do if I have a question about certain a class?**

Reach out to the teacher of the class through email.

- **What is SSL? Who do I contact for SSL?**

Student service learning is a High School Graduation requirement of 75 hours of volunteering. The requirements and opportunities are available on the website (<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/>)

Ms. Smethurst is the SSL Coordinator in Pyle. Her email id available in the Staff Directory on Pyle Website.

- **What do I do if my child needs to leave early from school? How do I report an absence?**

Go to Pyle Website and access the Attendance & Absence form and have it filled out(www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/pylems/attendance/). Please email attendance questions to cathering_g_smith@mcpsmd.org

Pls have your child know when they are supposed to leave so they can go to Ms. Smith in the office and collect a pass.

- **Whom do I contact if there is a problem with my Child's bus?**

Please call the school Administration or the Bus Depot. If there is a conflict on the bus please contact the counseling office.

- **Technology**

Parents access Parent Vue for their child's assignments and grades, and the binder to keep track of what is happening in class. The Counselors recommend that parents go through the above once during the week and once during the weekend.

A to Z Connect Membership Toolkit is the PTSA's mailing list with information on school activities

Google Meet is a virtual platform for meetings

Pyle Staff Directory emails are the best way to email members of the staff

K. After School Activities

After school activities began the week of September 9th. These activities take place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week. Go to the Pyle Website, and click on after school activity links for details on registration. Counselors recommend that kids explore activities and they try atleast one afterschool activity this year.

L. Upcoming Events

CAC Speaker Series

- **Teen Anxiety and Stress**

Oct 24th, 12-1:30

- **Being the parent you middle schooler needs**

Nov 21st, 12-1:30

- Building an understanding of LGBTQ+ youth and gender fluidity

Dec 12th, 12-1:30

- **Study Skills Night**

November 13th, 6:30-8:30 pm

For students and Parents.

L. Tips for Parents of Middle Schoolers

- **Middle school kids will have issues at some point, be prepared and welcome the opportunity as a parenting moment.**

Middle school years, kids will get into fights, will lose a friend, get a c, problem on bus, not like their teacher, don't fear it or dread it, know its going to happen and see it as an opportunity, remain calm and talk it through.

- **You will occasionally need to be the bad guy, accept it.**

Middle School are the years where children push boundaries while trying to assert independence, these are not the three years where you want to be their friend. You need to be the tough person and set boundaries and be firm.

- **Expect your child to occasionally fail, allow yourself to occasionally fail too.**

The Counselors underscored the power of an apology, we will make mistakes as parents and our children will make mistakes too, it is important for us as parents to own our mistake and apologize when we mess up and we model the behavior for our children to learn to do the same.

- **Praise effort rather than results**

Recognise hard work and reward that they are trying their best and do not get fixated on grades.

- **Have conversations with your child about life outside school instead of asking questions, be patient and open**

Don't get wrapped up in grades, that's only a piece of them, it is not all of them, spend time talking about things outside of school, talk to them, be there for them when they want to talk to you without being judgmental, focus on building relationships.

- **Middle school is a process of self-discovery and can conflict with your idea of who they are supposed to be**

Parents are not always going to like what their kids are like at this stage, they will wear different masks as they try to come into their own. Parents need to recognize that their values as a family will eventually prevail and all this is temporary.

- **Middle schoolers exaggerate**

It's a developmental stage they are in, they bend the truth, exaggerate, pls validate and confirm

- **Middle Schoolers are often bored**

This doesn't mean they are not challenged enough in school, parents can help look at activities that will keep them engaged, don't overschedule and try to strike a balance where they are engaged and not stretched across activities.

- **Comfort and growth are often incompatible**

Kids go through a lot of growth, they are not always going to be comfortable, parents can help them withstand, cope and grow.

- **Middle schoolers are from Pluto, Parents are from Saturn**

We have completely different priorities as parents compared to our children.

M. How can you help?

If you would like to volunteer to engage with the student community, please sign up for Career and Culture lunches, Board Game lunches, and help mobilize donations for Zen Den

Please Contact CAC Chairs-Sushmitha Paidi (sushmitha.paidi@gmail.com) and Nina Kutty (nina.kutty@gmail.com)

