

## **Fidelity of Implementation of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children**

**Jill Gaitens**

*In 2007, in response to the challenges highly mobile military-connected students were encountering with school enrollment, eligibility for school programs, placement in classes, and graduation requirements due to frequent relocations, the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children was developed. Many educators remain unaware of the compact and the accommodations that can be offered to military-connected students. This literature review will explore the factors that generated the need for the compact and set the stage to answer the question: to what degree does Military-Interstate Compact policy align with school practices in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a division serving over 20,000 military-connected youth.*

### **The Military Interstate Compact**

Today, over a million military-connected children live with the challenges presented by frequent moves, parent deployments, and various life transitions that include deployment, reintegration, and coping with parents who may have changed profoundly due to military related experiences (Garner, Arnold & Nunnery, 2014). These children depend heavily on a network of supportive adults who are conscious of their unique issues and trained to identify the early signs of emotional and academic struggles from the lens of their culture. The goal of the Military Interstate Compact is to replace the widely varying public school policies that often create hardships for students in public schools due to the service of a parent. The Compact was intended to provide for the uniform treatment of military-connected students transferring between school districts and states. It was developed by The Council of State Governments' National Center for Interstate Compacts, the Department of Defense, national associations, federal and state officials, departments of education, school administrators and military

families. The compact was intended to provide consistency in every state that chose to join, however the policies adopted vary slightly in each state, acknowledging local control issues. State participation was voluntary, however states must adopt the Compact through their legislative process. It applies only to public schools and addresses key educational transition issues encountered by military families including enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation to ease the socio-emotional and academic challenges of students. It applies only to the children: of active duty members of the uniformed services, National Guard and Reserve on active duty orders, and members or veterans who are medically discharged or retired for one year after separation.

With recent legislation adopted in New York and New Hampshire and with legislation in Oregon becoming effective in January 2015, all 50 states have now passed a version of the Compact. In all states, the Compact is considered law, not suggestive guidance. Member states are required to form State Councils and inform school districts of the terms of the Compact. The Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3) meets annually and is tasked with coordinating the implementation of the requirements of the Compact.

### **The compact addresses transitional issues with:**

#### **Enrollment**

- Educational Records
- Immunizations
- Kindergarten & First Grade Entrance Age
- Placement & Attendance
- Course & Educational Program Placement
- Special Education Services
- Placement Flexibility
- Absence Related to Deployment Activities

#### **Eligibility**

- Eligibility for Student Enrollment
- Eligibility for Extracurricular Participation

## Graduation

- Waiving courses required for graduation if similar course work has been completed
- Flexibility in accepting state exit or end-of-course exams, national achievement tests, or alternative testing in lieu of testing requirements for graduation in the receiving state
- Allowing a student to receive a diploma from the sending school instead of the receiving school (when appropriate).  
(MIC3, 2014)

## Why a Compact Was Needed

The unique needs of military-connected children have largely been overlooked in schools designed for neighborhood civilian students, however a growing number of studies are now revealing that the stress and mobility these students experience affects both their emotional health and academic performance. When school personnel are not aware of unique populations or culture groups, they cannot understand or address their needs. The quality of the education military children receive affects enlistment, retention, and morale, and has a role in operational readiness (MIC3, 2014). In August 2014, the 50<sup>th</sup> state in the Nation adopted the Compact, however Military School Liaison Officers continue to report enrollment challenges for military-connected students due to lack of awareness, even in states like Virginia, where the compact has been in place since 2009 (Virginia Code 22.1-360).

## Increasing number of states and districts adopting data-indicators

The Federal Department of Education defines military-connected students as the children of active duty service members, however states that adopted the Compact were not required to adopt a data-indicator for military-connected students. Thus, many registrars, counselors, teachers, and school administrators remain unaware of the military-connected students in their districts and divisions to whom the Compact applies. Some

families self identify, however most blend in, unnoticed. It is unclear to what degree the Compact is addressing the issues that generated its creation and there is an increasing call for accountability. A 2011 Government Accountability Office report revealed the lack of data available to study the academic achievement of military connected students and where resources might be directed to address the greatest needs.

*“There are no data available on these students (military-connected) that could be used to assess their academic achievement or educational outcomes, or determine where funding needs are the greatest. Such reporting requirements exist for certain other groups of students, such as economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. Federal agency officials acknowledged this need for information, and education has begun discussing how to address this need.”* (Government Accountability Office, 2011)

As competition for limited resources increased under sequestration, states and school systems who know they served high numbers of military-connected students began developing data indicators to track military-connected students. Although no national indicator has been adopted, 13 states adopted mandatory data indicators for schools after the GAO report and some heavily impacted regions have adopted data indicators voluntarily. Schools in Texas, South Carolina, Illinois, Maine, Nevada, Arkansas, Michigan, Florida, Tennessee, Alaska, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Indiana now track military connected students. California has current legislation pending and it may pass in 2014. Washington and Utah voted on, but did not pass legislation requiring a student data indicator for military-connected students.

## DoDEA and Department of Education Partnership

The Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) K-12 Partnership Program has worked collaboratively with the United States Department of Education to provide resources to Local Education Agencies (LEA's) that educate

military children since 2009. To receive large federal grants, grantees are required to adopt data indicators in the schools they serve for reporting purposes. Two school divisions in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia have adopted division-wide data indicators for external evaluations for these grants, however this data is not publically available. According to Blue Star Families, Virginia serves the largest concentration of military-connected students in the nation, however Virginia does not have a statewide indicator. The majority of school systems seem unaware of military-connected students, the grants, and the Compact according to Fatimah Pierce, a Program Manager at the DoDEA.

### **Where Military-connected Students Attend School**

The Department of Defense Educational Activity consists of two school systems, the Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DoDDS), which serves students overseas, and the Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DoD DDESS), which serves students in the United States. DoDEA operates 64 schools in the United States serving 7% or 80,000 military-connected students, however according to the Department of Defense (DOD), over 1.2 million military dependent children attend schools off base installations in schools designed for civilian communities or are home educated (DoDEA, 2011). The DoDEA schools offer a standardized curriculum and culture that eases the transition of military-connected students between schools, particularly from domestic to overseas schools and back. This system also helps students to overcome the effects of frequent moves and socio-emotional stress (DoDEA, 2011), unlike schools in civilian communities who have widely ranging degrees of awareness of this population of students.

Research conducted by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) estimates military-connected children move six to nine times during their K-12 academic experience and have unique academic and socio-emotional needs. Due to their highly mobile lifestyle and the perceived uneven availability of high quality public schools near urban, suburban, and rural military installations, military-

connected parents must research the educational options available in each new community, as well as the enrollment nuances of each option. Although traditional public schools are the most popular option, many military-connected families elect to home educate, select a private school, or educate their children through virtual or distance learning programs to ease the transitional issues that the Compact was developed to negate (The Military Child Education Coalition, 2012).

Many military-connected students attend schools in areas with high concentrations of military-connected students, however during lengthy deployments, it is not unusual for a family to move closer to extended family (Blaisure, 2012). "Going home" to live near extended family results in additional moves and children attending schools with students and staff unfamiliar with the military culture or the Compact. The further military-connected students live from high impact cluster areas, the more likely local schools might be unaware of the Compact. The physical disruptions due to mobility factors result in military-connected youth often experiencing isolation and academic barriers due to variances in educational policies (Hammer, 2014).

In addition, the children of Reserve Component personnel and the National Guard typically attend civilian schools far from military installations further isolating them during stressful deployments. Civilian schools often lack the procedures and resources to identify military-connected students, to assist with school transitions, and to link students to local assistance, which may result in negative school experiences (De Pedro et al., 2011).

### **Impact aids role in identifying military-connected students**

Public schools in civilian communities largely define the number military-connected students attending their schools through the lens of Impact Aid, a federal Department of Education program designed by Congress in 1950 to disburse financial aid payments to local educational agencies that are financially burdened by federal activities

such as military bases and Indian Reservations (National Military Family Association, 2006). Eligible school districts take a count of students who are federally affiliated once a year and because the funding is weighted, disaggregate their impact aid reports by: children of members of the uniformed services, children who reside on Indian lands, children who reside on Federal property or in federally subsidized low-rent housing, and children whose parents work on Federal Property. To be eligible for funding assistance under impact aid, a school district must educate at least 400 eligible children in average daily attendance, or the federally connected children must make up at least 3 percent of the school district's total average daily attendance. School districts must also demonstrate that the Federal Government has acquired real property with an assessed valuation of at least 10 percent of all real property in the district at the time of acquisition within their borders after 1938. Thus many districts who do not believe they will meet the funding criteria, do not conduct the Impact Aid Survey and do not know what number of military-connected students who attend schools in their communities (National Military Family Association, 2006). Unlike other federal education funding distributed in a formula structure like IDEA or Title One, Impact Aid does not require that academic data be tracked or reported, nor does it require that funding be directed toward the education of military or federally connected students. School districts and divisions receiving this aid are not required to adopt practices to address the needs of military-connected students, a growing concern at the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2011). School districts and division who identify military-connected students using Impact Aid reports know only how many military connected students attend each of their schools during a short, annual window. They cannot offer information regarding how these students are performing academically or socio-emotionally.

### **School Consciousness and Parent Perceptions**

Determining the factors that make a school conscious to the needs of military-connected students to implement the Interstate Compact for these students is dependent on schools knowing

who their military-connected students are. Using the data reported by states and divisions that voluntarily track military-connected students, Impact Aid, and DoD estimates, there are over one million military-connected students whose parents are active duty, members of the National Guard or Reserves or Veterans of the United States Military to whom the Compact applies according to MCEC.

- 1,381,584 of the military-connected students are 4-18 years old;
- Over 80% of these children – 1,105,267 students – attend P-12 public schools;
- Approximately 10-12% of military-connected students are served in special education programs. (MCEC, 2012)

Extensive resources are available to assist schools, teachers, and students, however parents appear to perceive that schools are still unaware of these resources according to Blue Star Families. Students of active duty, reservists, and National Guard members may experience the deployment of parents in any community across our Nation or attend any school. A 2012 military family lifestyle survey of the parents attending civilian schools, conducted by Blue Star Families, found that:

- 38% of parents reported that their child's school was not aware of military life experiences, including transition and deployment.
- 39% of parents did not feel their child's school was "responsive or proactive" to unique military situations.
- 50% of parents were not aware of the Military Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity.
- 29% of parents responded that their child's school complied with the Compact.
- 47% of parents responded that they were unaware of the School Liaison Officer Program.
- 25% reported that their schools were using School Liaison Officers.
- 33% reported that their child's schools had support programs for military-connected students.



- 36% stated that deployment had negatively affected their child's ability to participate in extra-curricular programs. (Blue Star Families, 2012)

### **How are Military-connected Students Doing?**

**Academic achievement.** Blaisure theorizes based on recent research that the children of military service members have unique life experiences that may potentially result in school challenges as they transition to and from new school environments (Blaisure, 2012). There is a perception, based on mobility data (De Pedro et al., 2011) that military-connected students might lag behind their civilian peers academically. Although little data is available from civilian schools due the lack of a national military indicator allowing all schools to track their academic performance, in 2010, the children attending DoDEA schools in grades 3-11 demonstrated academic strength by exceeding national averages in math, science, language arts, social studies and reading (DoDEA, 2010a, 2010c). In addition, 68% of students attending DoDEA schools who took the SAT test compared with 47% of national rate. Although DoDEA math scores were lower than national average, reading and writing scores slightly exceeded national averages. African American and Hispanic DoDEA students scored 1-6% higher in each section of the SAT than civilian peers continuing a multi-year trend (DoDEA, 2010b). The reasons for this difference cannot be fully researched, again due to the lack of national indicator in civilian schools, however "military children avoid some of the hardships that disproportionately affect prospective minority families in the civilian population: parental unemployment, limited parent education, extreme poverty, lack of access to health care, poor-quality schools, discrimination, and/or disadvantaged or dangerous neighborhoods" (Blaisure, 2012). As the 13 states that adopted indicators begin disclosing data and additional states adopt indicators, more conclusive data is expected to emerge regarding the academic performance of military-connected students.

As states adopt indicators, it can also be inferred that schools will become more aware of the Interstate Compact and parent satisfaction with civilian school programs may increase.

**Socio-emotional needs.** Although academic data is limited from school settings outside of DOD schools, clinical mental health research regarding the socio-emotional needs of military-connected students is available. The Compact does not specifically address these issues, however parts of the Compact were designed to address stressors that may exasperate the mental health needs of students. For example, the Compact covers the exclusion of military-connected students from activities that promote socialization and connectedness, such as athletics, National Honor Society, and other extra-curricular programs with deadlines for try-outs and enrollment. The Compact also addresses absences related to deployment and at times of other stress.

Since 2001, when the war in Afghanistan began, and March 2003, when the war in Iraq began, the United States has experienced the longest sustained deployment of service members in history (Cozza, 2013). Combat operations are sound bites on television or the Internet for most Americans. Military-connected children have experienced separations from mothers, fathers, and increasingly both parents (Chandra & London, 2013). Studies have indicated that the children of parents who have deployed have experienced numerous psychological and academic challenges (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). The Gorman, Eide, and Hisle-Gorman study revealed that the demand for mental health services for military-connected students has doubled to two million outpatient and hospitalizations for severe socio-emotional problems including suicidal behaviors since the beginning of the Iraq war.

In addition, another recent study in California (Cenderbaum, 2014) revealed that nearly a quarter of all secondary school freshman and juniors who have a parent or a sibling serving in the military indicate that they have had suicidal thoughts during the past year. In comparison, only 19 percent of freshmen and about 17 percent of juniors with civilian parents had experienced

suicidal thoughts. This is much closer to the national rate according to the same study. Numerous studies demonstrate that during times of conflict military-connected children and adolescents often “experience more negative psychological, social, and emotional outcomes than their civilian peers” (Astor, 2013; Astor, Pedro, Esqueda, & Benbenishty, 2013; Clever & Segal, 2013).

The California study used data from the annually administered California Healthy Kids Survey, administered to 7th, 9th and 11th graders in public schools by the state's Department of Education. This study added a military child indicator in the survey to disaggregate data regarding military-connected students, an approach that has not been taken in other states. Of the 14,000 teenagers surveyed, 13% had a military connection. The extent of the issue was previously difficult to determine as all other mental health surveys on military-connected youth had been done in a clinical setting. This study indicated that the psychological effects for students might vary depending on a student's family situation with higher levels of deployment by a parent or sibling increasing a teen's risk of sadness and depression (Cenderbaum, 2014).

Current research of schools that track military students indicates that military youth experience higher instances of substance abuse, violence, bullying, victimization, mental health issues, and gang affiliation than their peers who are not military connected. The authors point out increased incidences of negative behaviors may manifest when there is a lack of awareness and support of a student's military connection by school faculty and staff (Cozza, 2013).

**The impact of deployment.** Schools that fail to be conscious of their military connected student populations may miss the opportunity to support a student academically during deployments. Due to deployment related circumstances, it might be necessary for parents to place their child with a designated guardian. The Compact requires that schools allow students the option of remaining in their school of record or relocate them to the neighborhood school of their guardian. Deployment

of a parent effects a students academic achievement, behavior, and psychological well-being, as children worry about parental safety and experience a reduction in parent support with homework and school activities. When a child has a deployed parent during the school year, there is a 3 percent decrease in test scores when compared to that of a child with non-deployed parents. There is a .92 point reduction on math scores when a child's parent is deployed during the month of the exam. For the five subject areas and the total score, there is a statistically significant negative effect in academic achievement from deployments as far back as five years (Engel, R.C., Gallagher, L.B., & Lyle, D.S., 2009). A child's math score declines as the duration of parent absence increases (Lyle, D.S., 2006).

In a 2009 U.S. Army study that compared the Terra Nova exam scores of 56,000 school-age students (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2009) demonstrated that when a child had a deployed parent during the school year, there was a 3 percent standard deviation in lower test scores than a child with non-deployed parents. This study also found that there was a .92 percent point reduction on math scores when a child's parent was deployed during the month of the exam. For the five subject areas and the total score, there was a statistically significant negative effect in academic achievement from deployments as far back as five years. Schools that are conscious of the effects of deployment through the adoption of identifiers and understanding of the Compact, might be better prepared to address socio-emotional issues and academic slides more effectively.

**The effects of mobility.** The effects of moving impact all military-connected subgroups; including students in high-income families. Consistently, students experienced declines in test scores after moves. No group consistently benefited from moving (Pribesh, & Downey, 1999). The Compact seeks to address the academic slide that typically takes place after a move by allowing students to be enrolled with hand carried school records, proper placement for gifted, special education, and English Language Learners, and eliminating redundant or missed enter and exit

testing. Researchers at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, found that military-connected youth had unique perceived stressors in relation to tension at home, strains on peer relationships, adapting to new school environments, academic challenges, student/teacher relationships, and involvement with extracurricular activities after moves (Bradshaw, Sudhenaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010). In this study, inconsistent policies created stress for both students and parents with the transfer of high school credits and varying graduation requirements being strong concerns. One area covered by the Compact but inconsistently applied according to Hampton Roads Regional School Liaison Officer, Deborah Patch, is the compact waiver for high school students regarding state history requirements. This section of the compact ensures students are not required to take multiple state history courses as a graduation requirement. In the study, students also reported that friends have been required to stay in school an extra year to complete graduation requirements that are often regional, such as a state history course. This had negative effects on self-esteem, attitudes toward school, and academic motivation.

The mishandling of student records was also a strong concern causing matriculation delays according to the study. One student was quoted, "I had to repeat junior year because they lost half a year of my transcripts. Just lost it. So now I am a 19 year old senior and I feel like an idiot." With all schools now covered under the compact, students should be allowed to hand carry non-official records and have them honored. Parents in the study, which was commissioned by the DoDEA, indicted that their was a need for standardization across schools in relation to academic requirements and services provided to students, areas covered under the Compact.

### **Comparisons to Past Research**

In 2001, MCEC conducted Secondary Education Transition Study (SETS). In 2009, this study was updated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (EMC-21) Study. These studies examined the academic supports in civilian schools from the lens of the mental health and academic research available. In

2001, the Compact was not in place in any state. By 2009, 32 states had adopted the Compact. Today, all 50 states have adopted the Compact. The SETS study, conducted over 10 years ago found that:

- Records transfer and interpretation systems were neither consistently efficient nor effective between school districts.
- Variations in school calendars added to the challenges of transition and created barriers for students.
- Variations in school schedules increased the probability of transition challenges
- Clear and timely information exchange, understanding/interpretation, coherent articulation of courses and credits, redundancy, lack of formalized reciprocity made transfers confusing school personnel and military families.
- Extracurricular experiences were important to the "fitting in" process, however some policies create barriers for student participation.
- Vigorous and dynamic partnerships made a difference for both military and school organizations.
- Students needed and appreciated caring, sensitive adults.
- Professional development and adequate staffing were an on-going need. (MCEC, 2001)

The EMC-21 (The Military Child Education Coalition, 2009) detailed a decade of changes through a mixed methods research study design to offer a theoretical lens or perspective (Hanson, 2009). The design used quantitative data to analyze themes and patterns and qualitative data to add depth through interactions with teachers, parents, and students. The study asked:

1. "What are the educational barriers and stressors for military families when they transition from one location to another?"
2. "Are multiple deployments causing stress on the education of military-connected students? What is the impact on schools?"

The intention of the updated study was to make recommendations to both educators and military leadership to support the education of military students. MCEC considers the study to be

phase two research that addressed factors such as federal and state testing requirements, the impact of NCLB and high stakes testing, the impact of frequent parent deployments, and technology advances that have improved technology and records transfers.

A significant barrier in EMC-21 study, according to the author, remained a lack of a military-connected student indicator. The study found that the failure to consistently track military-connected students makes it difficult for schools to target resources where they are needed the most. The report recommended that, to improve school service in communities with a military population, specific and quantifiable data such as military affiliation of parents, deployment status, transition history, and academic and behavior indicators be collected to provide guidance on services. This study confirmed the information gap that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) had uncovered in a study of academic performance of military-connected students attending civilian schools (Government Accountability Office, 2011).

### **Why Evaluate the Compact in Virginia Beach**

In August 2014, I received a Governors appointment to the Virginia Council on the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. Virginia adopted the Compact in 2009, however other than agendas from quarterly meetings, no evaluation data regarding its implementation in school divisions is readily available. Addressing the needs of military-connected children in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia is challenging (Garner, Arnold, & Nunnery, 2014). With the increasing amount of data available through three DoDEA Grants awarded to Virginia Beach and Newport News several, a fidelity of implementation study is now achievable and lessons might emerge to support other communities as well as potential revisions to the Virginia Compact. This evaluation might also reveal gaps in staff training, parent knowledge, and implementation across grade levels and communities with a high military presence.

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