





# “At Ease”

Helping Military Children Feel

Principals should create a school culture of sensitivity and support for military children.

By Margaret Morgan and Andrew Ross

Some have referred to military children as a hidden minority or labeled them as trans-culture or third-culture kids, largely because the vast majority of educational and sociological research regarding military families focuses almost exclusively on soldiers and their spouses. Military children are represented in nearly every school district in the country, but according to research on the subject led by Monica Christina Esqueda, many schools are unaware of who these children are. With more than 70 percent of the estimated 1.2 million military children attending local public schools, principals should be cognizant of the challenges of educating this hidden population and be sensitive to and supportive of their needs.

Military children are one of this country's oldest, though somewhat invisible, subcultures. These youth experience the same developmental patterns and processes as other children, but their development plays out in a unique context that often differs dramatically from that of their civilian counterparts.

A typical military child grows up in a highly structured environment if living on or near a military installation—a communal life of sorts, often with complete access to medical care and overall greater economic stability than in the surrounding areas. The sense of community on or near bases is also frequently on full display: It isn't unusual to see block parties every weekend, military families sharing holidays together, and people helping each other out during difficult times. In many ways, even though military children are a highly mobile group, their tightly knit social and cultural environments help insulate them from other common risk factors that mobile civilian students face.

This mobility—military children are likely to attend between six and nine schools before graduating from high school and move three times as often as their stationary counterparts—can also lead to other benefits. Relocat-

ing can expose children to diverse cultures within the United States and abroad—cultural experiences that are unmatched by most of their civilian counterparts. Indeed, teachers of military students have described them as tolerant and more open-minded than their peers. While the richness of these experiences is beneficial, drawbacks to continual relocation can affect the educational process.

### Challenges of Relocation

For some students, adaptation following relocation happens with ease, while for others there are more challenges—especially for those entering school for the first time or during adolescence. The authors of “Accounting for the Social and Non-Market Benefits of Education” theorize that this happens because during these two distinct developmental periods, children struggle with the same difficulty: to establish a sense of self while beginning psychological separation from parents. The challenge may be especially problematic for adolescents who move as often as every two years, as they shift their support networks from family to peers; the frequent loss of old friends and rebuilding of social networks can be very stressful. Some studies even indicate that children find this the most traumatic aspect of relocation.

Other difficulties arise when state, district, and school-level policies at the new school are markedly different from those the student knows. Worse, educational policy is often created with a non-mobile population in mind, so military students may not see their needs reflected in policy. Curricula can vary as much as policy, and aligning course sequencing and progression requirements can be extremely disruptive, even in the short run. While a single move may not present a major problem, highly mobile students may experience a cumulative effect over time.

The Interstate Compact on Edu-

cational Opportunity for Military Children attempts to address some of these common policy problems by requiring, for example, schools to process requests for student records within 10 days, and placing students in courses based on sending (originating) state assessments—a major step forward for mobile military children that helps resolve some of the most problematic areas of school transition. While currently enacted as part of policy in the majority of states, the efficacy of the Compact at both the district and school level is largely unknown. Moreover, parents must know of its existence in order to force compliance.

Currently, no research consensus exists on the consequences of mobility. Some studies have concluded that relocation is a stressor that can negatively affect academic and interpersonal development, while others have found that mobility does not hinder the academic progress of military children. However, most of this research was conducted prior to 9/11 and subsequent overseas conflicts. Updated research of contemporary student experiences is needed.

Stressors such as parental disability, illness, or death related to combat service may have a negative effect on academic and psychological outcomes, according to research by Kristin Mmari et al. and Rozlyn Engel et al. The strain of long stretches of deployments on military families and children is also unlike any seen before. The U.S. involvement in WWII was less than four years and our involvement in Vietnam lasted less than a decade, with most soldiers serving one or perhaps two tours. Today, military parents are often deployed four or more times. These deployments may be more common than schools and school districts realize, as in the past 10 years, National Guard and Reserve units have deployed with nearly the same frequency as their active duty counterparts. For example, military students

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✦ The Military Child Education Coalition provides **free professional development** opportunities for educators, a resource and reference library, and much more.

✦ Educators in affected states should familiarize themselves with the **Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children**. This site not only provides information on the Compact, but also provides context for its adoption and implementation.

who were in kindergarten during 9/11 are now high school juniors—their entire K-12 career may have occurred under the strain of parental separation and the anxiety over the potential loss or disability of a parent. Some military children will have friends who have experienced such losses.

### Schools as Buffers

A 2010 report published in *School Psychology Review* “School Transitions among Military Adolescents,” found that a supportive school environment can mitigate or protect against psychological stressors. When they are informed about the risks to children of military families, schools can play a critical role in buffering the negative effects of relocation and deployment stress. Schools—where students spend most of their waking hours—can address some of this need for support by maintaining consistent routines and providing explicit community structure. The internal stability of the school helps students become comfortable there.

Furthermore, ties to teachers are one of the most important factors for student academic success, according to research by Bridget K. Hamre and Robert C. Pianta. A supportive and close relationship with a teacher has a significant positive effect on academic engagement, and this relationship is amplified for children when a parent is deployed. Teachers and principals, as well as other school staff, must be aware of their military students and also become involved with them. Keep these points in mind when considering how to best serve military students:

- Know who your military children are.
- Familiarize yourself with the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children.
- Review school policies and programs to address challenges highly-mobile students may face (for instance, does your school policy help new students who want to join extracurricular

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clubs and sports when they transfer during the school year?).

- Consider implementing a shadow program for new military students.
- Ensure teachers understand the challenges of—and students’ emotional reactions to—parental deployment.
- Reach out to students separated from parents, offering opportunities for open communication.
- Consider organizing an after-school club for children whose parents are deployed so they can openly discuss concerns and connect with others facing the same situation.
- Watch for signs of stress—involve the school counselor, parents, and other resources your community or school district may offer.

Teachers can also help by letting military students know they can speak with them, a school counselor, or others in the school about their concerns. This not only assists the student, but also might provide school personnel with unique insight on what is going on with the child. Ultimately, if children feel safe and secure among the adults in their school, their learning is less likely to be negatively affected.

### Sensitivity to Needs

Beyond knowing the traditional risk factors, educators must also be aware of more nuanced, subtle ways that they can be sensitive to and supportive of the needs of military students. A personal story may help to illustrate this point. At the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, I was teaching

at a middle school in a large military community. One morning, a teary-eyed student came into my classroom asking for a late entry pass for his history class, a class that began each day by reviewing current events in the local newspaper. According to the student, the headline each day was about our involvement in Afghanistan. The student couldn’t concentrate after viewing the headlines and spent a good part of the morning worrying about the safety of his father. After a discussion with the school counselor and teachers, we decided that current events topics should be approached a bit differently. Teachers would pre-select items for students to discuss, and while the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were still discussed, it was without the lurid, eye-catching headlines meant to entice people to purchase the newspaper. None of my already very sensitive colleagues had any idea that something so routine could have such an impact on our military students.

As school leaders, the more we do to address the needs of the military child, the better we can help these students make the most of the unique advantages their lives afford them—experiences that can build adaptability, resilience, and cultural awareness.



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