

The Needs of Military Families: How are States and the Pentagon Responding, especially for Guard and Reservists?

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Testimony

Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, my name is Dennis J. Reimer and I live in Edmond, Oklahoma. I appear before your committee today representing the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). www.MilitaryChild.org

I am honored to be here today to talk about children. In 1999 I retired from the U.S. Army, after thirty-seven years on active duty. I am currently the Director of the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City, and as such continue to have the opportunity to work in the area of National Security. My wife, Mary Jo and our two children served with me. Mary Jo has been a teacher, a mother and a leader in the area of improving educational opportunities for military children. I am proud of all three of them.

Today I appear before you as a father, a grandfather, a former commander, and as one of the initial National Advisors to the Military Child Education Coalition, a national non-profit organization. Begun seven years ago in Texas, the sole purpose of MCEC is to serve as educational advocates for the children whose parents are devoting their talents, skills, and lives to our nation.

On behalf of the MCEC leadership and community, thank you for the remarkable work of this committee and the visibility that you have brought to the challenges and needs of the military family, especially the children. Senator Alexander, last year you along with Senators Dodd, Chambliss, and Nelson held six hearings in your home states and here in Washington. These sent a powerful message to military families that their concerns are being heard. We deeply appreciate what you are doing and welcome this opportunity to share MCEC's views on what is being done in other state and local communities as well as what needs to be improved.

First, some examples of "what's working" in the states: Gov. Bush has discussed the efforts stemming from the groundbreaking legislation that was enacted recently in Florida. They are to be commended for all they are doing on behalf of military children.

It is also very encouraging to see additional actions supportive of the military child are taking place in other states.

Two examples from Texas: This year improved Texas policies outlining eligibility for in state tuition, opened doors for military dependents to affordable higher education. In the 2003-2004 school year over 10,000 military family members have qualified for resident rates at Texas institutions. Lindsey, a military child and a college student in San Antonio, is benefiting in real dollars--paying less than \$50 in state rates per semester hour compared to more than \$200 per hour non-resident rates. This is a good news example from just one of the 18 states that have enacted military friendly tuition policies that expand access to affordable high education.

Secondly--The Texas Gov's office is working with MCEC on an exciting initiative with components such as: statewide training of educators and school counselors on the unique needs of the military child—active duty, as well as the National Guard, and Reserve components.

Texas, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina are, right now, in various stages of collaboration to develop and codify educational policies that will ease transitions for both military-connected students and other students that experience frequent school moves. Maryland will soon join in this effort.

Working in partnership with their military communities, Maryland's Department of Education is developing plans to respond to recent state legislation that requires their state board of education to seek reciprocity agreements with other states.

In Georgia all public school systems serving military bases have signed the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) joining in a community that now comprises 150 school districts from 24 states as well as the Dept of Defense (DoD) schools.

<http://www.militarychild.org/SETS-MOA.cfm>

The status of the MOA school signatories can be seen at:

http://www.militarychild.org/PDF-2004/MOA%20Signatories%207_04.pdf

The MOA represents an important call to action. It is a tangible commitment that is drawn directly from the real school and individual family experiences reported in the US Army's Secondary Education Transition Study. This landmark research was a part of the Army's response to identified need. As Chief of Staff of the Army I commissioned the Military Child Education Coalition to conduct the Secondary Education Transition Study or SETS. The most comprehensive study done to date on school transitions SETS involved military parents, students, and campus educators from 39 public and DoD high schools worldwide. Not just another study that disappears on some shelf, SETS has resulted in two significant outcomes:

The US Army and now the US Air Force policies on stabilization for families with seniors; and, the research-based Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The MOA's far-

reaching community of school systems brings together DoD schools and the civilian local schools that teach our military children in a collaborative way never before experienced.

Today we have military families deployed around the world---not just the Active component but also Guard and Reserve. As we see the footage of Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen leaving home for the challenges that face our nation, it is fitting to look at issues their very mobile children face because of their parents' career. To put a face to these issues let me cite the case of Renee.

Renee moved in her last semester as a senior. Both of her parents had died, so she lived with her sister and her sister's husband, a soldier who at that time was serving in Iraq. This was Renee's fourth high school, in four states. When Renee moved a few weeks into the start of the spring term, she faced the enormous challenge of meeting a new state's graduation requirements to include a high school exit exam. Unfortunately her sending school was so bureaucratic that compassion and professional collaboration were out of the question when the receiving high school requested that they work together for the sake of Renee and try to meet her urgent needs so she could graduate. Fortunately, by chance, Renee received extra-ordinary support at the new school and she made it. Not by intent, by chance. The Memorandum of Agreement, if signed by all governors, would have increased the likelihood that transition predictability is not just based on luck.

It is about Renee...and we have more work to do for others like her!

Our research indicates schools do a fairly decent job of receiving students but a very inadequate job of preparing students for transitioning to the next school.

The Agreement addresses records transfer---this is important because for kindergartners through seniors, one of the most effective ways to assist military children is to reduce the bureaucratic and sometime archaic processes that encumber the timely and accurate transfer of school records. Though this is a highly complex set of challenges for all kids, it is greatly intensified with special needs students who participate in special programs or if one or more parents are deployed and the student must live with a caregiver. The Agreement addresses flexibility in accepting coursework and program participation.

Another example is Brian an 8th grader who loves math. His family moved last year and shortly thereafter Brian's dad went to Afghanistan. Even though at his old

school he was taking advanced math, the receiving school did not allow 8th graders to take advanced math without being in their gifted program---Brian missed the cut-off by a very slim number of points. Later, after discovering that the math book used was the same as the one in the previous class and gathering other documentation from the sending school, his mom appealed. The appeal was denied. Brian was not allowed to take Algebra. In a few months he will move again---his parents have already discovered that the next school will not allow him to take advanced math in 9th grade because 8th grade algebra is a prerequisite. The facts in this case just don't add up or pass the common sense test.

A third example is Ann who in first grade in a Department of Defense School, like most

seven year olds, was an emergent reader. When the family moved the receiving schools promotion policies stipulated that a student had to complete a particular sequence in the basal readers or be retained in that grade. Instead of welcoming Ann with loving understanding and professional flexibility, the textbook-based decision was that this new-to-the-system student, Ann, had to repeat first grade.

Lindsey, Renee, Brian and Ann are real children and representative of the challenges that thousands of military children face. The MOA, if it had been adopted by these school systems, could have changed their stories. This is personal for every family. States joining the Agreement can establish safety nets—safety nets for kids like Renee, Brian and Ann.

A specific example of what can happen if every state enlists in the Memorandum of Agreement and crafts it into a school transition bridge between states are policies that translate into reasonable grace periods for programs and respect the professionalism of other schools. For both Brian and Ann this would provide a fair and deserved chance to excel.

The military has changed!

Our professional, highly skilled military is now made up of a large number of families. Most service members are married—actually over 60 percent. In the Active duty force 58% (over 800,000m troops) are parents.

In the Active, Guard, and Reserve forces the majority are families where only one parent is in the military. Still 35,000 moms and dads in the Active force and 22,000 in the Guard and Reserves are both wearing the uniform. Even though the military has fewer one-parent homes than the national average—over 80,000 single parents are serving in the Active duty and 65,000 are citizen soldiers. Military parents who have school-aged children are more likely to experience separations than their civilian counterparts. We can help for now and in the future by taking care of the kids whose fathers and mothers are taking care of America. This should be done immediately in a way that is practical and sustainable. Ultimately this is a readiness issue, precisely because military families—not just the uniformed member---live the mission.

An important part of that mission is quality of life—taking care of the kids who look at the empty chair at the kitchen table and know dad or mom is in harms way. Quality of life—policies and institutions that recognize these families are also called on to go through many school transitions. Military children move and experience the stress of separations because from new baby to the newly minted graduate, their families live foreign policy---they are on point for America.

Military families have the challenge—but the schools have the responsibility and the opportunity to work together with the military communities to help their children. All of us working together can contribute and help build a brighter future.

These examples are why we urge this committee to reach out systematically to the states asking them to adopt, sign, and act upon the Guiding Principles in the Memorandum of

Agreement. In the Southwest they have a saying “all hat and no cattle”—it is in the doing not the showing where we can make a real difference for children. My military experience taught me that what gets measured, reinforced and institutionalized gets done. I hope the committee will strongly encourage the states to build in accountability mechanisms that ensure that the Agreement is the catalyst for authentic action. Then the MOA will have the potential to grow into compassion and flexibility for all mobile students.

It is true that many good things have begun to happen, but military kids cannot wait—should not have to wait for the 100% solution. With a life of transitions punctuated by separation the 800,000 K-12 children of the active duty military joined by the 500,000 “suddenly military” children of the National Guard and Reserve deserve our best efforts. Remember, each military child serves too!

The MCEC stands ready to help and has provided a copy of our recommended “Action Plan for Improving Predictability and Support for Military Children During Educational Transitions”.

Thank you again for your great work on behalf of children and for allowing MCEC this opportunity to participate in this important discussion.