



# Getting School Districts Ready for the **Military Student Identifier**



**Doug Mesecar and Don Soifer**

Foreword by **Former Congressman John Kline**

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# Foreword

**When Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, there were two central goals; first, to prevent overburdening schools with compliance requirements or the need to over-test students; and second, to preserve a meaningful accountability system that measures and improves school performance. Providing parents and taxpayers with the information they need to understand whether or not their schools are succeeding is a crucial element to supporting public education.**

The inclusion of a Military Student Identifier into the law was an important accomplishment of ESSA, because its use extends this same visibility to our military families and to the educators who serve them.

Having served in the Marine Corps for 25 years, I have a deep appreciation for the sacrifices our military families make regularly. Frequent moves to new communities and new schools make it more challenging to ensure that their children's education needs are met successfully, without crucial pieces slipping through the cracks.

This report seeks to help school district leaders gauge their schools' readiness to use the Military Student Identifier to its full potential. Having studied some of our nation's finest public schools serving active-duty-connected students, its authors identify essential practices underway that can support the effective use of the new identifier, once state education agencies have fully implemented it into their education data systems.

Perhaps even more important is that this report can help serve as a guide to military families. It identifies the characteristics of school districts and programs that are most successful at helping military children integrate effectively and get the most out of a public education. As a result, it can serve as a valuable resource for parents in the armed forces as their children transition from school to school during the course of a military career.

**John Kline, a retired Member of Congress who represented Minnesota, was chairman of the Education and Workforce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, and co-authored the Every Student Succeeds Act.**



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# Executive Summary

**Those who serve active duty in our nation's military are often quite familiar with making sacrifices as part of fulfilling their service. So, too, are their families, including their school-aged children, for whom the common realities of life in the military present frequent challenges to succeeding academically, and even non-academically, in school.**



Courtesy of Virginia Beach City Public Schools

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is now starting to impact state and local educational systems across the country as they assess students, collect data, make accountability determinations, and work to provide a more equitable and successful educational experience for all students. While the law impacts all students in one way or another, it has a particular relevance for military-connected students.

ESSA requires all states to collect — and report — assessment data on military-connected students, defined to include students with a parent who is a member of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard on active duty, including full-time National Guard duty.<sup>1</sup>

Gauging the performance of the nation's 1.2 million military-connected children is vital because they move many times during their K–12 years, far more than typical American children. As a result, they are at much greater risk for uneven and inconsistent education.

Until now, there has been very little reliable, consistent data about most stateside military-connected students. This lack of information translates to a lack of awareness about their academic progress, and military-connected students' unique contributions and challenges all too often go unnoticed in schools. But now, practitioners, families, policymakers, and researchers can better understand how and why the schools these students attend are succeeding — or are the best fit for a student's needs.

As many as 20 states had some form of a Military Student Identifier (MSI) in place before ESSA, but there was a wide variety of definitions of which students to include and how to share that information.<sup>2</sup> Generally, the data was not even made public. Virginia, for example, has been a leader in creating a Military Student Identifier, but did not publicly report the information so all stakeholders could benefit from the information.<sup>3</sup>

For far too long, little data has been available about military-connected students and their educational experiences and outcomes, or their transition pathways. Under ESSA, this is about to change, and change for the better.

By assessing several school districts that serve substantial military populations, and conducting a thorough review of publicly available information, this report aims to provide local education officials nationwide with a number of recommended practices and additional steps that they should consider taking to successfully implement the ESSA Military Student Identifier and effectively use the information collected. The report also can serve as an important guide for military service parents as their children transition to school districts around the country.

<sup>1</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114–95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015–16) Section 1111(h)(1)(C)(ii).

<sup>2</sup> Education Commission of the States, Analysis of Military Student Identifier Policies, Jennifer Dounay Zinth, August 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Overview of Military Student Identifier Policies, Presentation for the Virginia Council on the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, September 2014.





# District Readiness for the ESSA Military Student Identifier

**Nationally, as state education agencies are showing varying degrees of progress incorporating the Military Student Identifier (MSI) into their data systems as required by ESSA, school districts are in different stages of implementation as well. At the district and school levels, what does readiness to utilize the identifier to its potential as an educational tool to support learning gains for this diverse population of learners require?**

Most districts, particularly those in states with no precursor MSIs, are in very early stages of implementation. Even in states with precursor MSIs, there are few districts that are excelling at using data about military-connected students to provide comprehensive and sustained efforts that other districts can emulate. By examining practices of districts that are excelling in integrating military-connected students and data, it is possible to identify those fundamental characteristics districts should be employing, not only to improve general district policies and practices, but to take full advantage of the powerful opportunity the identifier holds for military-connected students and their families.

The following characteristics and stages of implementation are based on research and in-person visits and interviews with districts, schools, and school officials around the country serving military-connected students in a wide range of settings and circumstances. These districts and schools are employing promising practices based on a careful understanding of their military communities, military-connected students, and unique local or state contexts, all enabled by the thoughtful use and powerful application of data-informed practice.



Robust, data-driven culture supports classroom teachers target instruction, intervention and enrichment to individual students.

# EVALUATING DISTRICT READINESS FOR THE MILITARY STUDENT IDENTIFIER

|   | Beginning                         | Progressing                       | Excelling                         |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| I. Direct Support for Students                                |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Efficient student intake and identification                   | At least 1 characteristic present | 2 or more characteristics present | 3 characteristics present         |
| Whole child support emphasizing social and emotional learning |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Personalized education approaches                             |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| II. Aligned Educational Leadership                            |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Focused professional development                              | 0 or 1 characteristics present    | 1 or more characteristics present | 2 or more characteristics present |
| Data-driven culture   |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Clear staff responsibilities for military-connected students  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| III. Systems and Communities                                  |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Timely and thorough family information/communication          | 0 or 1 characteristics present    | 1 or more characteristics present | 2 or more characteristics present |
| High expectations for all students by all staff               |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Strong, communicative district-base relationship              |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Total # Characteristics                                       | 1–3                               | 4–6                               | 7+                                |

**Beginning stage:** 1–3 characteristics present

**Progressing stage:** 4–6 characteristics present

**Excelling stage:** 7+ characteristics present

This chart is meant to be a guideline for benchmarking around major areas of district and school activity, not an absolute barometer of success. Some districts may have different sets of characteristics, but the domains are present in highly successful districts in an intentional way, each building on the others. If, for example, a district only was implementing some combination of characteristics in the Aligned Educational Leadership domain, they would not be considered an exemplar because the characteristics in the first domain are foundational to those that follow and for exceptional, sustainable success with military-connected students.

Detail about the domains and characteristics follows.

## Domain I — Direct Support for Students

- ▶ **Efficient intake and identification system for rapidly identifying military children.** Strong beginnings matter: student intake process in the first two weeks of enrollment must identify academic and non-academic needs for every learner and begin to focus strategies informed by this information.
- ▶ **Whole child support emphasizing social and emotional learning (SEL).** Social-emotional supports and wraparound services using district and military resources are critically important to the success of many military-connected students, some of whom may begin during the school year. There must also be opportunities for participation in gifted and talented programs and extra-curricular activities.
- ▶ **Personalized education approaches implemented consistently and with fidelity.** Individually-focused instructional models are implemented at scale across a school district. Teachers supported with training in personalized learning approaches and actionable information on progress of individual learners leverage digital learning as part of core instruction, bolstered by strategic small-group and one-on-one teaching. These personalized approaches vary and can be expected (and even encouraged) to evolve and iterate with support from instructional leaders.

## Domain II — Aligned Educational Leadership

- ▶ **Focused professional development.** Effective professional development for teachers is crucial, especially focused around understanding and meeting the needs of military-connected students. Teachers should be prepared to take advantage of the unique contributions of — and handle the unique stressors for — military-connected students.
- ▶ **Data-driven culture.** Efficacious, data-driven culture supports classroom teachers as they guide instruction, intervention, and enrichment. Through the effective use of the MSI, educators and leaders can better know and personalize their interactions with students, including the provision of both academic and non-academic services more quickly and effectively to transitioning students.
- ▶ **Clear staff responsibilities for the performance and well-being of military-connected students.** Districts acting intentionally about who and how staff engage with students, family, military staff, and other stakeholders is critical to ensuring services are delivered, problems are identified early, and solutions are vetted for maximum buy-in.

Personalized learning begins with the specific educational needs of individual students; Courtesy of LEARN Charter School Network



## Domain III — Systems and Communities

- ▶ **Timely and thorough family information/communication.** Knowledgeable, dedicated staff are on the lookout for academic and non-academic opportunities for learners, with ongoing outreach to military families to keep them informed, engaged, and foster understanding of these opportunities. District and base staff collaborate closely on all aspects of support for military-connected students, including ways to integrate base staff and leadership into teaching and learning, as well as extra-curricular activities.
- ▶ **High expectations for all students by all administrators and staff.** Embracing practices supporting continuous improvement, district leaders who expect the best from their students and their staff tend to create a virtuous cycle of improvement where each success achieved is met with efforts to do even better.
- ▶ **Robust, communicative working relationship between base and district.** Districts need to keep abreast of military developments, understand the often-evolving mission of the base, and the nature of the service members there to better serve their military-connected students. Base leadership needs to understand the needs of the district and how they can support and engage in ways that benefit all students.

## Education Law Bolsters Military-Connected Students in Several Ways

**In addition to the Military Student Identifier, ESSA also includes a number of other provisions that will benefit military-connected students and families:**

- ▶ **A strong focus on college and career readiness:** Grade-level proficiency does not equate to readiness for life after high school. This focus helps military-connected students in that they are often proficient at grade level but may not be as ready to take on post-secondary experiences;
- ▶ **Encouraging the measurement of academic growth in addition to proficiency:** Many military-connected students have deficits to make up, or are already ahead — and looking at growth ensures these students are able to “count” in academically sound ways and to get the help they need to catch up — or continue surging ahead; and
- ▶ **Recognition of the importance of social and emotional learning in the success of students, particularly those going through the frequent moves ingrained in the military family experience:** The level of understanding, support and follow-through with these students is essential to their immediate and long-term success. Students experiencing isolation, or other challenges linked to frequent moves and displacements, are less likely to reach their full potential if these challenges are not addressed.





# Characteristics in Action:

## How Districts are Addressing The Needs of Military-Connected Students

**The drill is unsettling but familiar: military families get their permanent change of station orders and the process of moving to a new installation, a new house — and a new school — starts again. Often, these moves happen with very little notice for the families or the receiving schools. Approximately 200,000 school-aged, military-connected children transition to new schools every year.<sup>4</sup>**

Having to change schools is routinely identified by military families as the most difficult part of relocating. For military families with school-aged children, despite the many military family websites, information-packed military family community listservs, internet videos, and shared checklists, there is nothing quite like a well-prepared school that is ready, willing, and able to welcome the new family and students to the school and community to ease the transition. With the ESSA's MSI coming fully online this year, these transitions can and should get easier.

For this project, the authors visited select districts, schools and school officials around the country serving military-connected students in a wide range of settings and circumstances. The visits included interviews and/or site visits to: Coronado Unified School District, California; Churchill County School District, Nevada; Columbia County School District, Georgia; Learn 6 Charter School North Chicago, Illinois; Sweetwater Union High School District, California; Virginia Beach City Public Schools, Virginia, and Waynesville R-VI School District, Missouri.

As the Military Student Identifier comes into full effect, there are a number of programs, initiatives, and promising practices that are evident in districts around the country. Several are detailed below.

**With the implementation of good policy and practice around the Military Student Identifier, these practices underscore that districts can achieve greater success with and for the military-connected students in their schools.**

### Domain I — Direct Support for Students

The success of an educational system must start with the student and build outward. This is equally true for all students, no matter what their unique characteristics or background may be. Military-connected students come to school with all the same gifts, challenges, and potential of their non-military-connected peers, but they also come with something unique that needs to be recognized, nurtured, and developed. The following characteristics are the first and most important for districts seeking to excel in serving military-connected students.

#### Efficient Intake and Identification System for Rapidly Identifying Military Children.

Strong beginnings matter: student intake process in the first two weeks of enrollment must identify academic and non-academic needs for every learner, and begin to focus strategies informed by this information.

Districts and schools need to be able to immediately identify military-connected students upon enrollment and then to communicate that to teachers, counselors, and other staff who can then provide appropriate academic and emotional support to each student as they start school. To date,

<sup>4</sup> "Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for Defense Dependents' Education (Update)," Department of Defense Education Activity, Report to Congress, 2015.





Courtesy of LEARN Charter School Network

very few schools have had any process for systematically identifying military-connected students and making sure teachers and personnel know the student. But, with the advent of ESSA and the MSI, this is likely to greatly improve.

**The MSI is a long-term effort that has value beyond just the data. Through the effective use of what will be new information to many, educators and leaders can better know and personalize their responses including the provision of both academic and non-academic services more quickly to transitioning students.**

The MSI will also provide districts with a clear picture of the distribution of military-connected children across multiple schools, which is critically important for districts to respond appropriately. In Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBS), while 25 percent of students are military-connected, that average can range from 10 to 50 percent depending on each school.

In Columbia County, Georgia, the district has a higher percentage of military-connected students than the neighboring district of Richmond, which is the district where the base is physically located. In the Columbia County School District (CCSD), Grovetown High School has a higher percentage of military-connected students, with more children of enlisted soldiers, more socio-economic diversity, and more poverty than Greenbrier High School, which has more officers' children, less diversity, and less poverty. This has obvious implications for the services and supports needed at each high school.

Another important use of data is tracking and coping with transfers into and out of schools. At Grovetown High School, 50 students transferred in or out in first two months of 2018,

almost all of which were military-connected students. The Grovetown School Liaison Officer (SLO) and principal said that in their experience, enlisted service members tend to transfer more and at off-times (such as in the middle of the school year) than officers; this was confirmed by staff at Greenbrier, where military-connected students tend to move over the summer and less frequently.<sup>5</sup> The implications on programming and staffing are both obvious and critical — but would be hard to imagine without CCSD taking its own initiative with data. With the MSI, this powerful knowledge will come to be more common-place in all districts, and military-connected students and families will benefit.

At Virginia Beach, the district has two specifically dedicated counselors to support military-connected students and families across a range of issues, especially around academic transfer challenges like getting up-to-date transcripts, credit recognition, and course completion. Interestingly, district staff have found that military-connected families come with different levels of preparedness when arriving in the district, where enlisted families tend to need more support.<sup>6</sup> Having additional data on military-connected students from the MSI should help in quicker initial identification with better signals for potential academic needs and opportunities.

**Whole child support emphasizing social and emotional learning (SEL).** Social-emotional supports and wraparound services using district and military resources are critically important to the success of military-connected students, some of whom may begin during the school year. There must also be opportunities for participation in gifted and talented programs and extra-curricular activities.

Using data to drive better academic supports and outcomes is not the whole story. Districts that take full advantage of the non-academic social-emotional data and information available to them are able to better meet military-connected students' needs.

<sup>5</sup> Author interview of staff at Greenbrier and Grovetown High Schools, February 7, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Author interview of Virginia Beach City Public Schools, February 6, 2018.

# What School Districts Should Know about Military-Connected Students And the Quest for Better Data

**Currently there are roughly 1.2 million school-aged children of active-duty members of the United States military services, with over 650,000 stationed within the continental United States.<sup>7</sup>**

Of these, three-quarters are under the age of twelve, three-quarters attend public schools (traditional public or charter schools), while another 10 percent attend nonpublic schools.<sup>8</sup>

Among the greatest areas of need for military-connected students is that they deal with a high degree of mobility and uncertainty due to a parent's service. It is common for these students to attend more than six different school districts during their K-12 education as a result of military deployments — three times more than non-military-connected students.<sup>9</sup>

The quality of their children's educational opportunities remains very important to military families, and their willingness to make sacrifices to provide their children a high-quality education is a resonant factor for today's stateside military experience. A survey conducted in 2017 revealed that military families are twice as likely as other families to change jobs, take an additional job, or move their home closer to a particular school, although aspects of specific military assignments can make any of these actions difficult or impossible at times.<sup>10</sup>

As states make progress implementing the new Military Student Identifier in useful ways under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the information it offers

military families about their schools' particular success serving this crucial population will increasingly hold value in supporting them in becoming knowledgeable consumers seeking high-quality educational opportunities for their children.

The MSI is buoyed by work of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (MIC3 or the Compact). The Compact focuses on supporting the school needs of active-duty military-connected students, while children of National Guard and Reserves family can also benefit from the work it supports as well. Most broadly, the development and 50-state adoption (plus the District of Columbia) of the Compact from 2006–2015 has brought greater consistency and stability to the military-connected student transition process across the country.

While in various stages of implementation, the Compact has created nationally consistent criteria for critically important information that needs to be shared between states, districts, and schools, to aid in the timeliness and success of transitional military-connected students. The Compact addresses key educational transition issues encountered by military families including enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation.

The new ESSA-required MSI will bolster the impact of the Compact by making important outcome data about military-connected students widely available, which will set a clearer context within which the Compact policies and guidelines can operate. Together, the Compact and the MSI will become a powerful catalyst in helping districts, schools, and educators better support and educate military-connected students.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defense Education Activity, March 2015 Report to Congress, page 5.

<sup>8</sup> Military Interstate Compact Commission, FY 2017 Annual Report.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense Education Activity, <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/about.cfm>

<sup>10</sup> Paul DiPerna, Lindsey Burke and Anne Ryland, "Surveying the Military: What America's Service Members, Veterans and Their Spouses Think About K-12 Education and the Profession," EdChoice, October 2017, p. 23.

All the moving and transitioning military-connected students do increases the chances that their educational and emotional needs and strengths will go unrecognized or unappreciated by receiving districts, schools, and educators. As students progress through their academic careers, the expectations, access to opportunities, social pressures, and emotional needs increase in complexity and immediacy.

Depending on the mission and varying roles and functions on base at any particular time, educators serving military-connected children often must work to keep informed about impacts on individual children. For example, some bases are home to active-duty personnel deployed on missions to hotspots where danger from engagement is a frequent reality, or other personnel serving on missions requiring secrecy about their location. Also critical is the parental role in the military. Children may or may not know where they are at a given time based on their assignment (and sometimes one child does while another child does not, increasing stress).

Clearly, social-emotional and mental health challenges can have an impact on a military-connected student's educational success.<sup>11</sup> As the RAND Corporation found in its 2011 study of Army families and students, "School staff had little consistent information to let them know which students are military and when students may be experiencing deployment. These difficulties were sometimes more pronounced for educators serving Reserve and National Guard families because these students tend to be a small minority in their schools."<sup>12</sup>

Frequently, military-connected students have success academically, but struggle with the social aspects of transitioning repeatedly to new schools and communities. When schools and districts focus on the careful collection of social and emotional data — anecdotal and statistical — and organize around the use of this information, teachers, counselors, and other support staff are able to soften transitions, encourage participation, reduce anxieties, and more effectively prepare military-connected students for life after school.



Effective, small-group instruction is a valuable component of personalizing teaching and learning;  
Courtesy of Waynesville R-VI School District

<sup>11</sup> *Effects of Soldiers' Deployment on Children's Academic Performance and Behavioral Health*, by Amy Richardson, Anita Chandra, Laurie T. Martin, Claude Messan Setodji, Bryan W. Hallmark, Nancy F. Campbell, Stacy Hawkins, and Patrick Grady, RAND Corporation, MG-1095-A, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



At Columbia County schools, social-emotional supports include peer-to-peer initiatives like the Student2Student® Program at Greenbrier High School, and a systematized lunch buddy program at Grovetown High School, where new students don't eat alone because lunch can be the single most difficult social time during the school day.

Service clubs, like Student2Student®, which include military and civilian students, can ease the emotional stress of transitioning to a new school by having a current student greet the new student, give a tour of the school, and invite the new student to lunch. Greenbrier teachers and students reported that this welcoming practice helped ease the transition of military-connected students to the new high school.

Southern California's Coronado Unified School District, just outside of San Diego, utilizes Military Family Life Counselors (MFLCs) to provide additional, helpful supports, including counseling groups, one-to-one counseling, grade-level clubs for students with deployed parents, and an ambassador club to host and welcome new students from their first day of school. Funded by the Department of Defense over the last 10 years, the MFLC program is run by the military to support districts and schools with large numbers of military-connected students.

In Columbia County, Grovetown Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) students extensively participate in peer-to-peer activities and programming for military-connected students. One of the JROTC students explained his motivation to go above and beyond in helping his military-connected student peers by saying, "Never say

'goodbye,' say 'see you later.'" His belief is that in the relatively small world of the military, he will run into many of these same students in the future and building relationships in school will pay dividends throughout their lives.<sup>13</sup>

For military-connected high school students, JROTC programs have an important role to play in providing structures for many supports. Coronado Unified has a strong Navy JROTC program, "Islander Company." In addition to the specific programmatic attributes, school leaders report that it provides participating students a support structure, and a helpful connection to friends, for military-connected kids.

Technology also has a role in providing social-emotional supports for students. The elementary schools at Coronado Unified each have a "Military Connections Room," for use by children of parents deployed overseas. When a ship is in a foreign port or at other times, the parent may have an opportunity to video-chat with their child. When these opportunities present themselves, schools help set this up during the school day. They keep a dedicated desktop computer available for this purpose.

A number of educators and counselors noted that military-connected students were often more mature and seemed able to handle the ups and downs of school life more easily. Some have found that because military-connected students grow up in diverse environments, they tend to be tolerant, resourceful, adaptable, and responsible. Through use of the MSI, knowing whether schools have relatively large numbers of military-connected students, and how any programs serving them perform, may also reveal how these programs may positively impact all students in the school.



Professional development for teachers should include a focus around meeting the specific needs of military-connected students; Courtesy of Waynesville R-VI School District

### **Personalized education approaches implemented consistently and with fidelity.**

Individually-focused instructional models are implemented at scale across a school district. Teachers supported with training in personalized learning approaches and actionable information on progress of individual learners leverage digital learning as part of core instruction, bolstered by strategic small-group and one-on-one teaching. These personalized approaches vary and can be expected (and even encouraged) to evolve and iterate with support from instructional leaders.

As new personalized learning models proliferate and evolve in schools across the country, military-connected students have much to gain if districts can use the MSI data and incorporate it in these emerging education approaches. This is especially true of instructional models which are implemented at scale

<sup>13</sup> Author interview of CCSD Grovetown JROTC high-school students, February 7, 2018.





Waynesville R-VI schools serving students connected with Fort Leonard Wood benefit from Superintendent Brian Henry's strong commitment to strategic professional development; Courtesy of Waynesville R-VI School District

across a school district, equipping teachers with special training and actionable data to support their ability to meet the educational needs of diverse populations of learners.

One example of such a model proving valuable to military-connected students is Illinois' Learn 6 Charter School's North Chicago Campus, located on-base at Naval Station Great Lakes, serving 490 students in grades K–8. The Learn Charter School Network which runs the school was selected in 2017 by a committee of families and leaders at Washington, DC's Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling. This group sought to organize a new charter school serving a combination of military families at the base and civilians living in the adjacent community.

"Differentiation and personalization are the most important part of our approach" in serving this diverse community of learners in either community, according to network CEO and President Greg White. White describes a major academic challenge in serving military-connected students as identifying and then filling in the "splinter skills" students have missed.<sup>14</sup>

This is standards-aligned work, and the frequent relocations between states that students in military families experience complicate the challenge significantly. When a student enters school in a new state whose instruction is aligned with different academic content standards, teachers must keep track of skills or lessons those students may have missed or already been taught as a result of the subsequent change in learning sequence.

Successful personalized learning models require well-designed and implemented support for classroom teachers serving military-connected students. Help with information teachers can make actionable for individual learners represents an important aspect of such support.

For Learn 6, school leaders understand that the effectiveness of the model overall relies on connecting this individual learning on computers with face-to-face classroom support. To enable this systemically, teachers participate in data-driven instructional team meetings every two weeks, on Wednesdays, to discuss the specific progress and strategies for individual students.<sup>15</sup>

To fully realize the potential of personalized learning models, however, it is important that schools have flexibility, allowing students to advance based upon their mastery of content, and not be constrained by the seat-time requirements that have governed public education systems for the past century. A few states have begun allowing for Competency-Based Education models through which students advance to new content by demonstrating mastery and are free to do so at their own learning pace.

An example of how this can work for military-connected students comes from Nevada, where the Churchill County School District has applied to participate in the state's new Competency-Based Education Pilot. The district, which serves students connected with Naval Air Station Fallon, is working to create a new middle school blended-learning instructional model using a school-within-a-school program.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the authors, November 2, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

In the 2016–17 school year, the Churchill County School District received a grant from the Nevada Ready 21 program, a model program built to emulate Maine’s, which it used to purchase Chromebooks for its 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

The Nevada Ready 21 program offers a valuable, soundly-designed model particularly useful for school districts serving military-connected students, often smaller districts with limited resources for instituting new instructional initiatives. The program is structured to support this work in schools in numerous ways. For example, each grantee (whether a traditional school district or a charter school or network) receives full-time digital learning coaches, experienced teachers assigned to work with educators on teaching models, integrating new curricular components, and other aspects of personalizing teaching and learning. The program also fosters instructional progress by providing schools with a dedicated full-time, site-based technician, so the trainer and teachers don’t need to spend their time on technical issues.<sup>16</sup>

## Domain II — Aligned Educational Leadership

Building on the key characteristics of the direct support of students outlined in Domain I, the following characteristics describe how staff can be equipped with training and information to better meet the challenges and opportunities of educating military-connected students. Districts and schools excelling in the education of military-connected students focus on well-prepared educators and leaders, armed with actionable data, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. When staff are effectively equipped and organized, military-connected students benefit, as do all students in a district’s schools.

**Focused Professional Development.** Effective professional development for teachers is crucial, especially focused around understanding and meeting the needs of military-connected students. Teachers should be prepared to take advantage of the unique contributions of — and handle the particular stressors for — military-connected students.



Take a Vet to School Day is a popular event at Coronado High School; Courtesy of Coronado Unified School District

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the Nevada Ready 21 program, visit: <http://www.doe.nv.gov/NevadaReady21/>



# Meeting the Educational Needs of Military Kids

The ESSA's MSI presents an important opportunity which, if used to its potential, can make an important difference as a tool to help schools understand the specific educational and social-emotional needs of the estimated 1.2 million military-connected students and to help better meet those needs.<sup>17</sup> (Nearly 80 percent of military-connected students attend local public schools.<sup>18</sup>)

In fact, if implemented properly by state education agencies and used to its full potential by districts, schools, and educators, the identifier will benefit not just military-connected students, but also reveal their impact on other students, schools, and districts, and provide a way to evaluate the specific policies and services which impact them. The frequent transitions and the learned adaptability of military-connected students creates a flexibility, resilience, and independence among these students, which can provide a strong example to other students.

The most important details in these implementations will have to do with how state and district education agencies integrate the MSI into their existing student data systems to illuminate the progress these students are making in useful ways.

For example, one aspect of this work which can strengthen its usefulness will be how states' data systems include children connected with mobilized members of the National Guard and Reserves. While not required directly by the federal law to specifically identify children of mobilized Guard or Reserve personnel, it is widely recognized among educators that these student populations face specific challenges

which can be different than those of other military-connected students, and thus there would be value in the ability to monitor their academic progress distinctly.

Also, while it is not explicitly required under ESSA that military-connected student reporting include all the other required accountability indicators, like the longitudinal growth of individual students on assessments and graduation rates, there would be considerable value in states and districts working to include this ability to track their progress within their student data systems. If school districts want to advance their work with military-connected students to the full potential made possible by the MSI, they should go beyond the law's requirements and identify which students are connected with the National Guard or Reserves and provide different supports for these students on the basis of their needs. The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) continues to serve as a valued advisor to many state education agencies as they work to adapt their data systems to optimally incorporate the MSI.

Knowing detailed information about military-connected students and families enables districts to better understand and better serve this important population, meeting students and families where they are at and helping them take full advantage of the educational opportunities while they are attending that district and school.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defense Education Activity, "Leveling the Playing Field for Military-Connected Students." <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/Leveling-the-Playing-Field-for-Military-Connected-Students.pdf> or Clever & Segal, Demographics of Military Families, Future of Children.

<sup>18</sup> Government Accountability Office, Education of Military Dependent Students, 2011, p. 11.

Research shows teachers are the most important in-school factor affecting student performance. Teachers with many military-connected students are faced with the complicated task of trying to identify gaps in the student's knowledge and skills so that they can fully engage with the current coursework. This is true even when a transition takes place at the start of the school year, but even more difficult when a military-connected student arrives in the middle of the year. One crucial aspect described by educators and leaders is the importance of effective professional development for teachers in schools with military-connected students is being able to adapt content for a new student. Supporting individualization with appropriate digital content can help.

In Missouri's Waynesville R-VI School District, serving most students connected with the Army's Fort Leonard Wood so that nearly 80 percent of the district's students are military-connected, Superintendent Brian Henry and his team make professional development a constant priority.

**"All of our professional development in some way references the needs of military students; however, serving military students requires a greater professional development focus on effective academic interventions, including building the capacity of our teachers to conduct action research and attempt to address learning needs in a timely fashion," observes Dr. Henry.**

Professional development for educators focuses on effective data teaming to quickly determine the standards needing additional time and focus, as well as training to promote action research linked to utilizing research-based effective learning strategies.

The district conducts three or four formal, district-wide professional days each school year for its educators. Meanwhile, school-level professional development is treated as an ongoing experience structured monthly. This process is driven by teacher-leaders and administrators working within the selected focus of a school-level school improvement plan.

"It is very important that our staff are learners themselves and have an expanding instructional toolbox that can

address the needs of students with a wide variance in proficiency toward our state standards," Superintendent Henry notes. "This variance is the result of transitioning through numerous different sets of state standards as military children. Effective instruction and timely intervention mitigates the learning delays some military students face.

"We strive to instill in our teachers a thirst for learning and improvement, high expectations for students, and a willingness to fail forward, try something new, and let data inform instruction."<sup>19</sup>

In Virginia Beach, two district-funded Military-Connected Counselors (MCCs) provide extensive support to other staff. They differentiate their support based on elementary, middle, and high schools to reflect the different needs at each level. For elementary schools, they generally focus on small group training; in middle school, it is more about individual staff, and in high school, it is both individual and through pairing of teachers. The focus of this professional learning support is on the social and emotional needs of military-connected students. The counselors provide extensive support in the first two weeks of a military-connected student's transition to the new school and then sustain continuous professional learning support with at least two touch points during the school year.

**Data-driven culture.** Efficacious, data-driven culture supports classroom teachers as they guide instruction, intervention, and enrichment. Through the effective use of the MSI, educators and leaders can better know and personalize their interactions with students, including the provision of both academic and non-academic services more quickly and effectively to transitioning students.

The MSI will require districts to use a 'flag' — or some notation — in data systems to identify students with active-duty military parents. Having this information on military-connected students will allow schools and officials to better understand how military-connected students and the programs supporting them are performing.

One example of how a district can put the MSI into action is the Virginia Beach City Public Schools in Virginia (VBS). In 2017, the district started putting a purple star by each military-connected student in the student information system to make teachers constantly aware of the military-connected students in their classes (rather than having to always remember and/or pull reports).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the authors, July 13, 2018.





Students rising for the pledge during Take a Vet to School Day salute; Courtesy of Coronado Unified School District

Virginia Beach also has a deep appreciation for how data can help inform the fuller picture of military-connected student distribution across schools. Twenty-five percent of students served by the district are military-connected. However, the share of military-connected students in individual schools varies depending on the school; the schools closer to bases have the higher percentage of military-connected students. But it is not just the percentages that are important; the district also has deep knowledge of the units and missions of the parents of these military-connected students, which can significantly alter these students' experiences.

For example, students of Navy SEALs tend to cluster in one school, and those students don't know where — or for how long — their parent will be deployed, which significantly affects emotional equilibrium. On the other hand, some parents of military-connected students primarily work on-base domestically and rarely deploy, which has different implications for support.

But the educational picture in VBS is further informed by the close review of data on the mobility of military-connected students. Of Virginia Beach's military-connected students, about half are highly mobile (meaning they are moving into or out of schools within one to two years of arrival or departure). Which schools are most affected by this mobility helps the district determine which schools need more and different types of support. Moreover, mobility tends to be

higher in elementary — as much as 60 percent year-over-year — than in middle or high school. Again, if large numbers of military-connected elementary students are moving in and out of schools, the amount of support provided to these schools and their staff will be quite different in scope and frequency than those with less change.

The effective use of the MSI across the country will help all districts better understand the concentration and mobility of their military-connected students, thereby improving service delivery and efficiency.

Several districts observed for this report make extensive use of data to apply for various supplemental grant funding through public and private sources. Virginia Beach has secured multiple awards from the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Grants to Military-Connected Local Educational Agencies for Academic and Support Programs (MCASP)<sup>20</sup>, a grant program that supports research-based strategies that enhance student achievement and ease the challenges that military-connected children face due to their family's military service, which the district attributes in part to their systemic collection and use of data. California's Coronado Unified has won four DoDEA grants between 2009 and 2017, totaling \$5.3 million, supporting a wide range of educational needs of military-connected students.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For more information about DoDEA's Partnership Grant Program, visit: <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/grants.cfm>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Superintendent Karl Mueller with the authors, February 1, 2018.

Columbia County Schools received a three-year grant from the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) College Readiness for Military Families Grant Program<sup>22</sup> of \$2.7 million in 2017 for four of its five high schools. These funds are used to promote and support students taking Advanced Placement exams by the College Board. The fifth high school in CCSD — Grovetown — completed its three-year NMSI grant in 2017 and has moved to sustaining its gains.<sup>23</sup> High-quality data was instrumental in supporting these grant applications, and the MSI should similarly help other districts seek additional funding from third-party sources to support military-connected students.

In a thoughtful implementation of a data-driven culture, schools in Coronado Unified School District make innovative use of a program called Teachers on Special Assignments, or TOSAs. These are experienced educators (who are often military spouses) who help classroom teachers with student performance data.

In Coronado, the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment is administered to students three times each year for use as a formative assessment. Teachers, with support from TOSAs, use performance data from these assessments to target small group instruction, interventions and instruction.

Most mornings, Coronado students participate in a data-driven “Before-School Academic Support and Enrichment Program” which offers targeted academic support in areas aligned with content standards identified by grade-level teachers using various digital content.

Districts often take precautions in handling sensitive information about military-connected students, like in Virginia Beach, where the school that children of Navy SEALs attend is not identified; the mere fact that some students are so identified can run counter to parental wishes. District best practices around knowing the military culture, service branch particulars, type of service (e.g., combat vs. intelligence), and background of students can enhance the ability of districts to proactively and positively support and address social-emotional and academic needs.

### **Clear staff responsibilities for the performance and well-being of military-connected students.**

Districts that are intentional about how staff engage with students, family, military staff, and other stakeholders is critical to ensuring services are delivered, problems are identified early and consistently, and solutions are vetted for maximum buy-in.

A district excelling in its efforts to educate military-connected students in highly effective ways requires strong district leadership to ensure efforts are comprehensive, aligned, and sustained district-wide. Dr. Sandra Carraway, Columbia County superintendent, embodies this necessity. She has ensured her leadership team works in support of school-based personnel to meet the needs of military-connected students. This commitment pervades the district from top to bottom and is an essential ingredient in their success.<sup>24</sup>

All assistant superintendents in CCSD have clear responsibilities for military-connected students around support, instruction, communication, and data. They routinely and closely collaborate with building staff, including principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers, and aides.

CCSD principals are specifically charged with overseeing building efforts to address the whole spectrum of support for military-connected students. Chris Segraves, principal of Greenbrier High School, and Craig Baker, principal of Grovetown High School, have clearly organized their staff to address all aspects of educating military-connected students. The CCSD Local Action Plan<sup>25</sup> is a useful resource that clearly articulates responsibilities for supporting military-connected students. It should be obvious that the efforts outlined in the Local Action Plan would not be effective without high quality data. For districts looking to emulate this approach, the MSI will serve as a critical enabler.

The Local Action Plan’s collaborative approach goes well beyond district staff. The district makes extensive use

<sup>22</sup> For more information about the National Math and Science Initiative College Readiness for Military Families Grant Program, visit: <http://www.nmsi.org/Our-Approach/Military-Mission.aspx>

<sup>23</sup> “Columbia County Schools to Receive College Readiness Program Grant,” WRDW.com, August 7, 2017. <http://www.wrdw.com/content/news/-Columbia-County-Schools-to-receive-College-Readiness-Program-Grant-438311853.html>

<sup>24</sup> Author interview of Dr. Sandra Carraway, January 16, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Columbia County School District website: <https://4.files.edl.io/60c7/06/15/18/224140-bceada50-b35d-4ad6-9ca5-e095127b4783.pdf>; Accessed March 2018.



of seven Military Family Life Counselors embedded in all school activities and perform such important roles as leading counseling groups, one-on-one counseling for students, grade level “deployment clubs,” and leading “ambassador clubs” to host new children on their first day of school.

In schools around the country serving military-connected student, the military’s School Liaison Officers (SLOs) are a valuable resource to military families as they transition. In Columbia County, SLOs substantially ease the transition for military families, while providing schools with a single point of contact that help school staff better understand military culture and military family needs. However, sometimes these SLOs are stretched thin in having to cover multiple districts, which can limit their ability to work individually with all transitioning families.

At Virginia Beach City Public Schools, the efforts start at the top. Superintendent Dr. Aaron C. Spence is a member of the Virginia Council on the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. He has also charged his leadership team to consistently and proactively meet and exceed the expectations of military-connected students and their families. Many of the efforts were spearheaded by Dr. Amy Cashwell, the district’s former Chief Academic Officer.

**Virginia Beach uses two of their own dedicated military-connected counselors to focus on three core areas:**

- 1 Preparation for post-secondary life;
- 2 Academic transfer issues (especially relating to credits); and
- 3 Social-emotional learning.

These dedicated counselors are in addition to other supports provided by the districts and the military (e.g., SLOs). As previously discussed, VBS makes extensive use of data, and the three main areas of focus described above are driven by the use of data to identify ongoing need and to gauge success. As districts consider how to best organize themselves around the education and support of military-connected students, taking time to review what the data from the MSI shows about student performance and outcomes is critical.

Strong relationships between school districts and the military bases they serve can take many forms; Courtesy of Waynesville R-VI School District



## Diving Deeper Into Military-Connected Student Performance

While much has been published about the specific challenges facing military-connected students, the education practitioners whose job it is to meet their educational needs do so with little in the way of data-informed approaches about these students. This is due to a variety of reasons, among them the military's practice of sharing only a minimum of information about its families with the education community.

Coupled with the fact that families move a great deal between different states, the cross-section of student factors educators routinely draw upon to assign evidence-based practices to address their specific needs is rarely available to help this crucial student population.

Anecdotally, and in relation to data analysis that frequently isn't more detailed than aggregates and averages, a portrait of generally academically-proficient military-connected students is usually described. However, like many aspects of the education of military-connected student highlighted herein, there is more depth and complexity to the picture.

For example, an exception to this narrative is a 2017 analysis led by the Military Child Education Coalition, which examined various aspects of military-connected students in Texas during the 2014-15 school year. The collaboration

with researchers from the Educational Leadership Research Center at Texas A&M University found that among students who were not classified as economically-disadvantaged, military-connected students had lower passing rates on end-of-course exams for grades four, five, and eight in reading and math than their non-military classmates. For students from economically-disadvantaged households, however, this trend was reversed.<sup>26</sup>

The analysis also identified some demographic trends of interest to educators. For example, the research team found that compared to the overall Texas student population, active-duty, military-connected students are younger and less likely to be economically-disadvantaged (36 percent versus 59 percent), more likely to be white (38 percent versus 29 percent), African-American (19 percent versus 13 percent), while less likely to be Hispanic (33 percent versus 52 percent) or limited-English proficient (4 percent versus 19 percent).

Active-duty, military-connected students were found to be identified at a slightly higher rate than their civilian classmates with both special needs (9.2 percent versus 8.6 percent) and at a slightly lower rate for participation in gifted and talented programs (6.8 percent versus 7.6 percent).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *The Military Student Identifier: A Texas Study*. Dr. Robert Muller, Lead Investigator, Dr. Fuhui Tong, Co-Investigator, Dr. Philip J. Irby, Co-Investigator. Texas A&M University, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



Across all the districts visited or interviewed, the efforts of district and base staff are woven into the fabric of the educational systems. They are instrumental to the entire educational experience for all students. The educational and emotional support for military-connected students is given a unique focus or emphasis with the broader structures, but are not, with few exceptions, created wholly and independently. In this way, the districts are sending a powerful signal to staff, students, and families that military-connected students may have unique needs, but are part and parcel of the entire educational experience.

### Domain III — Systems and Communities

Reaching beyond the walls of the classroom to the broader community — including any military base(s) present — is critical to successfully meeting the needs of military-connected students (Domain I) and supporting educators and leaders around excellence in serving these students (Domain II). By thoughtfully implementing these characteristics across all schools and extending to those with a stake in the success of military-connected students, districts can take a significant step toward wide and deep success that is sustainable across changing demographics and inevitable leadership transitions.

**Timely and thorough family information/communication.** Knowledgeable, dedicated staff are on the lookout for academic and non-academic opportunities for learners, with ongoing outreach to military families to keep them informed, engaged and foster understanding of these opportunities. District and base staff collaborate closely on all aspects of support for military-connected students, including ways to integrate base staff and leadership into teaching and learning, as well as extra-curricular activities.

California's Sweetwater Unified School District, a secondary district consisting of middle and high schools, maintains a strong emphasis on helping students and families identify college scholarship opportunities. Designated scholarship counselors work directly with students to make them aware of useful opportunities.

For schools serving students with parents on extended deployments, programs for engaging parents directly with students in school are often popular, welcomed opportunities. Coronado Unified elementary schools run a program called Unified Through Reading, where soon-to-be-deployed parents are filmed at the school reading a story aloud and recording video messages to their children. The sessions are saved as DVD recordings and given to families.

The required effort needed to maintain operational security can have an impact on how districts respond to the changing assignments and missions of installations. Districts may not always know what is affecting their military-connected students, but often events happening in the military have personal impacts on students and in the broader military community, which can ripple through the schools. Districts have to exercise sensitivity to changes in student behavior resulting from the impacts of their parent's service and underscores the need for strong family communication. Districts need to be able to get as much information as possible from the military within the bounds of operational security in order to better respond to the academic and emotional needs of impacted students.

District leaders were quick to point out that there are differences between the military branches and within each branch depending on the type of service. For example, the nature of the military population around Columbia County is changing with the base's mission to be more cyber intelligence-focused; this creates a different mix of soldiers — from more enlisted and transient to one of more technologically skilled and less transient — and the supporting community also changes based on these shifting missions. At Virginia Beach, with eight different installations, there is a wide variety of missions that require a great degree of flexibility around needs and awareness of military assignments and service member roles and duties. With better data about student performance, these differences and nuances can be better understood and addressed.

As previously noted, though, some military families prefer to not identify themselves to districts for security reasons; the identifier will help districts better understand who is attending their schools and provide appropriate support and services, but districts will also need to be thoughtful in how they approach families that may not want to be identified.

**High expectations for all students by all administrators and staff.** Embracing practices supporting continuous improvement, district leaders who expect the best from their students and their staff tend to create a virtuous cycle of improvement where each success achieved is met with efforts to do even better.

**Military service members are held to the highest of standards and expectations in their various roles in service to our country and their respective missions. As parents, these service members expect nothing less from the educational systems they will interact with as their children progress through their academic careers.**

The military branches are becoming increasingly involved in working with districts to ensure the best possible experiences for their military families. In fact, the quality of education has become an important factor in whether service members re-enlist.

As one example, over 600 soldiers and civilians (including their families) will move to the greater Augusta, GA, area, including Columbia County, as part of the military's effort to relocate the U.S. Army Cyber Command from Virginia and Maryland to Fort Gordon over the next few years.<sup>28</sup>

Before the decision to move to Georgia was made, however, local districts traveled to the Pentagon to make the case that they were ready, willing, and capable of meeting the needs of the Cyber Command. Columbia County school district had to show how their level of service — and ability to produce strong academic outcomes — would be a good fit for the transitioning troops and their mission.<sup>29</sup>

After a number of years of solid, if unremarkable, performance, the district started putting the pieces in place to take a large step forward. And it shows. On the most recent statewide summary of district performance, CCSD had higher overall performance than 84 percent of districts in Georgia. Its elementary students' academic growth is higher than 51 percent of districts; middle school students' academic growth was higher than 51 percent of districts; and high school students' academic growth is higher than 87 percent of districts.<sup>30</sup>

Missouri's Waynesville R-VI School District Superintendent Brian Henry explains that in his district, "We strive to instill in our teachers a thirst for learning and improvement, high expectations for students, and a willingness to fail forward, try something new, and let data inform instruction. Being an educator in a military-connected school system means you are part of our country's military readiness and the mission of our armed services. Our role is key to the success of service members, especially when deployed. If a service member is concerned about the safety or effectiveness of their child's learning environment, he/she cannot be as effective in the field."<sup>31</sup>

Generally, the children of military service members achieve good academic outcomes. In some cases, this results in the perception that these students are generally fine academically, despite some turbulence in meeting credit hour requirements due to transfers. Or, that these military-connected students just need additional social and emotional support. This emphasis is reflected in the prevalence of programs and documents that only address this important, but targeted, need.

<sup>28</sup> Damon Cline, "On the frontlines of cyber war," *Augusta Magazine*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.augustamagazine.com/2015/04/01/on-the-frontlines-of-cyber-war/>

<sup>29</sup> Author interview with Dr. Sandra Carraway, January 16, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> For more information about CCSD's academic performance on state accountability indicators, visit: <https://schoolgrades.georgia.gov/columbia-county>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with the authors, July 13, 2018.



Service member reading to and engaging with elementary students; Courtesy of Virginia Beach City Public Schools

Excelling at educating military-connected students requires that districts take a broader view. Many military-connected students are advanced academically and districts must recognize how to continually advance these students' performance. Just meeting their social and emotional needs, or any academic transfer issues, would not be enough. Effectively employing data about these students — particularly with the MSI coming online — will help districts maintain and accelerate strong academic performance.

Further, there is a dearth of data about how military-connected students perform as they get older, in terms of both graduation rates and readiness for post-secondary life, whether college, career, or military. At Virginia Beach City Public Schools, the two dedicated military-connected student counselors focus on post-secondary transitions. All districts report on graduation rates and most are now starting to track college and career readiness. But as the prevalence of data on military-connected students increases with the MSI, districts will be able to specifically examine how military-connected students perform within these broader indicators of performance.

However, it should be noted that ESSA does not require districts to disaggregate data on military-connected students for all accountability indicators (learn more on page 24). But districts looking to excel in their support of military-connected students would be able to get to this level of analysis through their own systems and decisions.

**Robust, communicative working relationship between base and district.** Districts need to keep abreast of military developments, understand the often-evolving mission of the base, and the nature of the service members there to better serve their military-connected students. Base leadership needs to understand the needs of the district and how they can support and engage in ways that benefit all students.

A strong relationship between installation staff, district and school personnel, and military-connected families is critical to helping families and students receive the support and services they need. Unfortunately, these relationships must overcome leadership changes and other pressures, and strong relationships are not always the case. The capacity and priorities to develop the relationships, supported by resources and time on task, varies across school districts and installations. It seems evident though, that military leadership continues to place a meaningful priority on improving these relationships. In the districts profiled for this report, the district-base relationship was solid, and it showed.

Without close attention to relevant and timely data, districts and bases are not able to meet each other's needs effectively and productively. District leaders need to well-understand the mission of the base, and essential characteristics of those service members stationed there to better serve



their military-connected students. Base leadership must understand the needs of the district and how they can support and engage in ways that benefit all students.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons for districts is to use military-connected student data to build and support strategic communications underlying a strong relationship between military and educational leadership and staff. Close communication, cooperation, and alignment between installations and districts enables greater and more successful service delivery and outcomes.

Often, the effectiveness of the district-base relationship can be difficult to institutionalize or sustain because it is often driven by specific people in key positions. With frequent changes at the leadership of bases or districts, these relationships have potential to falter. That is why it is important to prioritize maintaining these partnerships and relationships at the system level, so they can survive leadership transitions by making them a core value of both the military and education systems.

This is true at Columbia County School District and others, where the district has put a base representative on the school board as an ex-officio member. Other districts, like Virginia Beach, have established standing committees of district and base personnel, as well as parents and community leaders, who regularly meet to address opportunities and challenges in relation to serving military-connected students. In this way, information on military-

connected student performance and how schools interact with military families is regularly reviewed by all stakeholders.

The Coronado Unified School District, and its superintendent Karl Mueller, typifies a district which maintains an excellent, communicative relationship with the commanding officers at the nearby bases. The district's elected school board includes two retired military officers, who champion the needs of military-connected students.

When the mission of a particular military installation shifts, and with it the composition of its workforce, this becomes vital planning information for school district leaders. On a different level, school districts frequently rely on military spouses to fill important teaching and administrative roles. When military personnel decisions impact their ability to continue serving in these roles, optimizing timing and communication between organizations can make an essential difference in how schools are able to meet students' needs.

For school district decision-makers needing to keep planning processes on track, the strongest possible communication between base and district leaders is necessary for the efficacy of those planning processes.

Sometimes, as with Georgia's Columbia County Schools, there is advance notice and preplanning that takes place to prepare for the shifting nature of the base's mission and service members. In other cases, this is or has not been the

Strong district-base relationships are critical to helping families and students receive the support and services they need; Courtesy of Virginia Beach City Public Schools





case, often because of operational security reasons, which reinforces how essential district-base relations are and the close connection districts need with formal (MFLCs, SLOs) and informal (military spouses and military culture) military resources to adjust and adapt.

Columbia County has been conducting long-range planning in anticipation of Cyber Command locating to the area. For example, educators there have been adding programs in their middle schools, to include National Integrated Cyber Education Research Center curriculum and a middle school course regarding information technology. They are expanding “CyberPatriot” teams and strengthening their partnership with Fort Gordon cyber-connected brigades. CCSD schools are fairly well-situated to accommodate growth, but have planned for an additional high school campus that will serve any students interested in pursuing coursework related to yet to be determined workforce needs, which are being studied now. Also, the district is increasing online offerings, allowing students to choose home study, in addition to high school and college facilities.

CCSD and Fort Gordon have also adopted an innovative Army program where a local school is matched with a unit, called “Adopt-A-School.” All schools in CCSD are paired with a specific unit from the base; Greenbrier High School has been “adopted” by the Cyber Protection Brigade and Grovetown High School by the 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion.

There are a wide range of activities conducted under this program, each with the goal to “routinely contribute military resources and services to schools in order to nurture the intellectual, emotional, social, and physical growth of children in the Fort Gordon area.”<sup>32</sup> Activities conducted under this program include one innovative collaboration, a “hack-a-thon” that the Cyber Protection Brigade conducts with Greenbrier High School. The base’s various units routinely have competitions to see which unit is most engaged with the school system.

**The district and Fort Gordon have created a plan to “emphasize strategies to be implemented in order to address the issue of transitioning military connected children.”<sup>33</sup> Among the many strategies, most are directly related to the use of data on military-connected students:**

- ▶ Improve the timely transfer of student records;
- ▶ Develop systems to ease student transition;
- ▶ Establish procedures to lessen the adverse impact of moves/deployment;
- ▶ Communicate variations in the school calendars and schedules;
- ▶ Create and implement professional development systems;
- ▶ Continue strong, child-centered partnerships between the installation and supporting schools;
- ▶ Provide information concerning graduation requirements; and
- ▶ Provide specialized services for transitioning students when applying to and finding funding for postsecondary study, or when transitioning from school to work.

Great relationships are built and sustained by the constant communication of useful information. This communication is valuable for many reasons and on many levels, including the simple fact that a military facility and a school district are often the two largest employers in their communities.



First day of school; Courtesy of Columbia County School District

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Army, Fort Gordon, Adopt-A-School brochure, provided to author by Columbia County School District Feb. 7, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Columbia County School District website: <https://4.files.edl.io/60c7/06/15/18/224140-bceada50-b35d-4ad6-9ca5-e095127b4783.pdf>; Accessed March 2018.

## Congress Should Expand The MSI To Track Key Education Indicators

While the required inclusion of military-connected student assessment data in public reporting is a bold step in the right direction, ESSA does not require military-connected student data be reported for the other accountability indicators required by ESSA, including growth on assessments, graduation rates, and other academic indicators.

This is a problematic oversight in the law; states and districts would better serve military-connected students and families by fully including the performance of military-connected students on all accountability indicators to get a more comprehensive view of military-connected student performance.

Congress should consider expanding the reporting on military-connected students to all accountability indicators under ESSA so states, districts, schools, educators, military staff, and especially families and parents can have a more complete picture of military-connected student performance. After all, if military-connected students are being identified in the data, why not report all pertinent data available, not just some of it?

**By taking the next logical step in reporting on military-connected students, states, districts, schools, educators, and families will have a more complete and actionable picture of military-connected student performance and be able to better understand what successes are being achieved, what supports may be needed, and how resources can be better applied.**



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lexington Institute Adjunct Scholar **Doug Mesecar** has served as a senior official at the U.S. Department of Education, as well as with leading education companies and in Congress. At the U.S. Department of Education, Mesecar served in a number of senior roles: Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Innovation and Improvement, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Department. In Congress, Mesecar was a senior professional staff member on the House Education and Workforce Committee.

✉ [mesecar@lexingtoninstitute.org](mailto:mesecar@lexingtoninstitute.org)

🐦 [@dmes](https://twitter.com/dmes)

**Don Soifer** is Senior Fellow with the Lexington Institute. He also serves as President of Nevada Action for School Options, a nonprofit he founded in Las Vegas in 2017. Soifer's research has been published and discussed in many of the nation's most influential news outlets and journals. He has testified before the U.S. Congress on several occasions, and in official hearings of numerous federal and state agencies.

✉ [soifer@lexingtoninstitute.org](mailto:soifer@lexingtoninstitute.org)

🐦 [@donsoifer](https://twitter.com/donsoifer)



1600 Wilson Boulevard  
Suite 203  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Tel 703.522.5828  
Fax 703.522.5837  
[mail@lexingtoninstitute.org](mailto:mail@lexingtoninstitute.org)