

SUBJECT:

# School Connectedness

EXTENDING CONNECTIONS TO MILITARY CHILDREN

This report has been supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Defense. While it draws on research and examples from public schools across America, the issues of school connectedness have special salience for children who have one or both parents in the Armed Services. Today, well over a million children of military families are in U.S. public schools, and those numbers will increase.

Research has taught us that second only to family, school is the most important stabilizing force in the lives of young people. For children who often feel “like the new kid on the block,” having someone to sit with at lunch, a teacher who helps them catch up on class material they missed in transfer or a coach who finds a way to incorporate them into a team—even after the season begins—is vital to their success.

America is a country on the move. Though few school-age students will move with the frequency of military children, the extent to which schools create stable, caring, engaging and welcoming environments is the extent to which all our children will thrive.

**The Value of Connections** When students feel connected to their school, they believe that adults in the school care about them and their learning. School connectedness results from high academic rigor and expectations, support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and an environment of physical and emotional safety. Research has shown that school-connected students are more likely to succeed, exhibiting positive behavior and avoiding risky behavior.

For military children, concerns range from having a lunch partner to developing an academic plan that can be taken from school to school so the student can stay on track through high school graduation. Developing trust between schools and military families is essential. Central to that is flexible academic support, which will assist students who may find AP and other classes filled when they arrive or may encounter different prerequisites or a different course sequence. Schools need to present military students with appropriate academic options, not leftovers. Most military families are computer savvy, and many students can catch up online. Assignments can also be placed on the Web each evening so parents can monitor their child's progress.

Three dynamic influences interact to build school connectedness:

1) *Individuals*: Students and school staff; 2) *Environment*: School climate, and 3) *Culture*: Social needs and learning priorities.

**Individuals** By high school, some 40 to 60 percent of all students are chronically disengaged from school. That number does not include those who have already dropped out. What can be done? First, recognize that people connect with people. Relationships formed between students and school staff members are at the heart of connectedness. From the principal to the janitor, all adults are important to this dynamic, and a positive student-teacher relationship is central. Effective teachers become a creative, energizing force in the learning process and enable students to develop a stake in their own achievement.

*The Cumberland County School District near Fort Bragg, North Carolina, works closely with the military installation to develop an Action Plan as part of their school improvement process that includes a proposal designed to address specific needs of children of military families attending their schools.*



*The Killeen Independent School District in Texas arranged to video and broadcast the graduation ceremonies of each of their high schools, sending them to Iraq via satellite so parents could see their children graduate.*

Military students generally have a high graduation rate. They tend to be goal oriented and college bound. But teachers and administrators must be aware of their affective as well as academic needs. For example, having a parent deployed in harm's way for extended amounts of time is very challenging. Knowing that an adult in school cares enough about them to seek them out each day and check on their well being is significant to their success. When military students' lives are chaotic during moves or deployment, schools need to be proactive in supplying predictability and stability.

**Environment** An ideal school “climate” includes a strong emphasis on academic achievement, positive student-teacher relationships, respect for others, fair and consistent discipline, attention to safety, and family and community involvement. Engaging schools promote connectedness through high academic standards, personalized learning, relevant curriculums, and flexible instructional methods and scheduling. There is no substitute for capable leadership; school administrators and teachers must set the example and establish a climate of trust. In addition, schools can help families create a supportive learning environment at home and involve communities in the success of their schools.

Military children are especially sensitive to the school environment, and they need to feel welcome. High-achieving military students who were members of the National Honor Society in their previous schools, for example, should not be excluded in the new school.

Schools should be flexible in allowing military students to take time to be with a deploying or returning parent. Schools need to be aware—and prepared to provide appropriate referrals and support—if children are helping to care for a severely injured parent or one suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. If a student is not responding as usual, the school needs to be responsive and supportive.

Partnerships between the military community and schools are essential. Educational leaders understand the importance of being aware of and responsive to the needs of their military families. Military parents want to know how they can support the school and the learning process – including ways to help during their own or their partner's deployment. Collaboration includes not only the



*Radcliff High School in Hawaii has developed an orientation, support and advocacy program for new students facilitated by peers. Students are also developing a program for staff members to increase educators' awareness of the challenges of frequent moves and deployment on teens.*



*Being excluded from the wrestling team because you arrive after tryouts—especially when you were the star wrestler in another school—is devastating. Schools can include students in athletic activities through the use of video tryouts, letters from former coaches and reserved slots for latecomers.*

schools' response but also the military community's involvement and sharing of resources and expertise. An installation's weather station, for example, can provide an opportunity to enhance classroom learning. Information from the installation regarding such issues as plans for expansion, deployments, and community events permits schools to be proactive and responsive.

**Culture** Although learning is the priority of educators, students have many reasons to attend school, including socializing, sports and extracurricular activities. Students' social status is often dictated by cliques, from the powerful jocks and preppies to the lowly goths and nerds. If a popular clique's values favor fun over future, sports over studies, or popularity over productivity, the pro-learning environment will be undermined. Demanding but fair teachers can lower the likelihood of student harassment and improve the culture through clear rules and creative conflict resolution. Because of the strong link between school bonding and reductions in health risk behaviors, many health programs also aim to strengthen school connectedness.

For adolescents, participation in extracurricular activities often defines who they are. Schools need to make an effort to involve military students in the life of the school, including athletics and leadership positions in academic and social organizations.

Military students' life experiences are different, and schools can use them to validate the worth of the experiences and enrich their school environments. Students can share their observations about living in another culture among people who speak a different language. These students may have lived overseas and seen firsthand some of the landmark features other students have seen only in textbooks. Schools should value what military students bring from other cultures and opportunities.

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