



**NEEDS OF MILITARY-CONNECTED SCHOOL DIVISIONS IN SOUTH-EASTERN VIRGINIA**

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# **Needs of Military-Connected School Divisions in South-Eastern Virginia**

A Technical Report by  
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## **Abstract**

This technical report presents the findings of a

## Executive Summary

Schools must meet a wide array of academic, social and emotional, and organizational challenges to effectively educate military connected students who are experiencing transition or deployment of a family member. In this study, we visited eight elementary schools that serve high concentrations of military connected students to gather information about their needs and existing strategies for supporting these students. This study was conducted in a state that is home to 327,000 active-duty military and family members, the second-largest active-duty military population in the nation (Virginia National Guard, 2011). We purposefully selected schools with varying populations of military connected students. Children of service members from all branches of the military were represented in the school settings selected. We interviewed and conducted focus group and survey data collection efforts with teachers, principals, counselors and other specialists. School personnel responses were analyzed for themes that capture responses to academic and social-emotional needs of military students and the unique position that these schools are in, in terms of providing high quality educational services to all of their students.

Our findings illustrate that, while public schools continually strive to provide excellent educational services to military students, they experience unique challenges due to the specific needs of these students. Furthermore, a great opportunity and willingness exists for schools to improve their systemic capacities to respond to military student needs if resources can be found and embedded on a school-wide basis. We found evidence of specific measures that schools are required to take to cope with the academic and social and emotional consequences of transition and deployment. In regards to significant numbers of student transitions, a number of demands are placed on the school. Critical areas of responsibility include the need to provide remediation for transition-related gaps in learning, the need to prepare students for mandated state and district-wide assessments for which requisite knowledge may be lacking, and the need to undertake complex grading, retention and placement decisions for transitioning students. For students with disabilities, schools must provide additional highly individualized evaluations and services to transitioning students with disabilities, while adapting their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to local and state contexts. The demand to provide these specialized services is particularly substantial in schools that serve bases with high concentrations of military-connected students with disabilities as a result of policies governing the stationing of service members with exceptional family members.

We found evidence that schools help transitioning students adjust to new pedagogical structures and pacing by working hard to implement appropriate accommodations and differentiated instruction. In some schools, staff invest time to induct new transitioning students into the academic and social life of their new classroom and school, establish systems to help students who miss many days of school due to transitions or deployment related issues, and put in place mechanisms for enhancing school connectedness for transitioning students and families. They institute creative ways to provide homework and other academic supports for students who have less support at home due to the deployment of a parent, and establish responsive classroom and school settings to meet the social and emotional needs of students struggling with transition and deployment related stressors, including in some instances the provision of counseling services.

Schools' ability to address these issues and promote student wellbeing and academic progress is intimately connected to the ways schools do business. Supportive school communities are not likely to be developed solely through externalized or add-on programs and supports without concomitant change at the school level. There is therefore a need to build capacity *within* schools to meet the needs of military connected students. Although external programs and resources can be beneficial, they require

internalized structures and supports to be able to take root and become part of the life and institutional memory of the school. Furthermore, limited funding availability makes it imperative to empower schools and school personnel to maximize their own resources to meet the needs of military connected students.

Sustainability is possible if capacity is built simultaneously inside-out and outside-in (Bol, Nunnery, & Lowther, 1998). With this in mind, our recommendations for the Department of Defense and others seeking to enhance school responsiveness to the specific needs of military connected children are:

- 1. Provide sustained, comprehensive, job embedded professional development for school staff who work with military connected students to create the capacity for building school-wide programs and practices that meet the academic and social-emotional needs of military students and families.** The impacts of transition and deployment are realized at the school, classroom and individual levels and, in the context of the schools we visited, represent an important continuing local context for educators' daily work. Accordingly, staff who work with military connected students at *all* these levels—namely administrators, teachers and other instructional staff, and counselors and other support service providers—must be aware of and able to address the educational needs created by transition and deployment. Furthermore, this training must extend beyond the simple awareness of issues and equip professionals with the methods and tools they need to be able to create and implement the academic and social-emotional supports needed by their students coping with transition and deployment related issues. Teachers, administrators, counselors and other school staff should be assisted in creating classrooms and schools in which all military connected students can succeed by equipping them with a repertoire of tools, exemplars and models they can use in their actual job capacities, time to explore them, assistance with implementation of these tools, and the construction of customized tools that fit their own local school contexts. According to the participants in our study, this sort of assistance would likely be well received and utilized at this time. Over 80% of the teachers we surveyed indicated that it is a priority for them to learn more about the needs of military connected students while only 11% indicated that they had received special training to address the needs of military connected students.
- 2. Provide support for additional school-based personnel to assist with the academic and social emotional challenges of transition and deployment.** Additional counselors, smaller student to teacher ratios, and additional administrative support all provide 'boots on the ground' where they are often most needed in schools. Because some of the needs associated with transitions and deployments are so highly individualized, requiring for example additional counseling to cope with stress, or quick turn-around evaluations, or individualized academic remediation, more on-site school staff to implement these specialized services logistically becomes a necessity if they are to be offered. Quite often the barrier to meeting the needs of students struggling with transition and deployment issues in our schools was described by our participants as not a "what to do" problem but a "who to do it" problem. Public schools with high concentrations of military connected students have unique staffing needs that, if not addressed, lower the capacity to provide a high quality education for *all* children, not just those whose parents are serving our country.
- 3. Assist schools in establishing systems to identify and respond to changing needs of military connected students, and monitor outcomes.** We did not find evidence that schools in our study had formal systems in place to

connected students as a group, nor to systematically assess and reflect on their school-wide efforts to provide a military conscious school environment. We recommend that resources be dedicated to helping schools establish and share these systems and tools so they are better able to build and sustain comprehensive school wide approaches to meet the changing needs of their military connected students. Doing so would also enhance mechanisms by which school districts and agencies can be held accountable for the ways in which resources are being developed and used.

- 4. Enhance school-military partnerships and communications.** Most of the participants in our study mentioned desiring more information about upcoming transitions and deployments so they are better able to anticipate needs and target services, as well as more information about resources. While our counselor participants made us aware that many resources do exist, connecting them to teachers so they may be utilized in the day to day life of the classroom appears to be an area that requires more attention. Fewer than 25% of teachers we surveyed indicated they had access to a list of resources and services to support the needs of military connected students and fewer than 14% agreed that school staff were well informed about military-based support services for military connected students.

In summary, our findings point both to the existence of significant awareness and desire to support the needs of military connected students and a critical need to increase systemic capacity in schools that serve substantial populations of military connected students.

## **Introduction**

the two researchers at 95% agreement for five main themes in teacher focus group transcripts; 95% agreement in school counselor transcripts; and 100% agreement in principal interview transcripts. After inter-rater agreement was established, one researcher coded the remaining transcripts. SPSS 18.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics for the questionnaire data.

Consistent themes emerged from the voices of practitioners in the eight military-connected public schools we selected for our study. The research design we employed was intended to provide a deeper understanding of the issues faced by educators of military-connected children in elementary schools in southeastern Virginia. Thus, while the findings may not necessarily be generalizable to other settings, they do provide a valuable insight into the experiences of these educators.



military connected students that report school personnel perceive one of the greatest challenges they face is meeting the increased academic needs of transitioning students due to difference in state and district curricula (GAO, 2011). One teacher in our study won

a school with an almost exclusively military connected population remarked, “My need here is really academic...I have got to provide some sort of intervention. Because I am not a Title 1 school and because I meet state accreditation, I have no assistance.” Conversely, the principal of a school that is Title 1 told us, “Academic n



Furthermore, each state interprets the law and provides guidance to the local education agencies, or school districts, which take this guidance to conduct evaluations of students potentially eligible for special services to determine if criteria are met, and specify the services to be provided (Salend, 2011). The result of this cooperative federalism in special education is that transitioning students may have had one set of services or supports in their previous school and the new school may determine another set of services or a different service delivery approach is more appropriate. As one counselor put it, “The child who comes with a certain set of services for Florida may come here and not be entitled to those services.

true. You want to give them time when they enroll in your school but some of these military kids can be at a different school every year. It is fifth grade and you find out they are still reading on a second or third grade level and it never showed up.” Together, these comments suggest if not resourced to cope with the additional demands of educating a student body that has such a high likelihood of transition, the potential for over-, under-, or mis-

week of school after your Dad has been fighting for our country. It goes back to flexibility and understanding.”

However, we did not hear any evidence of formal systems in place to support military connected students in keeping up with academics when they were absent. Participants did note that it was difficult to pre-plan academic supports because they often had little or no advance warning about deployments, leaves or homecomings. One principal commented, “Attendance is a challenge. They up and leave. If a service member comes back mid-tour or at the end of deployment, generally we get no warning.” Encouraging better advance communications with schools on the part of parents, establishing systems in schools to solicit and gather this information from parents, and providing schools directly with some advance information from military installations to anticipate these events may assist schools in supporting the academic needs of military connected students who miss periods of instruction due to transition and deployment related absences.

Deployments were frequently mentioned by our participants as having a significant impact on the amount of home support for learning and academics military connected students received. As one counselor stated, “Sometimes you see differences first in academics because instead of two people being in the house it becomes a single parent, or with a guardian, a neighbor. So sometimes there is a change in academics because they were used to a routine. You run into some of the older ones not having anyone to help them with their homework because the spouse is not at home and working too. Sometimes we see a decrease in the academic progress.” Difficulty completing homework when one parent is deployed has been found in other studies to have a negative impact on student academic achievement (RAND, 2011). Participants described several approaches to dealing with this problem, including some teachers who described starting homework early with students because they knew that when they got home they would have to work independently on it. One school principal detailed the creation of an afterschool program to assist with academics and child care, which benefited students who had a deployed parent and one parent at home who needed to work. Another participant indicated there had been a homework club that was situated on base about 5 years ago. Transportation for students was provided and teachers received a stipend for running the club, which she felt was very helpful for students who had parents who were deployed and unable to get as much adult assistance at home. Several participants also mentioned that having more information about when a child’s parent was deployed would be beneficial in offering homework and other targeted academic supports. As one teacher articulated, “I understand it is a busy time in their life if someone is going out on deployment as we see the kids sometimes more than the parents do. We need to know when things are going on. Kids are not turning in their work and just not doing their best either.”

Many of the participants expressed a desire for more information about military agencies and supports that could help them assist students with deployment and transition related academic needs in general. One teacher stated, “We need to know that there are agencies within the military that we can turn to if we really need their help.” School counselors, community liaisons, and to a lesser extent principals, interviewed were much more likely to be able to describe and specifically name military resources than were teachers in our study. But because teachers are closest to the students and responsible for their academic success, it is important for them to be aware of needs and resources for supporting military connected students. Systems for ongoing professional development for teachers regarding the specific academic support needs of military connected students and the resources available that they could employ at the level of classroom teaching would enable schools to build capacity in their teaching staff to better meet the needs of military connected students struggling with both transition and deployment related school challenges.

**The Social-Emotional Impacts of Transition and Deployment in Military-Connected Schools:  
School-based Issues, Needs and Responses**

**The Effects of Transition on Social Emotional Wellbeing**





bunch of kids in the class who are emotional. We play a happy song and the girls start crying. We are not counselors.”

As a group, participants displayed high levels of awareness of the need to address social emotional needs in military connected students. But while counselors and other support personnel provide invaluable assistance, their numbers in schools are limited. Although teachers work intensively with these students each day, we found little evidence of additional supports or sustained programs that could developing their awareness and knowledge-base of social-emotional issues related to transition and deployment. When asked about satisfaction with the choices that exist for emotional support services for military-connected students, less than 14% of teachers indicated that they were satisfied with the current support services. Furthermore, many participants felt that teachers faced competing pressures for their focus in the classroom. One principal noted, “I think teachers a lot of the time are so focused on academics and state tests and the pressures that, they don’t always take into account what children are going through or look at what is happening in their families that might be impacting what is going on in the classroom, or their behaviors or emotions.” Research on school connectedness suggests that classroom climate is key to helping building the sort of connections to school that help mediate the negative social-emotional and related academic impacts of military connected students experiencing transition and deployment stressors (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). Knowledge of how to establish a classroom climate that meets military connected students’ emotional needs in the context of the day to day learning environment would help teachers be better able to assist these students in focusing on learning and reduce stress related behaviors that disrupt learning. Such skills would not only benefit military connected status but also their classroom peers.

### **Need for Timely Notification of Deployment**

The social emotional consequences of deployment represented a key theme among participants. Open communication between care-givers and school personnel was desired in order for the best support to be provided for the military-connected child throughout the period of deployment. One counselor commented, “Sometimes the parents don’t tell us that they are leaving. The child does not tell us that they are leaving until a problem occurs, so it is difficult sometimes to be proactive with the child. It is more reactive with the child” while another told us, “I had one come to school and cry all day. I had no

**The Organizational Impacts of Transition and Deployment in Military-Connected Schools:  
School-based Issues, Needs and Responses**

In a recent report (RAND,2011), staff in military connected schools indicated they had little

annually around October and often become quickly outdated due to all the transitions after that point in the year. In addition to children of military service members, Impact Aid counts the children of civilian employees and contractors that work for the military, so these data include more than those students who are in families with active duty service members. In the words of one data manager we interviewed, “We are not an accurate database for people that want to work with military children *per se*.” According to the U.S. GAO (2011), there are no reporting requirements on districts’ use of Impact Aid funding, and therefore it is difficult to assess how the funds are used and to what extent military dependent students benefit.

Schools in this context are unable to quickly and accurately track trends in military student needs, achievement, or use of services. When asked to describe how easy it would be to find out if as a whole, military connected students differ from civilian students in terms of their use of emotional and instructional support services, absenteeism or discipline related issues, one participant who was very familiar with data collection in the district replied, “Not very.” Difficulty disaggregating military student achievement and social emotional support data is an obstacle schools face if they wish to assess trends and needs and keep track of how effectively the needs of military connected students are being met. Requiring that school districts keep these data through federal mandates may be one potential solution to this problem. However, given other pre-existing record keeping and data related mandates in the districts we studied, military connected schools are likely to need support and resources to effectively utilize these data to determine if they are meeting the needs of military connected students.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our study revealed that there is a wide array of academic, social and emotional and organizational challenges school must address in order to effectively educate military connected students who are experiencing transition and/or the deployment of a family member. Our participants indicated that schools must provide supports for transitioning students as they adjust to new pedagogical structures and pacing through accommodations and differentiation of instruction. School staff must take time to induct new transitioning students into the academic and social life of their new classroom and school. Our participants indicated one of the most significant issues they face when educating military connected students is providing adequate remediation for transition related gaps in learning, often in critical subject areas such as math and reading. In order to do this, schools must provide quick turn-around diagnoses of present levels of academic and social functioning for transitioning students. They must also prepare transitioning students for success with mandated state and district wide assessments of learning in curricula while they may be lacking requisite knowledge for success. Teachers, principals and counselors negotiate complex grading, retention and placement issues for transitioning students to provide reasonable accommodations while ensuring military connected students do not become victims of low expectations or social promotions.

Schools are charged with providing additional highly individualized evaluations and services to transitioning students with IEPs while adapting those IEPs to local and state contexts, which may be quite different from those of the locality or state from which they originated. Some schools located in specific regions face the challenge of providing specialized services for students with significant disabilities that are concentrated in unnaturally high proportions as a result of policies governing the stationing of service members with exceptional family members.

Creative ways are often required to help students who miss many days of school due to transitions or deployment related issues. Mechanisms must be put in place for 4(ha)( 4(ha)( 346.6(nitnna)4(tur)-7(c

students who have less support at home due to the deployment of a parent must be structured and delivered by school staff. Teachers, principals, counselors and other school staff must collaborate to establish responsive classroom and school settings to meet the social and emotional needs of students struggling with transition and deployment related stressors, as well as provide additional counseling services to these students.

Many of the educators we interviewed expressed a desire to establishing communications with parents and the military in order to find out as much information as possible about upcoming transitions and deployments, so they are able to know which students may need which service and when. Educators also described how they struggled with creating and recreating schedules and class arrangements that work in the context of a shifting, difficult-to-predict population of students. Some asked questions about how to assess and track the needs of military connected students in order to investigate whether and how programs and service provided are being used.

Schools' ability to address these issues and promote student wellbeing and academic progress is intimately connected to the ways schools do business. Supportive school communities are not likely to be developed solely through externalized or add-on programs and supports without concomitant change at the school level. There is therefore a need to build capacity *within* schools to meet the needs of military connected students. Although external programs and resources can be beneficial, they require internalized structures and supports to be able to take root and become part of the life and institutional memory of the school. Furthermore, limited funding availability makes it imperative to empower schools and school personnel to maximize their own resources to meet the needs of military connected students.

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- 3. Assist schools in establishing systems to identify and respond to changing needs of military connected students, and monitor outcomes.** We did not find evidence that schools in our study had formal systems in place to specifically track and monitor the needs and progress of military connected students as a group, nor to systematically assess and reflect on their school-wide efforts to provide a military conscious school environment. We recommend that resources be dedicated to helping schools establish and share these systems and tools



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**Table 1. Summary of Participant Responses to Military Connected Schools Questionnaire (N=55)**

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
When a military connected student transfers into my classroom, their previous academic record is usually accessible	5.5	14.5	38.2	27.3	0.0
When a military connected student transfers into my classroom, it is easy to use their previous academic record to determine their instructional placement	14.5	38.2	20.0	10.9	1.8
When a military connected student with an IEP transfers into my classroom, it is easy to use the previous IEP to determine how to meet that student's special educational needs	5.5	25.5	36.4	12.7	5.5
I have access to a list of resources and services that can support the emotional needs of military connected students	23.6	20.0	29.1	18.2	9.1
I prefer to find resources for military students by talking with a co-worker or acquaintance than by consulting a list	14.5	14.5	34.5	29.1	3.6
I find that I am often asked about options for emotional or academic services by parents and care-givers of military connected students	10.9	16.4	18.9	32.7	18.9
I am satisfied with the choices that exist for emotional support services for military connected students	12.7	30.9	36.4	12.7	3.6
Generally, school staff are well informed about school based emotional support services for military connected students	9.1	23.6	29.1	21.8	16.4
Generally, school staff are well informed about military-based emotional support services for military-connected students	29.1	30.9	23.6	12.7	1.8
I am well equipped to deal with the emotional needs presented by military connected students	5.5	12.7	43.6	34.5	3.6
It is a priority for me to learn more about the needs of military connected students	0.0	3.6	14.5	58.2	23.6

(continued)



**Table 1 (continued).**

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
As a teacher, there are more pressing issues for me than learning about military connected students	27.3	32.7	25.5	9.1	3.6
Specialized services are available to military connected students in my school I have been specially trained to deal with the needs presented by military connected students	7.3	20.0	27.3	30.9	7.3