
Military Parents' Perceptions of Public School Supports for Their Children

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This study examined how military-connected (MC) and nonmilitary parents perceive civilian schools' climate, schools' encouragement of parental involvement, problems in school, their needs in school, and their school satisfaction. The sample comprised 3,914 parents from eight school districts in the San Diego area. The parents completed the core and MC parent modules of the California School Climate Survey for Parents. Approximately 10 percent identified themselves as MC. Military parents provided significantly more negative assessments of schools' climate and encouragement for parental involvement compared with nonmilitary parents in the same schools. Nevertheless, they saw fewer violence problems in schools compared with nonmilitary parents. Military parents' most pressing need was for information on educational resources for military families. Although military parents were satisfied with many aspects of the school, a relatively large proportion expressed dissatisfaction with a sense of connection to other families in the school, the degree of understanding that staff showed them, and the responsiveness of the school administration to their concerns. Educators and social workers may need more training regarding military culture and the needs of military students and families. Programs should be developed to effectively involve military parents in schools and address their needs.

KEY WORDS: *military; parental involvement; parents; school climate; school satisfaction*

The demands of a military lifestyle in times of war add significant stress and psychological strain for military family members. Military service members experience life events such as multiple deployments, reintegration, and multiple geographic relocations (Esqueda, Astor, & Tunac De Pedro, 2012; Tunac De Pedro et al., 2011). During the prolonged conflicts of the past decade, many military family members have experienced psychological strain due to separation from the service member or from the service member's injury, trauma, or death (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006).

Research has indicated that military students experience significant psychological strain, because they frequently change schools. The average military child attends six to nine schools during the course of their development (Department of Defense Education Activity [DoDEA], n.d.). In each new situation, these students lose their old networks and are required to make new friends, adjust to new residences and military bases, adapt to new social norms and academic standards, and reestablish teacher relationships, among other adjustments. School transitions have involved delayed

transfer of academic records, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and varying eligibility for enrollment (Council of State Governments, 2008). Furthermore, the increased risk of parental deployment likely exacerbates the stress already experienced by military students (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009).

MILITARY-CONNECTED PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

Currently, there are 1.2 million school-age children of active-duty military service members. Only a small number (about 86,000) are educated in schools operated by the DoDEA (Tunac De Pedro et al., 2011). The DoDEA is a civilian agency of the U.S. Department of Defense that manages schools for military children in the United States and on U.S. military bases worldwide. However, most military children attend civilian public schools in the United States. The vast majority (about 80 percent) of these children are concentrated in 214 public school districts (Kitmitto et al., 2011).

Research has highlighted the role of parents and family in student outcomes. This is most likely the

case with military parents as well. Parental engagement and connection to the school are central factors contributing to a positive school climate and children's outcomes (Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Typically, parental involvement includes attendance at teacher conferences and involvement in school activities, such as open houses and after-school social activities. Consistent contact with teachers and direct involvement with their child outside of the school setting also serves a monitoring function that allows parents to receive feedback about their child's academic performance and self-regulatory skills (Stewart, 2008). For military families, this may be difficult if the spouse is deployed or in harm's way. Further, asking parents to provide their perceptions of the school is an empowering parent-involvement activity that supports and enhances a positive school experience for every child (WestEd, n.d.). Other positive parental engagement practices, such as parental participation in school governance, have had a major influence on the educational achievement of children (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Through such participation, parents demonstrate the importance they attach to schooling and academic achievement and therefore may influence their children's in-school activities and academic success (Stewart, 2008).

STUDY QUESTIONS

There has been a widespread effort and interest by the military community in building responsive military-connected (MC) schools for military children. In addition, there have been numerous empirical studies investigating the role of school climate and parental engagement in the social, academic, and emotional outcomes of children and adolescents. It is surprising that little empirical work has focused on how nonmilitary and military parents perceive their children's school environments, specifically school climate issues. Based on the first comprehensive parental survey of school climate conducted in the state of California, this study aimed to examine and compare the views and perceptions of military and nonmilitary parents regarding their children's school environments. Specifically, the study examines the parents' perceptions of the school's climate and problems, the degree to which the school promotes parental involvement, the parents' assessment of the needs of their children's school, and the overall parent satisfaction.

METHOD

The study is based on a survey conducted as part of a project intended to build capacity to improve school climate in eight MC schools in the San Diego area.

Sample

The sample included 3,914 parents from the eight school districts that responded to the survey. A total of 448 parents (11.4 percent) responded that at least one family member was serving in the military. Of MC participants, about three-fourths (396) responded that they or their spouse were currently serving on active duty. MC respondents identified 121 family members who were currently serving or deployed outside the state of California.

Significantly more nonmilitary parents (43.1 percent) indicated that at least one of their children was entitled to free lunch, compared with 34.1 percent of military parents [$\chi^2(2, N=3,914) = 15.15, p < .001$, contingency coefficient = .062].

Instrument

The instrument combines the Core Module and the Military Module of the California School Climate Survey for Parents. Both modules were open to all parents participating in the study, except for questions on satisfaction with school that were directed specifically to military parents. This anonymous survey for parents and guardians was developed and administered for the first time in 2011 by researchers at WestEd and the University of Southern California (USC) on behalf of the state of California. The instrument was administered through an Internet link and a paper version, in English and Spanish.

Background Characteristics. All participants provided background information such as number of school transitions, child's grade level, and years in school. MC parents also provided details on their or their spouse's military affiliation and background, including deployments in the previous five years.

School Climate. Parents were asked to assess various aspects of school academic and social emotional climate, including issues of student safety, responsiveness to diversity, and academic rigor. Responses for these 15 items were rated on a four-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). School climate was

computed as the mean of the 15 items assessing school climate and performance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .952$).

Parental Involvement. Parents were requested to rate their perceptions of the extent to which the school informs them and welcomes their involvement. Responses on items used the same scale as for school climate. Parental involvement was computed as the mean of these items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .876$).

School Problems. Parents were asked to what extent they thought the school had a problem in various school climate areas. Responses for these eight items were rated on a four-point scale (1 = not a problem, 2 = small problem, 3 = somewhat a problem, 4 = large problem). School problems was computed as the mean of the eight items in this section (Cronbach's $\alpha = .954$).

Need for Services. Parents were asked to identify the need for different kinds of services in their child's school. Responses for these nine items were measured using a four-point scale (1 = major need, 2 = a need, 3 = little need, 4 = not a need). Need for services was computed as the mean of these items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .954$).

Military Parent Satisfaction. Military parents were asked about their satisfaction with several aspects of school functioning. Responses for eight items were collected using a four-point scale (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = not at all satisfied). School satisfaction was computed as the mean of these items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .962$).

Data Analysis

Independent *t* tests were used to examine differences in military and nonmilitary parents' views of school climate, parental involvement, school problems, and need for services in school. Bonferroni correction was used to protect against error of the first kind by requiring that the tests have a small probability of rejecting any true hypotheses (Holm, 1979) (note that the Bonferroni correction tends to be a very conservative estimate of significance). Descriptive analyses allowed for examination of the distribution of military parents' perceptions of school satisfaction. Analyses of variance in parents' perceptions revealed that the between-school variance was not large enough to warrant multilevel analyses.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

More than three-fourths of respondents (78.9 percent) reported that they or their spouse had served

in the military for more than 10 years, 13.9 percent reported six to 10 years of military service, 4.6 percent reported three to five years of service, and 2.5 percent reported one to two years of service. Evidence indicated that multiple deployments were common: 68.7 percent of the respondents reported they or their spouse was deployed three or more times, 16.0 percent reported two deployments, 10.0 percent reported one deployment, and 5.6 percent reported they or their spouse had not deployed. Most military families in this sample had moved at least once during the previous five years, with 29.7 percent reporting they had moved twice and almost one-fourth (24.6 percent) reporting they had moved three or more times.

Most parents reported that their child had been in the school for one to two years (37.3 percent of nonmilitary parents and 38.6 percent of military parents). More MC parents reported that their children had been in their current school for less than one year (29.1 percent) when compared with nonmilitary children (22.5 percent). Similarly, more nonmilitary parents reported that their children had been in their current school for three to five years (30.4 percent) compared with MC parents (26.2 percent).

School Climate and Parental Involvement

Overall, respondents tended to have positive assessments of their children's school climate (see Table 1). They agreed most that schools clearly tell students in advance what will happen if they break school rules and that schools give their children opportunities for participation in classroom activities. Parents also tended to agree that the school encouraged their involvement and communicated with them. Parents tended to agree less that the school provided materials, activities, and programs that matched their children's talents, gifts, or special needs or their culture, ethnicity, and identity. MC parents had a consistently more negative assessment of school climate ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.63$, for MC parents $M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.52$ for nonmilitary families), $t(3,887) = 5.19$, $p < .001$). These differences were consistent across the many aspects of school climate. The largest differences emerged in terms of parental assessments of the quality of programs and activities matching their children's interests, talents, gifts, or special needs. Military parents reported significantly more on children in elementary school compared with nonmilitary parents

Table 1: Parents' Views of School Climate, by Military Affiliations

| Parent View School Climate | Nonmilitary | Military Connected |
|---|---------------|--------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |
| This school | | |
| Promotes academic success for all students. | 1.74 (.64) | 1.88*** (.73) |
| Encourages all students to enroll in challenging courses regardless of their race, ethnicity, or nationality. | 1.83 (.72) | 1.93 (.80) |
| Is an inviting place for students to learn. | 1.76 (.67) | 1.93*** (.80) |
| Provides quality activities that meet my child's interests and talents, such as sports, clubs, and music. | 1.88 (.79) | 2.15*** (.95) |
| Has quality programs for my child's talents, gifts, or special needs. | 1.94 (.76) | 2.17*** (.95) |
| Treats all students with respect. | 1.76 (.69) | 1.90*** (.76) |
| Clearly tells students in advance what will happen if they break school rules. | 1.61 (.62) | 1.74*** (.66) |
| Gives all students opportunities to make a difference by helping other people, the school, or the community. | 1.79 (.66) | 1.88 (.77) |
| Provides quality counseling or other ways to help students with social or emotional needs. | 1.92 (.78) | 2.03 (.87) |
| Communicates the importance of respecting all cultural beliefs and practices. | 1.80 (.66) | 1.90* (.74) |
| Gives my child opportunities to participate in classroom activities. | 1.65 (.57) | 1.73 (.63) |
| Provides instructional materials that reflect my child's culture, ethnicity and identity. | 1.95 (.77) | 2.13*** (.88) |
| Enforces school rules equally for my child and all students. | 1.81 (.75) | 2.00*** (.89) |
| Is a safe place for my child. | 1.77 (.68) | 1.93*** (.83) |
| School Climate Index | 1.81 (.52) | 1.97*** (.63) |

Note: Scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree.

*Bonferroni corrected $p < .05$. ***Bonferroni corrected $p < .001$.

Table 2: Parental Involvement, by Military Affiliations

| Parental Involvement | Nonmilitary | Military Connected |
|--|---------------|--------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |
| This school | | |
| Keeps me well-informed about school activities. | 1.79 (.74) | 1.92* (.82) |
| Allows input and welcomes parents' contributions. | 1.81 (.70) | 1.87 (.74) |
| Keeps me well-informed about my child's progress in school. | 1.73 (.73) | 1.85* (.84) |
| Promptly responds to my phone calls, messages, or e-mails. | 1.83 (.76) | 1.86 (.83) |
| Encourages me to be an active partner with the school in educating my child. | 1.80 (.71) | 1.89 (.79) |
| Parental Involvement Index | 1.80 (.59) | 1.89* (.66) |

Note: Scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree.

*Bonferroni corrected $p < .05$.

(60.2 percent and 40.6 percent, respectively) [$\chi^2(2, N = 3,914) = 56.93, p < .001$]. Therefore, differences between military and nonmilitary parents' perceptions of the school climate index were also examined separately for elementary, junior high, and high school students. Results indicate that differences between military and nonmilitary parents persisted across the three grade levels, with military parents reporting a less positive school climate compared with nonmilitary parents.

Parents tended to see schools as informing them and encouraging their involvement (see Table 2). Here again, MC parents had slightly less favorable views of parental involvement in their schools. The parental involvement index for MC parents

indicated significantly lower involvement ($M = 1.89, SD = .66$) compared with nonmilitary-connected parents ($M = 1.80, SD = .59$), $t(3,858) = 2.91, p < .05$.

School Problems

Parents were asked to assess the problems that their children's schools experience (see Table 3). Overall, parents identified small problems in their children's schools. The most common problems identified were physical fights between students and students' use of alcohol and drugs. The problem least identified by parents was weapon possession. Somewhat in contrast with the findings regarding school climate and parental involvement,

Table 3: Parents' Reports of School Problems, by Military Affiliation

| School Problem | Nonmilitary | Military Connected |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |
| How much of a problem is | | |
| Student alcohol and drug use | 1.95*** (1.16) | 1.54 (1.01) |
| Harassment or bullying of students | 2.27 (1.05) | 2.26 (1.05) |
| Physical fighting between students | 2.08*** (1.06) | 1.83 (1.02) |
| Racial/ethnic conflict between students | 1.87*** (1.06) | 1.61 (.98) |
| Students not respecting staff | 1.94* (1.07) | 1.76 (1.05) |
| Gang-related activity | 1.79*** (1.12) | 1.44 (.94) |
| Weapons possession | 1.54*** (1.01) | 1.24 (.66) |
| Vandalism (including graffiti) | 1.84*** (1.08) | 1.63 (.98) |
| School Problems Index | 1.96*** (.93) | 1.77 (.89) |

Note: Scale: 1 = not a problem, 2 = small problem, 3 = somewhat a problem, 4 = large problem. **Bonferroni corrected $p < .05$. ***Bonferroni corrected $p < .001$.

Table 4: Parents' Assessments of Needs in School, by Military Affiliation

| Need | Nonmilitary | Military Connected |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |
| Additional tutoring | 2.15 (1.08) | 2.34** (1.18) |
| After-school activities | 2.12 (1.06) | 2.16 (1.07) |
| Summer camp | 2.70 (1.16) | 2.66 (1.17) |
| Scholarships/grants for after school activities | 2.05 (1.12) | 2.32*** (1.14) |
| Emotional support for deployments, transitions, and so forth | 2.43*** (1.16) | 2.10 (1.03) |
| Parenting support for effects of deployment, transitions, and so forth, on child's behavior and achievements | 2.40 (1.16) | 2.41 (1.13) |
| Help military parents be involved in school | 2.48*** (1.11) | 2.27 (1.02) |
| Help military parents communicate with other military parents | 2.54 (1.10) | 2.46 (1.08) |
| Information on educational resources for military families | 2.52*** (1.11) | 2.10 (1.03) |
| School Needs Index | 2.36 (.88) | 2.27 (.73) |

Note: Scale: 1 = major need, 2 = a need, 3 = little need, 4 = not a need.

Bonferroni corrected $p < .01$. *Bonferroni corrected $p < .001$.

military parents saw fewer problems in school than nonmilitary parents ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .93$, and $M = 1.77$, $SD = .89$, respectively), $t(3,519) = 3.85$, $p < .001$. In particular, military parents viewed the most severe behaviors (for example, student alcohol and drug use, gang-related activity, and weapon possession) as less of a problem in their children's school than did nonmilitary parents.

Need for Services

We asked parents to indicate their needs for services (see Table 4). The responses indicated that there were expected differences in the needs identified by military and nonmilitary parents. Whereas nonmilitary parents identified more needs in regard to additional tutoring and scholarships and grants for after-school activities, military parents identified the need for information on educational resources for military families as the most pressing

need. Military-connected parents did not stress the need for more support for themselves to address the effects of such life events on their children's behavior and achievements compared with non-military parents.

School Satisfaction

Overall, military parents expressed satisfaction with many aspects of the schools. Military parents were especially satisfied with the respect school staff showed their family (83.8 percent either satisfied or very satisfied), the way teachers treated their children (80 percent satisfied or very satisfied), and how the transition was handled by the school or district (81.5 percent). A relatively large proportion of military parents (21.8 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with a sense of connection to other families in school. Furthermore, despite their satisfaction with the respect shown by the school staff, about a

third of the MC parents were only somewhat satisfied or not satisfied at all with the degree of understanding that staff showed them (34 percent) and the responsiveness of the school administration to their concerns (32.4 percent). In addition, many military parents were either only somewhat satisfied or not at all satisfied with the educational supports that the military provided to the school (34 percent).

DISCUSSION

As a result of war, multiple moves, and adaptation to new environments, military children may experience greater psychological strain than children of nonmilitary parents (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Mmari et al., 2009). Research has suggested that parents and schools can serve as strong social supports to children who experience community and family stressors by maintaining a positive school climate (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009). To achieve a supporting environment in MC schools, it is important that parents feel involved in the school and see it as a positive place for them and their children. This study was one of the first comprehensive comparisons of military and nonmilitary parents' perceptions of their children's school climate and needs in public schools.

Military families in this study reported on many stressors, such as multiple deployments and moves; these stressors were shared by their children. Schools are an important source of potential support for such families. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that military parents had less positive assessments of their children's schools compared with nonmilitary parents. This may be due to the inability of public schools to provide an environment that adequately addresses the unique culture, identity, and needs of military-affiliated children and families.

Although differences between military and nonmilitary parents were not major, military parents had consistently and significantly lower assessments of school climate. Similar to previous findings (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010), military parents had especially low assessments of the quality of programs and activities matching their children's interests, talents, gifts, or special needs. These findings are especially concerning, as military students are faced with academic, emotional, and psychological challenges (Esqueda et al., 2012;

Tunac De Pedro et al., 2011). A positive school climate can contribute to students' well-being and promote achievement (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). A supportive school climate has been shown to have a positive impact on military students' emotional, academic, and social outcomes in school (Tunac De Pedro et al., 2011). Specifically, previous findings have indicated that certain school climate factors have considerable implications for military children's well-being and proficiency. These factors are related to supportive relationships outside the family that provide both warmth and structure between students and teachers, between parents and teachers, and peer relationships (Bradshaw et al., 2010; MacDermid, Samper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008). Teachers and counselors need a better understanding of military culture and evidence-based strategies that create a more positive emotional climate for military children (Mmari et al., 2009).

Of special concern are the findings indicating that military parents perceive their children's school as encouraging their involvement less, compared with the perceptions of nonmilitary parents. Schools may find it more difficult to involve military parents due to their life stressors, such as needing to take care of the family while a spouse is deployed and the emotional strain associated with such deployments. These parents may also be more transient compared with other parents. Nevertheless, for schools to be helpful to these parents and children, special efforts should be directed to help accommodate the special circumstances of these parents. Our field observations provide many examples of schools that were able to engage military parents and involve them in meaningful activities in schools that contributed to military parents and the school community at large (for example, Astor et al., 2012). Other schools should be informed about such practices.

Despite their less positive view of school climate, military parents identified fewer problems in their children's school compared with others. This was particularly true of the most severe behaviors, such as weapon possession, gang-related activity, and alcohol and drug use. This finding may be interpreted in two ways. Military families may not be as familiar with the school as nonmilitary families, because they typically move and change schools often (Lin, Twisk, & Rong, 2011). If this is the case, schools that have military parents might

consider creating programs that allow these parents to become more familiar with the school. This knowledge could encourage parents to become more engaged and connected with the school. An alternative explanation is that military parents make a special effort to enroll their children in safe schools. As shown in a related study, military parents consider school safety as an important factor when selecting their children's school (Benbenishty, Esqueda, & Malchi, 2011). This finding corresponded with previous studies that highlighted the significant concern of military parents about their children's safety at school, particularly with regard to having a deployed parent. Military children were often prime targets for bullying by students who oppose military operations, such as participation in war (Mmari et al., 2009). Considering their tremendous personal sacrifice to serve in the military, these families can be devastated by such negative experiences in school.

Military parents indicated that information on educational resources for their children was their most pressing need. This may be associated with their relatively low satisfaction with the resources the military provides their children's school. This pattern may suggest that schools and the military should communicate and collaborate more effectively. There are many important initiatives by several military branches to support the education of MC students. Nevertheless, our observations indicate that often there are gaps in communication between on-base military personnel and community public schools. It is important to bridge these gaps by connecting the military and public schools caring for military students.

Parents in this study had an important message for their children's schools; they were satisfied with the respect school staff showed military families, the way teachers treated their children, and how transitions were handled by the school or district. They were far less satisfied with the degree of understanding staff showed them and the responsiveness of the school administration to their concerns. Hence, parents communicated that public schools should be educated as to the specific needs and concerns of military families. In fact, there are very few ways for civilian educators to learn about military culture and the special needs of military families and students. It is important to include these issues in preservice and in-service learning. Currently, there is an emerging collaboration

between a large group of schools of education and the Military Child Education Coalition to modify the training received by educators so that issues pertinent to MC students and parents are integrated into the curriculum. Similar interest is shown by social work educators. For instance, USC School of Social Work is training students to work with military students and families (see <http://sowkweb.usc.edu/master-of-social-work/msw-degree/sub-concentrations/military-socialwork-veteran-services>). Joining Forces, a comprehensive national initiative to mobilize all sectors of society to support service members and their families, is also supportive of improved awareness of military children and improved training for educators (see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces>).

In light of the robust literature that indicates that military connectedness is a significant factor that has a substantial influence over military families' life experience, this study attributes most of the differences between military and nonmilitary parents' perceptions to military status. Nevertheless, further factors related to military connectedness, such as the length of time at the current school since previous deployment or the characteristics of the schools in which students are enrolled, may have significant contributions to parents' perceptions, regardless of military status. Further studies can measure school-level factors such as school climate features or other military service-related variables that may also significantly contribute to variance in parents' perceptions of their children's schools.

Civilian schools that serve high concentrations of military students should examine school-level practices that improve the school climate for military children and involve their parents, so that their needs can be met. These practices may include integrating military culture into the core curriculum, celebrating parents on active duty, developing a military-centric focus, and increasing knowledge among school staff about the unique challenges of military children and their families. School social workers and educators need to be trained to be sensitive to the military culture and develop programs and activities that affect the lives of military students and their families. **CS**

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