

# The Building Capacity Project: An Exemplar on Supporting Military-Connected Schools



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Even though our nation's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began more than a decade ago, it wasn't until recently that both researchers and policymakers began to more fully recognize the strain that these conflicts placed on the children of military service members (Cederbaum et al., 2013; Gilreath et al., 2013).

Military children face not only frequent school transitions when a parent is transferred but also stress associated with a parent's deployment as well as fear over a parent being in danger (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). Recently, researchers have argued that these conditions greatly impact children's academic progress as well as social and emotional well-being (De Pedro et al., 2011; Esqueda, Astor, & De Pedro, 2012). In a recent study among military-connected students attending middle and high schools, Gilreath and colleagues (2013) found a significant positive correlation between drug and alcohol use and deployments of a military parent or sibling.

In addition, even though our troops have pulled out of Iraq and are gradually withdrawing from Afghanistan, military members and their families face a new round of challenges related to reintegrating into society and even transitioning out of the military.

Building Capacity to Create Highly Supportive Military-Connected School Districts, (Building Capacity Consortium) based at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work, in collaboration with the Rossier School of Education, is a multifaceted, four-year project that elevates the role of public schools in

providing nurturing and supportive learning environments for military-connected children and their families (<http://buildingcapacity.usc.edu/>). In partnership with seven San Diego-area school districts and one Riverside County district, the project is raising awareness, locally and across the country, of the strengths and unique circumstances of military children. It also serves as a model for how to educate school personnel—including current and future school social workers—on the needs of this population. The Building Capacity Consortium, which began in 2010, is supported by a \$7.6 million grant from the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) as part of the agency's efforts to improve learning outcomes and socioemotional well-being for military children, the vast majority of whom attend regular public schools. The principal investigator of the project is Professor Ron Avi Astor. Professors Rami Benbenishty from Bar Ilan University, Israel, and Marleen Wong from USC are co-investigators.

## Training Pupil Personnel

The primary mission of the Building Capacity Consortium is to equip graduate students with the knowledge and skills to support military-connected students.

Graduate students are placed as interns in a consortium of schools in order to gain experience and to help create school settings that are more welcoming to military children.

In the first year, the project placed 30 USC MSW interns in 30 of the 140 schools in the consortium, where interns reported approximately 10,000 hours of contact time with students, parents, and school staff. Intern activities included individual counseling and supporting military students through parental deployments and transition issues, as well as assisting all students with academic and socio-emotional issues. On a school-wide level, interns created groups and clubs for military students and organized a variety of creative events and activities to honor and support military families.

In the second year, the Building Capacity Consortium partnered with San Diego State University (SDSU) to increase the number of interns available in schools. In addition to the School of Social Work, the College of Education's Department of Counseling, and the School Psychology at SDSU became involved. This expansion yielded almost 18,550 contact hours. The various inter-institutional collaborations continued in the third year, with interns expected to provide a total of 20,364 hours in consortium

schools by the end of this school year. While most of their time is spent meeting with individual students, the interns also participate in social and behavioral assessments and IEP meetings, facilitate student groups, meet with families, provide in-service training for school staff, and conduct home visits.

In partnership with the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), the project has also given undergraduate students an opportunity to work in the consortium schools. UCSD's Partners at Learning (PAL) program is a university service-learning program where undergraduates from across the university provide academic tutoring to underserved students in K-12 schools. The project collaborated with the program to increase the tutors' knowledge and skills needed to work with military students. In addition to providing academic support, the PAL tutors also completed with the students a variety of projects that focused on building self-esteem and a sense of pride in being a military child. During the 2011–2012 pilot year, a total of 10 PAL tutors provided 400 hours of service in consortium schools. With the addition of the military culture component to the PAL's core curriculum, it is expected that 500 PAL tutors will provide 20,000 hours of service by the end of 2012–2013 school year.

## Data Monitoring and Building the Research Base

Another central focus of the project has been to gather and examine data in order to gain a better understanding of the issues military children face and their perceptions about their schools. The consortium partnered with the California Department of Education (CDE) and WestEd, a research organization, to add a new Military-Connected School Module to the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), an instrument that measures youth risk and resiliency. Key topic areas covered by the CHKS include school connectedness, developmental supports and opportunities, safety,

violence and harassment, substance use, and physical and mental health (<http://chks.wested.org/>). The new module allowed district and school leaders, as well as researchers, for the first time, to gain greater understanding on how military children compare to nonmilitary children in various domains, and it has guided the Building Capacity leadership in working with the interns and schools on addressing areas of concern. In 2012, the CDE and WestEd, which administers the CHKS, took the next step by adding a question to the core survey, asking all students whether they have a father, mother, or caretaker currently in the military. This addition allows schools throughout California, and the state government as a whole, to collect accurate data on the proportion of their students who are military dependents and to assess how their needs and experiences might differ from their nonmilitary peers.

It has been a priority for the Building Capacity Consortium to ensure that data from these surveys is shared with principals, counselors, interns, and others in the school communities in a timely manner. The project team also works alongside district leaders to shape prevention and intervention programs focused on the needs that emerge in the results. For example, many of the schools found bullying to be a problem among students. With data on bullying and school violence for their own schools, they were able to adopt programs according to the developmental levels of the students. In addition, the project leaders provided a series of workshops to enable both interns and school staff to better understand how to interpret the data on their schools, put it in context, and then respond with the programs that best fit the needs of their students.

The CHKS data—collected in 2011 and again this school year—is providing a brand-new window into the public school experiences of military students. To contribute to the body of knowledge about military students, members of the USC-based research team has published a steady flow of peer-reviewed manuscripts and has presented regularly at annual scientific conferences or meetings.

## Evidence-Based Programs: Implementation and Evaluation

Another goal of the Building Capacity Consortium is to match schools with evidence-based intervention and prevention programs that could address the priorities schools have set in terms of school climate and students' social and emotional well-being. With the scarcity of evidence-based programs focusing on military children in public schools, efforts were directed to adapting existing programs to better fit the needs of military children. For example, no anti-bullying program has been designed with the knowledge that military students might be more vulnerable than nonmilitary students to being bullied. The CHKS data, however, show that this is the case, and it's important for educators to know this if they have military children in their schools.

Learning Together, a tutoring program, is one example of a program that the Building Capacity project helped to bring to schools in the consortium with the needs of military students in mind. The program trains students to tutor peers who are two grade levels below them. But instead of being the top achievers in their class, the tutors are typically those who are below proficient and might even exhibit behavior problems in the classroom. The concept is that in teaching material to younger students, the skills of the older tutors improve along with those of the younger tutees.

During the 2011–2012 school year, one of the districts in the consortium piloted the math version of the program with fifth-grade tutors and third-grade tutees at schools located on a military installation. While the program can work in any school, administrators believe it is well suited to military-connected students because it helps them form stronger relationships with peers and develop a sense of responsibility toward their school—qualities that might not be very strong in students who

frequently change schools. The external evaluator of the project conducted a preliminary evaluation of the program and reported that there was enough evidence to suggest that the program should be implemented on a larger scale. The district, therefore, made the decision to involve more students and expand it to other schools.

The Building Capacity project also learned that there were military-focused programs that were not widely available or were not based in schools. One example is Families Over Coming Under Stress (FOCUS), which is based at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and provides research-based resiliency training to military families. Until the project's involvement, FOCUS was only available on military bases and to a limited numbers of families and students. The project leaders worked with UCLA to make a modified, school-based version of the program available within schools. By working with the developers of the program, the project arranged for interns and other school-district personnel to receive training on this new school-based, skill-building version of FOCUS, which helps children cope with the challenges of deployment and reintegration when a deployed family member returns home. During the 2011-12 school year, all of the project interns started FOCUS groups in their schools to implement the new version of the program. Preliminary evaluation showed that most of the interns did see improvements in emotional regulation and more willingness among students to discuss their feelings and show support to their peers.

## Guidebooks

Soon after the project began in 2010, work began on four guidebooks on how educators can create military-friendly schools and better understand the challenges that military students face during their K–12 years. Books were written for four specific audiences—teachers, school administrators, pupil personnel, and parents—with the belief that each group plays a special role in ensuring that military students are welcomed into new schools, supported during

challenging circumstances at home, and given additional academic assistance when needed. Co-published by Teachers College Press and the Military Child Education Coalition, the four titles are:

- *The Teacher's Guide for Supporting Students from Military Families*
- *The School Administrator's Guide for Supporting Students from Military Families*
- *The Pupil Personnel Guide for Supporting Students from Military Families*
- *The Military Family's Parent Guide for Supporting Your Child in School*

Featuring a blend of homegrown practices developed by the interns working in the schools as well as evidence-based programs, such as FOCUS, the guidebooks cover three primary topics—transition, deployment, and trauma. The resource guides offer a variety of suggestions for creating more military-friendly schools and discuss how relevant policies could be adapted to improve conditions for students as they transfer between schools.

The three books for educators are intended for use by colleges and universities in training prospective teachers, school social workers, and administrators. But they can also inform existing teachers and other school personnel. The parent guide is appropriate both for an individual parent as well as for parent leaders to use in working with educators to make schools more accommodating to the needs of military families.

The books are part of an overall strategy to communicate and raise awareness about how schools can support military families and to highlight promising practices in our schools. As companions to the guides, the project worked with Command Media, a nonprofit organization that teaches wounded warriors how to create short documentaries, to develop a library of videos demonstrating the practices that are described and encouraged in the guidebooks. These videos feature projects in the schools that are improving the school climate for military students, demonstrating

some of the challenges that military children face in public schools and describing specific strategies that the interns and others in the schools have used to create military-friendly schools.

The project also has a monthly newsletter distributed to those in school districts as well as to outside researchers, policymakers, and other organizations working with military families. Social media is used to draw attention to events or new research by project members, and project leaders have written several op-eds for outlets such as CNN and the Huffington Post on pressing issues affecting military children, such as Department of Defense budget cuts.

## Collaboration and Sustainability

Finally, the project has developed multiple partnerships with other universities, researchers, and community- and military-focused organizations. Collaboration with these partners—such as the FOCUS program at UCLA and the PAL program at UCSD—enables consortium schools to have access to resources and services that they would not have had otherwise.

The project has also collaborated with these other university partners on proposals to sustain current programs. Providing training to district staff has been another strategy used to help create practices that will carry on in the schools once funding for the grant has expired.

To summarize, the Building Capacity Consortium, now in its third year, is redefining the role schools play in educating military-connected students and is supporting them through school transitions and other challenges in their lives. To this end, the project highlights the impact that counseling and social work interns have in schools through the enhanced supports provided to military-connected students and their families. The project has created a sustainable training model that other universities and colleges can implement to help schools provide positive environments—not just for military students—but for all students.