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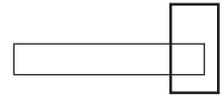
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What is This?

A Call to Duty: Educational Policy and School Reform Addressing the Needs of Children From Military Families

Monica Christina Esqueda[1], Ron Avi Astor[2], and Kris M. Tunac De Pedro[1]

More than 90% of the nation's 1.2 million military children attend civilian-operated public schools. Education researchers, however, often overlook the educational experiences and needs of military children attending civilian-operated public schools (i.e., schools that are administered by and under the purview of local education agencies). This article is the first in an educational research journal to examine the intersections among state policy, school reform, and the educational experiences of military children. This article also highlights new data sources and funding opportunities for research on military students.

Keywords: educational policy; educational reform; military education; policy analysis

The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan placed tremendous strain on the nation's military families. Frequent and prolonged deployments were, and in some cases continue to be, a stark reality for the majority of military families. Since 2001, approximately 2 million children have experienced at least one parental deployment (White House, 2011). Multiple deployments, frequent moves, and high levels of uncertainty are but a few of the demands placed on military children and families (Black, 1993; Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006). How civilian-operated public schools (i.e., schools that are administered by and under the purview of local education agencies) have addressed the needs of students from military families during the past decade, however, has been largely overlooked in the education research literature even though approximately 90% of the nation's 1.2 million military children attend civilian-operated public schools (Department of Defense Education Activity [DoDEA], 2011b). This policy brief examines the unique challenges affecting military children in schools, describes current educational policy responses (i.e., the interstate compact) and implementation challenges, and proposes future educational policy and research.

Challenges and Supports for Military Children

Military children experience many psychological stressors as a result of their parents' military service (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; De Pedro et al., 2011; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Mmari, Roche, Suhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). Parental deployments, war trauma, disability, illness, and/or death are among the military-specific psychological stressors placed on military children, and research has shown these stressors (and any resulting mental health issues) to negatively influence academic, psychological, and socioemotional outcomes among military children (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010; Lyle, 2006; Mmari et al., 2009). For example, between 2005 and 2006, the number of behavioral and mental health visits, behavioral disorders, and stress disorders reported for military children increased by 11%, 19%, and 18%, respectively, while a parent was deployed (Gorman et al., 2010). Jensen, Martin, and Watanabe (1996) similarly found that parental deployments were positively associated with a greater incidence of juvenile depression among younger military children and those whose remaining (i.e., nondeployed) parent reported higher levels of depression and stress. Empirical studies of school functioning further suggest that parental deployments are positively associated with poorer academic performance (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Engel et al., 2010; Hiew, 1992; Richardson et al., 2011). Despite these findings, recent research suggests that civilian public school personnel may not be adequately equipped to handle parental deployment issues (Mmari et al., 2009) and/or multiple school transitions (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; for a comprehensive review of mental health issues, deployment, war-related trauma, and military children, see De Pedro et al., 2011). These emerging data about students from military families in civilian public schools, however, are in contrast to the more positive, descriptive data on military students who attend schools operated by the DoDEA.

Department of Defense Education Activity Schools

The Department of Defense has provided "on post/base" schools for select military bases in the United States and abroad since the end of World War II. The entire school system, administered by the DoDEA, is composed of 195 schools in 7 U.S. states, 2 U.S. territories, and 13 foreign countries, and enrolls 87,224

[1]University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education, Los Angeles, CA
[2]University of Southern California, School of Social Work and Rossier School of Education, Los Angeles, CA

students (DoDEA, 2010, 2011b; DoDEA Data Center, 2011). In DoDEA schools, students from military families appear to be functioning at relatively high levels despite the multiple moves and risk factors associated with having a parent (or parents) in the military. Students attending DoDEA schools score above the national average on standardized tests of achievement, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Terra Nova Achievement Test. The achievement gap between racial and ethnic minority groups and White students is also less pronounced in DoDEA schools (DoDEA, 2010; Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001). Smrekar and colleagues further find that Black and Latino students in DoDEA schools score higher on the NAEP than their civilian peers attending public schools.

DoDEA Schools and Military-Connected School Districts

In contrast to the 250 military-connected, civilian school districts that have sizable proportions of students from military families (i.e., an average daily attendance of more than 400, or 10% or more of total student enrollment), DoDEA schools provide support for fewer military children, enrolling only 87,224 of the 1.2 million children of active-duty military service members. Unlike the majority of civilian-operated public school districts that may not be aware of military families' needs, DoDEA schools are military focused and provide an array of educational supports that are structured to support the unique circumstances surrounding military children and their families (DoDEA, 2010, 2011b; DoDEA Data Center, 2011). DoDEA schools have adopted a uniform curriculum and set of standards that reduce the difficulties associated with multiple moves (e.g., identical graduation requirements and school enrollment guidelines). DoDEA schools also work with local installations to implement programs that address family needs. For example, during a deployment, students attending a DoDEA school are more likely to find a structured peer support program at their school site (e.g., afterschool deployment clubs). Parent groups for the spouses of deployed service members have also been established at some DoDEA schools (DoDEA, 2011a). Although such curricular and programmatic supports are likely contributing to more positive student outcomes, the efforts of education professionals within DoDEA schools may also be a contributing factor. Education professionals within DoDEA schools tend to invest greater effort into the development and maintenance of school supports because they understand military culture and the effect of transition and deployment on the student's academic performance and overall success.

The practices, patterns of behavior, and supports described above are useful examples that may benefit civilian teachers, principals, and pupil personnel struggling to support military children in transition (for additional examples, visit http://www.dodea.edu/home/)

School Transitions and the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children

Children from military families change schools approximately every 2.9 years, or 9 times on average. Frequent school transitions, especially across district and state lines, create numerous challenges for students and their families (Council of State Governments, 2010b). For example, military children may begin

the school year in a state that allows a student to enroll in kindergarten at 4½ years old but transfer midsemester to another state where guidelines require a child to be at least 5 years old. As military children progress in school, the consequences of misaligned state and district policies are even direr. Many states require that graduating seniors complete a course in state history. The military child who begins high school in one state and transfers to a different state is unlikely to fulfill that requirement in time to earn a high school diploma and may thus need to postpone college enrollment.

Until 2008, differing state and district policies appeared to be hindering the educational progress of military children in public schools (Council of State Governments, 2010b). Congress recognized the need for more supports for students from military families in civilian public schools, and a memorandum of understanding was created between the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Defense to bridge this gap in services. DoDEA was charged with administering a large partnership grant program for military-connected schools and since then has provided over $100 million in school partnership grants to public school districts that serve military students. In January 2011, the Obama administration issued a presidential directive to all federal agencies, making the education of military students a high priority within each agency (White House, 2011). Since then, the Department of Education has made military-connected schools a national education research funding priority (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The attention of multiple federal agencies and their newly directed funding sources creates windows of opportunity for education researchers to become involved in programs and research that support military-connected public schools. The new funding sources (e.g., the large-scale partnership grant program through DoDEA) and opportunities for research, however, are not well known to the education research community.

Representative and descriptive research accurately documenting the unique educational needs and circumstances of military children in public schools is a critical first step toward supporting students from military families. Such data would bring greater awareness to the strengths and challenges of military children and allow educators to identify and direct appropriate resources. Research documenting the effectiveness of current military-connected school reform efforts linked to the shifts in federal priorities is also needed. The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (ICEOMC) provides such an opportunity. The ICEOMC is the largest ongoing school reform effort aimed at military-connected public schools in all 50 states and U.S. territories. Finally, research on the efficacy of both district- and school-level organizational efforts addressing the academic, emotional, psychological, and social challenges of military children is also needed. Research documenting the effectiveness of military-connected school reform efforts and the efficacy of these efforts would provide useful information to educators and policy makers in regard to best practices.

From an educational policy perspective, the policy goals encompassed by the ICEOMC provide a good template for understanding the issues faced by military families. Prior to April 2008, states lacked a uniform policy to address the needs of military children in transition. Issues related to enrollment, course and program placement, eligibility, and graduation were generally

addressed by each school site or school district on a case-by-case basis. Military families and organizations thus began to work with policy makers to reduce the difficulties associated with student transition at the national and state levels. Dedicated and politically active military families along with select Department of Defense officials and policy makers reasoned that an interstate compact would supersede conflicting state laws related to the transition of military children across state lines. In 2008, Kansas became the first state to sign the compact into law (Council of State Governments, 2010a, 2010b; U.S. Department of Defense, 2008), and as of this writing, 39 states and the District of Columbia have endorsed the compact (Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, 2011).

The purpose of the ICEOMC is to reduce and/or eliminate "barriers to educational success" for children from military families as they transition between schools and across state lines. Pursuant to this goal, the compact is designed to

A. [Facilitate] the timely enrollment of children [from] military families and [ensure] that they are not placed at a disadvantage due to difficulty in the transfer of education records from the previous school district(s) or variations in entrance/age requirements.

B. [Facilitate] the student placement process through which children of military families are not disadvantaged by variations in attendance requirements, scheduling, sequencing, grading, course content or assessment.

C. [Facilitate] the qualification and eligibility for enrollment, educational programs, and participation in extracurricular academic, athletic, and social activities.

D. [Facilitate] the on-time graduation of children of military families.

E. [Provide] for the promulgation and enforcement of administrative rules implementing the provisions of [the] compact.

F. [Provide] for the uniform collection and sharing of information between and among member states, schools and military families under [the] compact.

G. [Promote] coordination between this compact and other compacts affecting military children.

H. [Promote] flexibility and coordination between the educational system, parents and the student in order to achieve educational success for the student. (Council of State Governments, 2008, pp. 1–2)

The compact also entails the creation of individual state councils and an interstate commission. The compact further specifies a funding structure to support the interstate commission (Council of State Governments, 2008). Unless otherwise specified, the ICEOMC applies to the children of active-duty[1] military personnel, "members of the uniformed services (i.e., members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Commissioned Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Public Health Services)," "veterans of the uniformed services" who are "medically discharged or retired" up to "one year after medical discharge or retirement," and "members of the uniformed services" who are deceased as a result of their service up to one year (Council of State Governments, 2008, p. 7).

In some ways, the guidelines and dictates outlined in the compact strive to create conditions similar to those found in DoDEA schools. For example, under the compact, districts and schools can decide to excuse a student for deployment-related activities.

Districts and schools are also given the discretion to accept course credits and program placements from schools and districts in compact states. Notably absent from the original [model] compact language, however, are policies addressing high school exit exams. The decision to exclude high school exit exams from the compact was intentional. Several states were resolute in their opposition to the inclusion of high school exit exams and would not endorse a compact that excused students from fulfilling state exit exam requirements (Anonymous, personal communication, October 8, 2010).

Implementation

Initially, policy makers and stakeholders anticipated a lengthy implementation period. They assumed that it would take several years for states to endorse the compact. Currently, only 11 states have not endorsed the compact. Despite their lack of endorsement, the compact covers the majority (90%) of military children enrolled in civilian public schools. Implementing the compact within the states that have already endorsed the agreement, however, has been challenging. Member states were not required to pay dues until their second year of membership. Thus, prior to 2010, policy makers lacked the funding mechanisms needed to organize an interstate commission, oversee member state compliance, and coordinate individual state efforts. The process of creating a sustainable structure was also slower than policy makers might have preferred. Even so, an organizational structure is emerging and continues to evolve. State- and district-level implementation challenges remain, however (Anonymous, personal communication, October 8, 2010).

Some states have only symbolically endorsed the compact and have not yet informed district superintendents and/or school personnel of the compact's policy implications. Implementation of the compact has also been difficult in school districts with fewer military children. Some educators and policy makers have expressed discomfort with the compact's language and potential encroachment of local control (i.e., the power of school districts to make policy decisions). In the absence of state and district action, some districts have begun to implement their own reform efforts to ease the transition of military children (Anonymous, personal communication, October 8, 2010). Such challenges highlight the need for greater accountability and monitoring. Expectations for states and school districts must also be clarified.

Recommendations

States choosing to adopt the compact must accept responsibility for the dissemination of information. States must notify districts that they have adopted the compact. States also must provide districts with information about the compact and what implementation entails in a timely manner (e.g., within 6 months of adoption). A legislative kit containing the compact's original language and other resources is accessible online (see http://www.csg.org/programs/policyprograms/NCIC/MIC3ResourcesandPublications.aspx and http://www.mic3.net/pages/resources/resources.aspx). States can thus disseminate information about the compact at minimal cost (i.e., they can direct school districts to online resources). Once states notify and provide information to school districts, individual districts should then be responsible for implementing the compact to the degree that the compact has relevance for the district. Not all

school districts enroll military children, and there is great variation, by proportion, among districts that do enroll military students. Provisions of the compact may, therefore, have more or less relevance in individual schools districts. Given this variation, monitoring a district's progress and implementation will need to include consideration of the proportion of military children enrolled in a particular school district. Compliance with the compact, at the district level, will need to be continuously monitored by each state's compact council (each state is responsible for the creation of a state council, as stated in the previous section), whereas compliance at the state level should be monitored by the Military Interstate Compact Commission. Compliance should entail the timely implementation of the compact (e.g., within one year of adoption), at minimum. More comprehensive criteria, however, may be added in states with large proportions of military children. One limitation to this compliance structure, however, is that some states have yet to assemble a compact council and that the Military Interstate Compact Commission is still working to develop an effective compliance structure.

Future Research

Researchers might focus on implementation of the compact as a foundation for additional research and action. Although researchers have long documented the implementation of a variety of school reform efforts (Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004), school reform efforts supporting military children have not been studied. Anecdotally, however, data suggest that disconnects between state legislatures, district personnel, and school personnel may be hindering implementation of the ICEOMC (Anonymous, personal communication, October 8, 2010). Researchers should thus examine the challenges and factors promoting implementation of the compact. Research documenting the outcomes of implementation for students, families, and schools is also needed. Such research would allow educators and policy makers to identify practices that successfully support military children in transition. Finally, researchers might consider comparing academic outcomes in states that have implemented the compact with those that have not to determine whether states implementing the compact are experiencing more positive outcomes. Researchers might ask whether military-connected students (i.e., students with one or more family members serving in the military) in compact states are repeating fewer credits than those in noncompact states or if they are more likely to graduate on time. Separate from the benefits of such research for military children and families, research on the compact may have broader implications for other highly mobile student populations (e.g., migrant students) struggling with similar transition issues, perhaps resulting in changes to existing state policies concerning student transition.

Additional Areas for Education Research and Support

Parental Deployments, Separation, and Loss

Issues related to the deployment of and separation from one's parent (or parents) serve as potential barriers to the military child's educational experience. Empirical studies of school functioning have found that parental deployments are positively associated with poorer academic performance and behavioral functioning among military children (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Engel et al., 2010; Hiew, 1992; Richardson et al., 2011). Moreover, in some instances, a child has two parents serving in the military. Under such circumstances, the child may be placed in the care of another family member and also may be required to attend a different school (even if the child's new residence is within reasonable distance from his or her current school), depending on the state. This change in schools can cause huge disruptions in peer–teacher relationships. Students will also need to adjust to a new school context in the absence of parental support. Finally, when the military child's parent (or parents) returns from a deployment, some military families report that schools are not tolerant of the child's absence (for deployment-related activities) and may even report the child as truant (Anonymous, personal communication, October 8, 2010). Recent research also suggests that many civilian educators may be unprepared to sensitively address and support children grappling with fears of parental injury or death during a deployment (De Pedro et al., 2011; Mmari et al., 2009). Further, in the case of actual injury or death, many schools lack a plan of action to support children who are grieving (Atuel, Esqueda, & Jacobson, 2011).

Guidelines and effective practices documenting how model schools, classrooms, and pupil personnel organize to support military students on issues of parental deployment, injury, disability, reentry, and/or death would be beneficial to educators. Yet these types of issues have not been explored in the education research literature. In general, research identifying evidence-based practices in schools with students from military families is rare. How both public and DoDEA schools are integrating the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan into their schools' practices is also unclear. More research on best practices and guidelines surrounding the schools' approaches to deployment and reentry from deployment is sorely needed. Such findings would be beneficial for districts and schools struggling to meet the needs of military-connected students.

Sustainable Data Infrastructure

Military students appear to be invisible in many public school districts across the United States. Despite the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many civilian schools do not keep track of military student enrollment. Existing data systems thus lack the capacity to systemically identify military students, their academic performance, and/or their needs. State monitoring systems are needed that help educators identify schools with high military student enrollments so that resources can be directed to them. Given the sensitivity surrounding disclosure of military status, data should be reported in the aggregate. School personnel should also be trained to use the data to inform their school's practices. Finally, military families should be informed of the purpose and use of this data as a lever for additional school supports and resources rather than as a punitive assessment tool targeting military families.

California is the first state in the nation to develop a survey module to identify the needs of military children. The military module was developed by an interdisciplinary team of practitioners and faculty and was piloted with 21,740 students, 2,563 school staff members, and 3,941 parents. The module was adopted by the California Department of Education as part

of the California Healthy Kids Survey—a "statewide survey of resiliency, protective factors, and risk behavior" (WestEd, 2011). Data on military children were recently collected in eight military-connected school districts using the military module. It is reasoned that this type of anonymous survey data will help educators and researchers identify the strengths and weaknesses of military students and families. The data could also be used to identify model public schools and school districts that have created programs that improve the school climate and academic outcomes for military students in civilian public schools.

Special Education and Response to Intervention

Future research may want to explore how military-connected schools currently utilize existing interventions to respond to the behavioral needs and academic performance of military children. For example, special education has traditionally been used to address the needs of students with cognitive issues and/or other disabilities. Recent education research has suggested that external stressors such as transitions and repeated deployments negatively affect the academic functioning and behavioral outcomes of military children (Bradshaw et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2011; Mmari et al., 2009). Military-connected school educators thus may be responding to the needs of military children through placement (appropriate or not) in special education. Pre-referral to special education interventions such as response to intervention and student study teams is one possible area of inquiry. Future research could also investigate the utilization and effectiveness of external supports (military, school district, and federal) by military-connected schools. School liaison officers, school transition centers (i.e., school-based centers that offer informational, referral, or direct services to students and families who recently relocated), and the K–12 DoDEA partnership grant program are some examples of external supports currently utilized by military-connected schools. Whether schools utilizing such supports are experiencing better outcomes, however, remains unknown. Answering this question is nevertheless critical to future scaling-up efforts. Finally, future research must examine the protective role of a supportive school climate in the outcomes of military children. Research has suggested that a school's climate—which includes social relationships, a sense of belonging, and feelings of safety—moderates the potential effects of external risk factors on a variety of risky behaviors known to adversely affect academic functioning (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Researchers could investigate the role of supportive school climates on academic, behavioral, psychological, and socioemotional outcomes among military children. For example, do military-connected students exhibit more positive outcomes when school staff members and personnel are systematically trained to address the needs of military children? Findings from such a study, if positive, could then be used to inform future professional development initiatives.

Postsecondary Education

Education researchers need to examine the postsecondary aspirations, enrollment, and outcomes of military-connected students. This topic is virtually absent from the existing higher education literature base. Future research must address these critical gaps.

Existing data sets at the national level, however, may not be well suited to this line of research, given the problems identifying military-connected students. Further, existing measures were not designed to examine the unique circumstances of military-connected students. Data that capture how the demands of military life affect the postsecondary experiences of military-connected students are needed. Do military-specific experiences (e.g., frequent moves, multiple deployments) influence postsecondary plans? If so, how? These questions, and others, remain unanswered.

Concluding Thoughts

Military children have long been overlooked in the education research literature. The effects of this oversight, however, are now starting to enter into the field's stream of consciousness as the nation enters into another year of war. The ICEOMC is a policy instrument that addresses some of the educational challenges faced by military children. Education researchers could play a major role in conceptualizing and measuring the impact of these changes at both the policy and classroom levels. The compact, however, should also been seen as a mechanism for raising awareness in the broader educational community on the needs of military families. Researchers can contribute by helping to identify effective policies and practices that are enduring and sustainable.

Given the urgent need for knowledge and new funding sources for research in this area, education researchers could begin to include questions about military students as part of their current education research projects. Partnerships between professional education organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, National Education Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and military organizations such as the National Military Family Association, Military Child Education Coalition, and Military Impacted Schools Association could raise awareness within education research communities that military families are a distinct cultural group that should be included as part of the nation's diversity and school reform efforts. The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act further provides an opportunity to rectify the conceptual and policy omission of military children. Finally, efforts to support students from military families require future discussions on ways to streamline federal and state collaborations on the implementation of services. Military service is handled at the federal level, yet the education of military children falls under the purview of local and state entities. More detailed coordination between these government bodies and evaluations of best practices at the national, state, and local levels could improve the education and lives of military children in public schools.

NOTE

[1]"Full-time duty status," includes "members of the National Guard and Reserve on active duty orders pursuant to 10 U.S.C. Section 1209 and 1211" (Council of State Governments, 2008, p. 3).

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AUTHORS

MONICA CHRISTINA ESQUEDA is a doctoral student and research assistant at the University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education, Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, Waite Phillips Hall, Room 701, 3470 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4037; *mesqueda@usc.edu.* Her research focuses on college access, choice, retention, and persistence; the impact of national, state, and local education policies on student experience; and military-connected students.

RON AVI ASTOR is the Richard M. and Ann L. Thor Professor in Urban Social Development at the University of Southern California, School of Social Work and Rossier School of Education, 669 West 34th Street Los Angeles, CA 90089-0411; *rastor@usc.edu.* His research focuses on issues of school safety, school climate, international comparative studies, moral reasoning, and military-connected schools.

KRIS M. TUNAC DE PEDRO is a PhD candidate in urban educational policy at the University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education, Waite Phillips Hall, 3740 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089; *depedro@usc.edu.* His research focuses on culturally responsive schools, school climate, and school reform.