



NEEDS OF MILITARY-CONNECTED SCHOOL DIVISIONS IN SOUTH-EASTERN VIRGINIA

Arnold, P., Garner, J., Neale-McFall, C., & Nunnery, J.

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A Technical Report by
Pamela Arnold, Joanna Garner, Cheryl Neale-McFall, & John Nunnery
The Center for Educational Partnerships
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA 23508

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Please direct all correspondence to:
Dr. Joanna K. Garner
Research Assistant Professor
The Center for Educational Partnerships
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA 23508
jkgarner@odu.edu

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Abstract

This technical report presents the findings of a study of perceptions of elementary public school educators regarding the academic and social emotional needs, existing institutional supports, and potential areas for improving school responsiveness to educational obstacles faced by military-connected children experiencing transitions and parental deployment. Interview, focus group, and questionnaire data were collected from teachers, principals, counselors, specialists, and district data services personnel serving eight schools in four local education agencies (LEAs) in Virginia. Constant-comparison and descriptive techniques were employed to identify themes pertaining to schools' ability to support student academic and social emotional wellbeing. Findings and recommendations for improving school capacity to better serve military-connected children are presented.

Executive Summary

Schools must meet a wide array of academic, social and emotional, and organizational challenges to effectively educate military connected students who are experiencing transition or deployment of a family member. In this study, we visited eight elementary schools that serve high concentrations of military connected students to gather information about their needs and existing strategies for supporting these students. This study was conducted in a state that is home to 327,000 active-duty military and family members, the second-largest active-duty military population in the nation (Virginia National Guard, 2011). We purposefully selected schools with varying populations of military connected students. Children of service members from all branches of the military were represented in the school settings selected. We interviewed and conducted focus group and survey data collection efforts with teachers, principals, counselors and other specialists. School personnel responses were analyzed for themes that capture responses to academic and social-emotional needs of military students and the unique position that these schools are in, in terms of providing high quality educational services to all of their students.

Our findings illustrate that, while public schools continually strive to provide excellent educational services to military students, they experience unique challenges due to the specific needs of these students. Furthermore, a great opportunity and willingness exists for schools to improve their systemic capacities to respond to military student needs if resources can be found and embedded on a school-wide basis. We found evidence of specific measures that schools are required to take to cope with the academic and social and emotional consequences of transition and deployment. In regards to significant numbers of student transitions, a number of demands are placed on the school. Critical areas of responsibility include the need to provide remediation for transition-related gaps in learning, the need to prepare students for mandated state and district-wide assessments for which requisite knowledge may be lacking, and the need to undertake complex grading, retention and placement decisions for transitioning students. For students with disabilities, schools must provide additional highly individualized evaluations and services to transitioning students with disabilities, while adapting their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to local and state contexts. The demand to provide these specialized services is particularly substantial in schools that serve bases with high concentrations of military-connected students with disabilities as a result of policies governing the stationing of service members with exceptional family members.

We found evidence that schools help transitioning students adjust to new pedagogical structures and pacing by working hard to implement appropriate accommodations and differentiated instruction. In some schools, staff invest time to induct new transitioning students into the academic and social life of their new classroom and school, establish systems to help students who miss many days of school due to transitions or deployment related issues, and put in place mechanisms for enhancing school connectedness for transitioning students and families. They institute creative ways to provide homework and other academic supports for students who have less support at home due to the deployment of a parent, and establish responsive classroom and school settings to meet the social and emotional needs of students struggling with transition and deployment related stressors, including in some instances the provision of counseling services.

Schools' ability to address these issues and promote student wellbeing and academic progress is intimately connected to the ways schools do business. Supportive school communities are not likely to be developed solely through externalized or add-on programs and supports without concomitant change at the school level. There is therefore a need to build capacity *within* schools to meet the needs of military connected students. Although external programs and resources can be beneficial, they require

internalized structures and supports to be able to take root and become part of the life and institutional memory of the school. Furthermore, limited funding availability makes it imperative to empower schools and school personnel to maximize their own resources to meet the needs of military connected students.

Sustainability is possible if capacity is built simultaneously inside-out and outside-in (Bol, Nunnery, & Lowther, 1998). With this in mind, our recommendations for the Department of Defense and others seeking to enhance school responsiveness to the specific needs of military connected children are:

- 1. Provide sustained, comprehensive, job embedded professional development for school staff who work with military connected students to create the capacity for building school-wide programs and practices that meet the academic and social-emotional needs of military students and families.** The impacts of transition and deployment are realized at the school, classroom and individual levels and, in the context of the schools we visited, represent an important continuing local context for educators' daily work. Accordingly, staff who work with military connected students at *all* these levels—namely administrators, teachers and other instructional staff, and counselors and other support service providers—must be aware of and able to address the educational needs created by transition and deployment. Furthermore, this training must extend beyond the simple awareness of issues and equip professionals with the methods and tools they need to be able to create and implement the academic and social-emotional supports needed by their students coping with transition and deployment related issues. Teachers, administrators, counselors and other school staff should be assisted in creating classrooms and schools in which all military connected students can succeed by equipping them with a repertoire of tools, exemplars and models they can use in their actual job capacities, time to explore them, assistance with implementation of these tools, and the construction of customized tools that fit their own local school contexts. According to the participants in our study, this sort of assistance would likely be well received and utilized at this time. Over 80% of the teachers we surveyed indicated that it is a priority for them to learn more about the needs of military connected students while only 11% indicated that they had received special training to address the needs of military connected students.
- 2. Provide support for additional school-based personnel to assist with the academic and social emotional challenges of transition and deployment.** Additional counselors, smaller student to teacher ratios, and additional administrative support all provide 'boots on the ground' where they are often most needed in schools. Because some of the needs associated with transitions and deployments are so highly individualized, requiring for example additional counseling to cope with stress, or quick turn-around evaluations, or individualized academic remediation, more on-site school staff to implement these specialized services logistically becomes a necessity if they are to be offered. Quite often the barrier to meeting the needs of students struggling with transition and deployment issues in our schools was described by our participants as not a "what to do" problem but a "who to do it" problem. Public schools with high concentrations of military connected students have unique staffing needs that, if not addressed, lower the capacity to provide a high quality education for *all* children, not just those whose parents are serving our country.
- 3. Assist schools in establishing systems to identify and respond to changing needs of military connected students, and monitor outcomes.** We did not find evidence that schools in our study had formal systems in place to specifically track and monitor the needs and progress of military

connected students as a group, nor to systematically assess and reflect on their school-wide efforts to provide a military conscious school environment. We recommend that resources be dedicated to helping schools establish and share these systems and tools so they are better able to build and sustain comprehensive school wide approaches to meet the changing needs of their military connected students. Doing so would also enhance mechanisms by which school districts and agencies can be held accountable for the ways in which resources are being developed and used.

- 4. Enhance school-military partnerships and communications.** Most of the participants in our study mentioned desiring more information about upcoming transitions and deployments so they are better able to anticipate needs and target services, as well as more information about resources. While our counselor participants made us aware that many resources do exist, connecting them to teachers so they may be utilized in the day to day life of the classroom appears to be an area that requires more attention. Fewer than 25% of teachers we surveyed indicated they had access to a list of resources and services to support the needs of military connected students and fewer than 14% agreed that school staff were well informed about military-based support services for military connected students.

In summary, our findings point both to the existence of significant awareness and desire to support the needs of military connected students and a critical need to increase systemic capacity in schools that serve substantial populations of military connected students.

Introduction

Frequent transitions and longer, more frequent deployments can have negative impacts on the learning and academic achievement of military connected students (Engel, Gallagher & Lyle, 2006; Park, 2011; Phelps, 2010; RAND, 2011; United States Government Accountability Office, 2011). Additional consequences may also be manifest through behavioral difficulties, reduced social and emotional wellbeing, and a reduction in the nature and quality of school experience (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, Tanielian, Burns, Ruder & Han, 2009; Perkins & Borden, 2004; USGAO, 2011). In this technical report we describe the results of interviews and surveys of practitioners in elementary schools serving high populations of military connected students in order to gather perceptions of academic and social emotional needs of military connected students, and to understand the challenges, barriers and needs of educators and school systems. As a result, we present statements describing the academic and social-emotional needs of military connected elementary students, issues related to transition and deployment, existing educational support mechanisms, and areas of critical need. We conclude with recommendations to guide further investigation into ways in which these schools and the students they serve, can be better supported.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Participants included seven principals, eight school counselors, 59 K-5 general and special education teachers, two data administrators, two reading specialists, two math specialists, and a community outreach specialist from eight elementary schools in four public school districts with substantial populations of military connected students. We purposefully selected schools with varying populations of military connected students, including schools serving exclusively children of service members and schools with approximately equal proportions of military and non-military connected students. Children of service members from all branches of the military were represented in the school settings selected. The schools we selected for this study were serving the children of service members who are being deployed multiple times and for increasingly longer periods, as is the case for the wider military population nationwide (RAND, 2011).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection techniques included individual and focus group interviews, as well as teacher questionnaire. School counselors and principals were interviewed individually using semi-structured interview protocols with two researchers present. Teachers and school specialists were interviewed through focus groups using modified nominal group technique (Delbecq & Vande Ven, 1971; Moore, 1994), and each completed a Likert-scale questionnaire (Table 1).

Methods of Analysis & Triangulation

Field notes were taken during the focus groups and interviews (n=29), which were digitally voice recorded then transcribed for analysis using constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Tentative categories were constructed, compared among three researchers and revised through subsequent comparisons of the data. Two primary researchers reviewed the transcribed data to identify initial categories and themes. The two researchers and a doctoral level graduate research assistant coded 10% of data representing different schools and roles to discuss and refine categories and themes. Two primary researchers coded an additional 10% of the data and engaged in discussion to resolve coding disagreements. Transcripts were parsed line by line and percentage of agreement was calculated among

the two researchers at 95% agreement for five main themes in teacher focus group transcripts; 95% agreement in school counselor transcripts; and 100% agreement in principal interview transcripts. After inter-rater agreement was established, one researcher coded the remaining transcripts. SPSS 18.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics for the questionnaire data.

Consistent themes emerged from the voices of practitioners in the eight military-connected public schools we selected for our study. The research design we employed was intended to provide a deeper understanding of the issues faced by educators of military-connected children in elementary schools in southeastern Virginia. Thus, while the findings may not necessarily apply to the broader population of public schools that serve military-connected children, our findings are generally congruent with the emerging body of literature on military connected students and schools. The themes we identify merit careful consideration from the Department of Defense and others seeking to ensure quality educational experiences for the children of those who serve our nation.

The Academic Impacts of Transition and Deployment in Military-Connected Schools: School-based Issues, Needs and Responses

Active duty families move every two to three years within the U.S. or overseas (Park, 2011). This is three times more often than the civilian population (Collins, 2011). In recent studies investigating military parent and childrens' perceptions of transition, educational disruptions have been identified to be the most challenging aspect of relocation (Huebner, Alidoosti, Brickel & Wade, 2010; Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudinaraset & Blum, 2010; The White House, 2011). Educators in our study reported that these frequent relocations can disrupt student's learning and academic achievement in a variety of ways, requiring schools to provide a range of specialized supports and services to meet the academic needs of transitioning students.

The Effects of Transition on Learning and Academic Success

The most frequently discussed academic issue that emerged in both focus group and interview discussions among all participants—teachers, principals and counselors—was related to the varying school experiences of students who transition. One principal in our study remarked, “It’s not that we have 60% of new students at the beginning of the year. No, our transiency is monthly. It is a weekly thing. In fact we had two students that started yesterday (in June) with us. It is constant.” Another commented that one can “feel a breeze” in the hallway because there is a “revolving door.” This principal shared that after the state assessments she became curious and asked the registrar to pull the names of students taking the exams who had been there since kindergarten. Of 106 5th graders, just eight had remained in the same school since kindergarten.

Attendance at different schools and variable school experiences were reported to result in great variety in prior knowledge and skill sets among transitioning military connected students. This variation was frequently characterized as “gaps” or “holes” in the knowledge base required for the student's academic success in their current school. As one teacher stated, her most significant instructional challenge when teaching military connected students is, “Being able to fill in the gaps of what they missed because they have moved around a lot.” Reading, mathematics skills, and social studies knowledge, particularly relating to state history, were identified as the primary areas in which these gaps were most problematic. Substantial variability was observed both in schools' ability to remediate these differences, and in the strategies employed to address them.

Participants most frequently attributed the differences in prior knowledge to differences between state curricula, standards, and assessments. This is consistent with findings from other studies on

military connected students that report school personnel perceive one of the greatest challenges they face is meeting the increased academic needs of transitioning students due to difference in state and district curricula (GAO, 2011). One teacher in our study wondered, “How do you fill the gaps in the amount of time you have with them? It does make it hard for them. Their social studies [curriculum] in another state is not going to look like what we teach here. They are playing catch up as well as trying to move forward and there really is not extra support for that.” Participants also noted that there were differences in curriculum, assessments, and expectations military connected students may experience between public and DoD schools, between public, private and/or homeschool settings, and in some instances differences between districts or schools within a district. Several participants pointed out that on top of coping with gaps, it was not rare for students to have already learned things in their previous school(s) that had not yet been taught in their new school, resulting in boredom and wasted instructional time due to repetition of lessons. These findings are consistent with other studies which have identified that for military connected students, varied requirements from one state to the next often results in missed learning in critical topics and/or repetition of curricula already learned (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari & Blum, 2010).

In addition to curricular issues, participants also noted that transitioning students must readjust to different teaching methods, pedagogical techniques and pacing in a new school setting. School adjustment has been found elsewhere in the literature to be a significant stressor for military connected students (Bradshaw et. al, 2010). Participants in our study recounted that teachers expend a significant amount of additional effort in facilitating such readjustments and accommodating students until they adjust. Time is required for teachers to learn about new students and induct them into the classroom. One teacher made an analogy to the start of the school year in discussing a problem many mentioned: “Teachers need to get to know their students very quickly. You almost have to take time away from the whole class just to get to know that one kid a little bit better. It’s like going through the beginning of the school year all over again.” Many participants noted that because of differences in transitioning students’ prior knowledge and academic skills, the teacher’s ability to differentiate instruction is critical. As noted by one teacher, “The students come in with different skill sets. You need to be able to differentiate at a higher level and remediate in different ways than you would with a different population.” Teachers emphasized the need to provide a lot of small group and individualized instructional opportunities for transitioning students, and described the challenges of doing so given limited classroom time and resources.

Practitioners mentioned remedial support for reading and math as a critical area of need and a capacity that would support transitioning students. In addition, many articulated that there is a need for systems and tools that provide a quick turn-around diagnosis of present levels of academic functioning for transitioning military students. As one teacher expressed, “We need to be able to identify weaknesses quickly because we don’t have a school year to work with. They come in any time during the year and I don’t have the luxury of wasting any time with a child’s education. I have to teach them as soon as they get here so I have to know what they know and what they don’t know.”

Several of the school personnel in our study mentioned having an initial screening process in place to assess transitioning students, most frequently in reading, and access to better diagnostic tools for assessing transitioning students’ present levels of academic functioning. To provide remediation support, some participants mentioned that they had reading specialists and math interventionists available to assist with assessments and academic supports through Title 1 funding. Responses of principals underscored the importance of Title 1 resources when applicable; there were significant differences expressed among some of the principals of Title 1 and non-Title one schools with respect to how well they felt their schools were supported in meeting academic needs in general. One principal of

a school with an almost exclusively military connected population remarked, “My need here is really academic...I have got to provide some sort of intervention. Because I am not a Title 1 school and because I meet state accreditation, I have no assistance.” Conversely, the principal of a school that is Title 1 told us, “Academic needs are being met better than social-emotional because of the resources of Title 1. We are able to do lots of small group. We have an interventionist. We have tutors. We just have layers and layers.” Therefore, while schools with additional resources for academic supports employ them for the benefit of military connected students, schools without these additional resources may struggle to meet the transition-related academic needs of their military connected students.

Some educators mentioned the desire to have access to a better array of diagnostic tools for assessing transitioning students’ present levels of academic functioning. Some mentioned that it would be helpful to have background knowledge of curricula from different states and countries, for both school personnel and parents. The comments of one teacher reflect a sentiment expressed by several across our study, “Sometimes parents are unaware that things are very different from state to state and when they get there and their child is having trouble in school they can’t understand why.” Resources to assist both school personnel and parents in comparing curricula and standards from state to state may be helpful in supporting smoother transitions for students.

Transition intersects with school, student and teacher accountability where high-stakes testing and grading for transitioning students are concerned; many practitioners reported having little leeway to make accommodations with district or state exams. One principal notes, “At the end of the year they have to take those same state assessments that everyone else is, whether they have been here two days or all year.” This creates an instructional challenge for teachers, as well a social-emotional coping challenge for the transitioning students and their teachers as they try to play the “catch up” game. A teacher commented, “We have gotten students and we had to catch them up with two years’ worth of history because they had to take the state assessments. They could show up as late as the last month of school, you never know.” Some participants indicated that while they are not held accountable for the state mandated test scores of students who transition after October, “They still have to take them and we try to have some classes to boost them in science and social studies because our social studies is very oriented to this state in certain grade levels, so we try to bridge the gap for them.” For many participants, the performance of transitioning students on these exams and their impact on the overall scores of the grade, school and district were of concern. This is a predictable result given the current climate of high stakes testing in the United States. An unintended outcome of the policy focus on accountability in public schools in the case of military connected students seems to be that undue pressure is being placed on transitioning students (and their teachers) for them to “hurry up” and learn things that their peers have already been taught to which they may have not yet been exposed, often in a very short period of time.

Grading and promotion of transitioning students were also issues of concern for many of the practitioners at our military connected schools. Teachers and principals are often faced with difficult grading and retention decisions when working with transitioning students. We heard descriptions of some cases where adaptations to grading and retention policies were not in place for transitioning students. Describing such a case, one teacher said, “I had a child transfer in the middle of the year and semester so I had to take grades and quiz them on stuff we were talking about. I know it is damaging to their self-esteem about the lower grades. The parents called and vented and I said I understand but I have to give them grades. That is not fair to the child.” A counselor discusses a case in which a child was retained: “Sometimes we have had to make some decisions about putting the child back a grade level. The parents couldn’t understand how in their last state they were advanced, but here they are below grade level. That is really unfortunate for the families and the kids too.” On the other hand,

some schools are making adaptations in policy for transitioning students. A principal recounts, “I can remember a child I wanted to put back in a grade level and we just left him there because it would not be fair to punish him and say, ‘you are not up to our standards of fourth grade so you have to go back to third’.” These comments are consistent with other studies that found school districts reported adopting flexible academic requirements for newly transferred students (GAO, 2011). While it is tempting to want to make a blanket recommendation for all cases on these issues, these are really problems of practice that our schools are finding they must negotiate on case by case bases. The practitioners in the schools we studied seem to be trying to negotiate a fine line trying to figure out reasonable grading accommodations for transitioning students without subjecting them to low expectations and social promotions. Making such individualized decisions for transitioning students requires a great deal of additional time and relies upon the expertise of school personnel.

Academic Transition and Special Educational Needs

Military Family Needs Assessment (MFNA) data suggests that one of the biggest challenges reported by military families with an exceptional family member (EFM) was maintaining appropriate educational services for their child after relocation (Huebner et. al, 2010). Our data revealed that special education for transitioning students with disabilities is a significant issue of concern for practitioners as well. In general, principals in our study reported that the process of receiving records from transitioning students’ prior schools was relatively efficient, though only 25% of the teachers we surveyed felt these records were easily accessible and eighty five percent of teachers indicated that they did not think it was easy to use transitioning students’ previous academic record to determine their instructional placement.

Participants reported the greater number of transitions a child made and the more complex their service history, the more difficult it was for schools to amass all the necessary records and get a complete history—the most difficulty was associated with obtaining special education records. Principals indicated that they tried to facilitate the smooth transition of students with IEPs by obtaining the IEP in advance to consider potential needs and services ahead of time so they can be more prepared for the student’s arrival if possible. At the same time, comments by participants regarding difficulty obtaining records were most frequently related to special education records and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Confidentiality requirements for these records may be one factor that slows down their transfer, but a number of participants also recounted stories whereby parents deliberately did not inform the school that their child had an IEP because they felt like they wanted to give their child a chance in the new setting without being identified as disabled. While this is understandable, particularly in the context of a system that requires a child to be labeled using categories and language that have pejorative connotations in the common vernacular (e.g. “learning disabled”, “emotionally disturbed”, “mentally retarded”), practitioners often reported that this resulted in holding up processes for obtaining appropriate services and placements, and the loss of valuable instructional time for the transitioning student with the IEP. Practitioners also reported that some parents did not transfer the IEP simply because they were unaware that it would apply in the new state or that the school would need the information. More communication with service member parents who have children with IEPs about special education legal issues, and how to be effective advocates for their children may be helpful in mediating some of these problems.

Differences in state and local interpretations of federal laws governing special education also cause problems for transitioning students with IEPs and their schools. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) establishes specific classifications and due process requirements for ensuring the right to a free, appropriate public education for individuals with disabilities that apply to all states, states may add elements in the execution of the law (Villa, Thousand, Nevin & Liston, 2005).

Furthermore, each state interprets the law and provides guidance to the local education agencies, or school districts, which take this guidance to conduct evaluations of students potentially eligible for special services to determine if criteria are met, and specify the services to be provided (Salend, 2011). The result of this cooperative federalism in special education is that transitioning students may have had one set of services or supports in their previous school and the new school may determine another set of services or a different service delivery approach is more appropriate. As one counselor put it, “The child who comes with a certain set of services for Florida may come here and not be entitled to those services. It is very upsetting for parents.” Variability in local and state interpretation of federal law governing special education also results in great diversity in IEPs; eighty-five percent of the teachers and instructional specialists we surveyed indicated they did not find it easy to use a transitioning child’s IEP to determine how to meet that student’s special education needs. Counselors and other practitioners frequently mentioned the need for more resources in the school to help negotiate, translate and align IEPs transitioning students may bring in from other states with local protocols.

Consequences for military children arise from the military’s requirement of frequent transitions and the fact that it can be a lengthy process to determine eligibility for and the nature of appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. The timetable for evaluation and testing for special education services in many districts is a barrier for meeting the needs of transitioning students in many cases, according to our participants. Participants frequently reported that evaluations for special education services are lengthy processes that may be interrupted or left incomplete as the child moves from district to district, delaying the delivery of necessary educational services. Some school personnel also reported problems with getting information in a timely manner so they can act within federal and state guidelines. For example, one practitioner reported finding out that a transitioning student with an IEP was due for a triennial evaluation and the previous school did not start or complete it, leaving a short two weeks to complete a full evaluation and lengthy report in order to remain in compliance with the law. Schools would benefit from additional expert resources to facilitate evaluations for transitioning students with IEPs so they are better positioned to get services in place quickly and efficiently for these students that match the available service and delivery protocols in the receiving district.

Both over and under identification of military connected students for special education services were described by our participants as transition related problems. Some participants felt that there was a tendency for transitioning students to be perceived as having a disability when the actual cause of their academic issues were related to having missed exposure to curricula. In one counselor’s words, “Sometimes it is not that there is a special ed issue but it looks like a special education issue. If you never learned it that is why you don’t know it, not because you can’t learn it.” With respect to military connected students, a principal remarked, “I think the issues are different and I think we find a lot of the teachers do not know what to do with the kids. They are just not functioning where we need to be and a lot of times they want to take the child to child study team (for evaluation for special education services).” Several schools reported using various forms of pre-referral or teacher assistance teams to closely monitor children and provide interventions before recommending evaluation for special education. Additional support for professional development to school personnel who are members of the pre-referral team to determine differences between exposure related and disability related academic issues in military connected students may be helpful.

At the same time, some of the participants made comments that transitioning military connected students often did not get necessary special education services or were identified much later than they should have been as a result of moving from school to school. One counselor noted, “There is always a wait and see approach for special education kids. You don’t want to identify kids too quickly, which is

true. You want to give them time when they enroll in your school but some of these military kids can be at a different school every year. It is fifth grade and you find out they are still reading on a second or third grade level and it never showed up.” Together, these comments suggest if not resourced to cope with the additional demands of educating a student body that has such a high likelihood of transition, the potential for over-, under-, or mis-identification of students in relation to special educational services is apparent and serious. There is a critical need for schools to have systems, processes and resources in place to quickly and accurately identify students who need additional services and also to be able to tease out lack of exposure issues from disabilities to avoid under-identifying or over-identifying transitioning students.

Many of our participants described transition as having an impact on the motivation for and persistence to academic tasks, for both military connected students and their parents. As one teacher describes, “They are moving and they don’t know when but they know it is coming. It is like they have given up already. They don’t care because they are going to be moving. They kind of shut themselves off a little.” Motivation to attend to and persist to academic tasks is well understood in the literature to be related to academic performance (Anderman & Leake, 2005; Brooks & Shell, 2006). If military connected students lack the motivation to attend and persist to academic tasks in their school setting because they feel it won’t matter because they won’t be there long, they are less likely to perform to their full potential in that setting. Establishing school connectedness among the students of service members and their families has been noted as key to supporting learning and achievement for military connected students in this age of more frequent transitions and deployments (Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset & Blum, 2010).

The Effects of Deployment on Learning and Academic Success

In studies concluding that deployments have significant academic impacts on military children, more frequent absences from school has been identified as a contributing factor to the academic challenges faced by these students (RAND, 2011). Referring to the change in the nature of the deployment cycle for service member parents in her school, a counselor noted, “It used to be that their parent would deploy and would be gone six months and come home and be home for 18 months. Well, they get home and then the next year they deploy again and then the next year they deploy again. It is multiple deployments without a lot of time at home.”

Attendance issues and missed instructional time for military connected students due to both transitions and deployment were mentioned as major concerns by many of our participants. Participants reported they noticed that military connected students were missing instructional time in transit from school to school, with increasingly more frequent and longer periods of absence due to more frequent transitions and further transitions for service member parents. For example, one teacher noted “I see kids coming from Germany back and forth. It takes a long time to get here. They are missing a lot of instructional time.” They also noted that military connected students were missing more time recently because of spending family time just before deployments or after a home coming. They attributed this to both more frequent deployments and changes in parenting styles over time.

Teachers, principals and counselors we spoke with expressed a great deal of empathy for military students’ needs to spend family time during these critical periods and tried to accommodate through flexible attendance policies and preapproved absences. One principal asked the rhetorical question, “What do you have going on in that school that is more important than maybe the last opportunity that family is together as a whole?” Various teachers described efforts to catch students up when they returned from absences. One teacher described students missing school for weeks for family trips and said, “And then you have to catch them up. You can’t be mean about it and say ‘No, you can’t miss this

week of school after your Dad has been fighting for our country. It goes back to flexibility and understanding.”

However, we did not hear any evidence of formal systems in place to support military connected students in keeping up with academics when they were absent. Participants did note that it was difficult to pre-plan academic supports because they often had little or no advance warning about deployments, leaves or homecomings. One principal commented, “Attendance is a challenge. They up and leave. If a service member comes back mid-tour or at the end of deployment, generally we get no warning.” Encouraging better advance communications with schools on the part of parents, establishing systems in schools to solicit and gather this information from parents, and providing schools directly with some advance information from military installations to anticipate these events may assist schools in supporting the academic needs of military connected students who miss periods of instruction due to transition and deployment related absences.

Deployments were frequently mentioned by our participants as having a significant impact on the amount of home support for learning and academics military connected students received. As one counselor stated, “Sometimes you see differences first in academics because instead of two people being in the house it becomes a single parent, or with a guardian, a neighbor. So sometimes there is a change in academics because they were used to a routine. You run into some of the older ones not having anyone to help them with their homework because the spouse is not at home and working too. Sometimes we see a decrease in the academic progress.” Difficulty completing homework when one parent is deployed has been found in other studies to have a negative impact on student academic achievement (RAND, 2011). Participants described several approaches to dealing with this problem, including some teachers who described starting homework early with students because they knew that when they got home they would have to work independently on it. One school principal detailed the creation of an afterschool program to assist with academics and child care, which benefited students who had a deployed parent and one parent at home who needed to work. Another participant indicated there had been a homework club that was situated on base about 5 years ago. Transportation for students was provided and teachers received a stipend for running the club, which she felt was very helpful for students who had parents who were deployed and unable to get as much adult assistance at home. Several participants also mentioned that having more information about when a child’s parent was deployed would be beneficial in offering homework and other targeted academic supports. As one teacher articulated, “I understand it is a busy time in their life if someone is going out on deployment as we see the kids sometimes more than the parents do. We need to know when things are going on. Kids are not turning in their work and just not doing their best either.”

Many of the participants expressed a desire for more information about military agencies and supports that could help them assist students with deployment and transition related academic needs in general. One teacher stated, “We need to know that there are agencies within the military that we can turn to if we really need their help.” School counselors, community liaisons, and to a lesser extent principals, interviewed were much more likely to be able to describe and specifically name military resources than were teachers in our study. But because teachers are closest to the students and responsible for their academic success, it is important for them to be aware of needs and resources for supporting military connected students. Systems for ongoing professional development for teachers regarding the specific academic support needs of military connected students and the resources available that they could employ at the level of classroom teaching would enable schools to build capacity in their teaching staff to better meet the needs of military connected students struggling with both transition and deployment related school challenges.

The Social-Emotional Impacts of Transition and Deployment in Military-Connected Schools: School-based Issues, Needs and Responses

The Effects of Transition on Social Emotional Wellbeing

Children from military families may be at a greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems, which tend to be exacerbated by deployments, transitions, and lower stability in the home (Chandra, et. al, 2009; Gerwitz, Erbes, Poulsny, Forgatch & DeGarmo, 2011; Kelley, Herzog-Simmer, & Harris, 1994; Reed, Bell, & Edwards, 2011). Our participants observed a variety of social-emotional stressors in students experiencing transition and deployment. These stressors had both behavioral and academic impacts in school. For transitioning students, stressors included worries about making new friends, pleasing new teachers, fitting in and knowing what to do in a new place. A teacher noted, “There are just behavior issues with kids coming in and trying to adapt to a new environment or they are only here three weeks and they are getting ready to move. So sometimes their behavior gets in the way of learning.”

The importance of establishing connections for military-connected students at the school, classroom, teacher, and peer levels emerged as a theme of importance. Many military-connected students transition into a new school in the middle of a school year when the classroom rules have been established, bonds have been formed by peers, and introductions to school personnel are completed. Furthermore, transitioning is difficult for military connected children who must leave previously established social networks (Gerwitz et. al, 2011). One teacher commented on the importance of maintaining a welcoming classroom atmosphere, “We need to have a strong positive classroom environment where everyone is accepted, routines are established, and retain a positive welcoming atmosphere.” Another teacher commented on the fact that when students transition, school personnel need to be cognizant of the student’s comfort level in the school because, “Everything is brand new.” In addition, all educators commented on the fact that the majority of military-connected students seem to struggle with making and maintaining friendships. Specifically, one counselor commented, “For those kids in elementary school, who their friends are is a really important thing.” The importance of establishing peer connections is also found in the research literature (Blum, 2005; Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudinaraset, & Blum, 2010). In order to assist students transitioning into a new school, a variety of supports were described by teachers and counselors. These included having an ambassadors club where fifth grade students are greeters and mentors to new students, forming a military transition group to assist students in becoming acquainted with their peers, and having a “lunch-bunch” where the counselor will sit down with transitioning students and have lunch. Teacher supports included building a connection with their students by attending sports games, talking about deployment and transition in class, and trying to make a connection with the student on a more personal level. Multiple teachers also indicated a lack of time to implement connection activities due to all of their other responsibilities.

Social emotional support needs exist over and above those associated with transition. While educators commented on the resiliency of military connected students, a finding in agreement with other research (Chandra et al., 2010), they also commented on military-connected students’ difficulties with social skills and behaviors specific to anxiety, depression, stress, and anger. One counselor stated, “They [military-connected students] tend to require more services in terms of anger management, in terms of peer relational problems, difficulty in social situations more so than their counterparts, a lot more cases of depression at times, and they don’t interact well when new situations are presented to them.” Another counselor seemed to summarize the social-emotional impact of her military-connected students’ when she stated, “Military children probably account for about 60-70% of my counseling roster – in terms of who I am providing services for. They tend to exhibit the most issues.” Although

almost every counselor suggested that supports such as deployment and transition groups were being conducted in the schools, when there is one counselor to over 600 students their time to establish meaningful and empowering activities for military-connected students throughout the course of the school year, and not just at the point of transition or deployment, is limited at best.

Effects of Deployment-Related Social Emotional Difficulties on Learning

Emotional wellbeing directly impacts academic engagement (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton & Antamaramian, 2008). Students' anxiety and worry about the safety of the deployed parent was identified as a major issue impacting learning. One counselor recounts, "I have had a particular student come to me a number of times because she has not been able to focus in school because she has been thinking about her Dad and she is worried that she has not been able to speak to him in a few days. It distracts them from school sometimes and maybe makes them feel a little isolated."

Many of our participants did realize that they needed to be able to address the social and emotional needs of military connected students as a prerequisite to being able to teach them effectively. One teacher commented, "I have had kids, when their parents are gone, they sometimes do not perform the same. You cannot get past what they need to do until you have addressed their issues." A counselor noted, "Usually their academic problems stem from the social and emotional issues, so addressing that kind of goes along with that."

Multiple counselors commented on the military-connected child's fear of losing a deployed parent. Specifically, one counselor stated, "Of course, the biggest thing they are concerned about is something that may happen to their military member, that's the biggest fear." In the context of research demonstrating the link between social emotional wellbeing and academic progress these types of fears among children should not be ignored (Denhan & Brown, 2010; Hogan, Parker, Wiener, Watters, Wood & Oke, 2010; Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007). In order to combat these issues surrounding deployment, many of the counselors across the schools indicated that they were running deployment groups with students. A few counselors reported using deployment related printed resources, such as parental information packets distributed by military families support centers.

An urgent need exists for persons who are equipped and properly trained to understand and appropriately handle mental health issues among military-connected students (American Psychological Association, 2007; RAND, 2011). Teacher responses from the focus groups underscore the importance of this conclusion as it relates to the classroom setting. One central emergent theme was teachers' desire to be able to develop and maintain a stable classroom social-emotional environment that is supportive of best practices in teaching and learning. This theme coincided with the expression of a need and desire to establish an awareness and knowledge-base of social-emotional issues specific to military-connected students' experiences. Multiple teachers across all schools commented on the need to gain additional knowledge in order to know how to socially and emotionally support military-connected students and know how to appropriately handle behavioral situations stemming from transition and deployment related stressors in the classroom, which they identified as challenging. In our survey, 60% of teachers responded that they did not feel well equipped to deal with the emotional needs presented by military-connected students and 90% did not agree that they were specially trained to deal with the needs presented by military-connected students. This is consistent with findings from other studies in which teachers reported not knowing how to treat military connected students (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari & Blum, 2010). In our study, multiple teachers pointed out that their main solution to meeting the emotional needs of military connected students was to call on the counselor because they felt ill-equipped to enact this support themselves. One particular teacher commented, "We also deal with a

bunch of kids in the class who are emotional. We play a happy song and the girls start crying. We are not counselors.”

As a group, participants displayed high levels of awareness of the need to address social emotional needs in military connected students. But while counselors and other support personnel provide invaluable assistance, their numbers in schools are limited. Although teachers work intensively with these students each day, we found little evidence of additional supports or sustained programs that could developing their awareness and knowledge-base of social-emotional issues related to transition and deployment. When asked about satisfaction with the choices that exist for emotional support services for military-connected students, less than 14% of teachers indicated that they were satisfied with the current support services. Furthermore, many participants felt that teachers faced competing pressures for their focus in the classroom. One principal noted, “I think teachers a lot of the time are so focused on academics and state tests and the pressures that, they don’t always take into account what children are going through or look at what is happening in their families that might be impacting what is going on in the classroom, or their behaviors or emotions.” Research on school connectedness suggests that classroom climate is key to helping building the sort of connections to school that help mediate the negative social-emotional and related academic impacts of military connected students experiencing transition and deployment stressors (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). Knowledge of how to establish a classroom climate that meets military connected students’ emotional needs in the context of the day to day learning environment would help teachers be better able to assist these students in focusing on learning and reduce stress related behaviors that disrupt learning. Such skills would not only benefit military connected status but also their classroom peers.

Schools’ Need for Timely Notification of Deployment

The social emotional consequences of deployment represented a key theme among participants. Open communication between care-givers and school personnel was desired in order for the best support to be provided for the military-connected child throughout the period of deployment. One counselor commented, “Sometimes the parents don’t tell us that they are leaving. The child does not tell us that they are leaving until a problem occurs, so it is difficult sometimes to be proactive with the child. It is more reactive with the child” while another told us, “I had one come to school and cry all day. I had no idea until that day Dad was being deployed.” Another classroom teacher stated, “If you knew the parents were being deployed you might be able to understand.” Many participants also expressed a desire for increased communication from the military installations themselves regarding deployments, stating they would use this information to increases efforts to make more contact with the students who had family members deploying or those who were about to transition and offer additional supports.

Together, these findings point to recommendations for assisting educators to better meet the transition and deployment related social and emotional needs of military connected students. These include professional development for classroom teachers to learn strategies and approaches to empower them to deal with social-emotional issues in the context of their classroom; providing teachers and school staff with professional development opportunities to teach them to utilize arrangements that structure peer interaction and support, such as cooperative learning; and, ensuring ways to promote methods of open communication between school personnel and care-givers. The benefits of all of these recommendations would be maximized if resources were to be improved in a systemic manner throughout the school.

The Organizational Impacts of Transition and Deployment in Military-Connected Schools: School-based Issues, Needs and Responses

In a recent report (RAND,2011), staff in military connected schools indicated they had little information on which students are military, when students may be experiencing deployment, and how many students with military parents will be enrolling or leaving the school system at any given time. Our participants reported similar issues and described how these issues create challenges to meeting the academic and social developmental needs of the military connected students they serve.

Record Keeping for Transitioning Students

School administrators and administrative systems play a key role in determining the types of services students receive and in monitoring student academic and social emotional wellbeing throughout the year. In our study, the most consistently mentioned challenge at the organizational level for schools was related to transition. Specifically, participants spoke of the challenge of planning and providing timely and appropriate services to transitioning students when they had little advance or ongoing information about transitions. Principals often remarked that they found it extremely difficult to predict enrollment, and thus provide optimal staffing. One principal recounted a story where early in the school year the school reduced the number of teachers at a grade level because there were not enough students to warrant another class section. By October, each of the classes at that grade level was overenrolled due to an influx of military connected students after the start of the school year. In another case, a counselor described a situation of having many more children at a grade level than expected, whereby the district was forced to hire another teacher and split the class. Children, including military connected children, were in the position of the having begun the year with one teacher and then had to switch to another. The potential social-emotional impact of this event on these young students is evident in the counselor's remarks, "Dad has been gone and then we move them to another teacher. How terrible is that?" It is also reasonable to imagine that such disruptions to the routine of instruction would likely have academic impacts, for all students in these classes. In a context where schools are attempting to mitigate the effects of transition on students by providing them with stability in the school experience, participants noted it would be beneficial to have advance information about transitioning students for the purposes of planning, the provision of timely and appropriate services and placements, the ability to maintain reasonable and stable class sizes in which all children's social and emotional and academic needs can be optimally met, and the capacity to minimize last minute scheduling and classroom changes that are disruptive to learning.

The Need for Data Systems to Support Programming for Military Students

In order for schools to anticipate, monitor and effectively resource programs for military students, there is a critical need to implement systems to track the numbers of military children served in the district and school. But we did not hear evidence in any of the schools that formal, school-wide systems were in place. Data and record keeping on military connected students as a specific population was also reported to be challenging in many of the schools in our study. Most of the participants reported a reliance on informal mechanisms for finding out which students in their schools were military connected students. The most frequent approach was to find out from the parents at the school level when the parent registered their child for school. Many schools reported asking or finding out from the students themselves. Some participants reported not knowing at all—one counselor remarked, "Unless a person in a military uniform walks in, you don't know." Schools that collect data for Impact Aid were more likely to have some of this information, but one participant reported that these data are collected

annually around October and often become quickly outdated due to all the transitions after that point in the year. In addition to children of military service members, Impact Aid counts the children of civilian employees and contractors that work for the military, so these data include more than those students who are in families with active duty service members. In the words of one data manager we interviewed, “We are not an accurate database for people that want to work with military children *per se*.” According to the U.S. GAO (2011), there are no reporting requirements on districts’ use of Impact Aid funding, and therefore it is difficult to assess how the funds are used and to what extent military dependent students benefit.

Schools in this context are unable to quickly and accurately track trends in military student needs, achievement, or use of services. When asked to describe how easy it would be to find out if as a whole, military connected students differ from civilian students in terms of their use of emotional and instructional support services, absenteeism or discipline related issues, one participant who was very familiar with data collection in the district replied, “Not very.” Difficulty disaggregating military student achievement and social emotional support data is an obstacle schools face if they wish to assess trends and needs and keep track of how effectively the needs of military connected students are being met. Requiring that school districts keep these data through federal mandates may be one potential solution to this problem. However, given other pre-existing record keeping and data related mandates in the districts we studied, military connected schools are likely to need support and resources to effectively utilize these data to determine if they are meeting the needs of military connected students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study revealed that there is a wide array of academic, social and emotional and organizational challenges school must address in order to effectively educate military connected students who are experiencing transition and/or the deployment of a family member. Our participants indicated that schools must provide supports for transitioning students as they adjust to new pedagogical structures and pacing through accommodations and differentiation of instruction. School staff must take time to induct new transitioning students into the academic and social life of their new classroom and school. Our participants indicated one of the most significant issues they face when educating military connected students is providing adequate remediation for transition related gaps in learning, often in critical subject areas such as math and reading. In order to do this, schools must provide quick turn-around diagnoses of present levels of academic and social functioning for transitioning students. They must also prepare transitioning students for success with mandated state and district wide assessments of learning in curricula while they may be lacking requisite knowledge for success. Teachers, principals and counselors negotiate complex grading, retention and placement issues for transitioning students to provide reasonable accommodations while ensuring military connected students do not become victims of low expectations or social promotions.

Schools are charged with providing additional highly individualized evaluations and services to transitioning students with IEPs while adapting those IEPs to local and state contexts, which may be quite different from those of the locality or state from which they originated. Some schools located in specific regions face the challenge of providing specialized services for students with significant disabilities that are concentrated in unnaturally high proportions as a result of policies governing the stationing of service members with exceptional family members.

Creative ways are often required to help students who miss many days of school due to transitions or deployment related issues. Mechanisms must be put in place for enhancing school connectedness for transitioning students and families to mitigate the negative impact of transition on motivation to participate in school and persist to task. Homework and other academic supports for

students who have less support at home due to the deployment of a parent must be structured and delivered by school staff. Teachers, principals, counselors and other school staff must collaborate to establish responsive classroom and school settings to meet the social and emotional needs of students struggling with transition and deployment related stressors, as well as provide additional counseling services to these students.

Many of the educators we interviewed expressed a desire to establishing communications with parents and the military in order to find out as much information as possible about upcoming transitions and deployments, so they are able to know which students may need which service and when. Educators also described how they struggled with creating and recreating schedules and class arrangements that work in the context of a shifting, difficult-to-predict population of students. Some asked questions about how to assess and track the needs of military connected students in order to investigate whether and how programs and service provided are being used.

Schools' ability to address these issues and promote student wellbeing and academic progress is intimately connected to the ways schools do business. Supportive school communities are not likely to be developed solely through externalized or add-on programs and supports without concomitant change at the school level. There is therefore a need to build capacity *within* schools to meet the needs of military connected students. Although external programs and resources can be beneficial, they require internalized structures and supports to be able to take root and become part of the life and institutional memory of the school. Furthermore, limited funding availability makes it imperative to empower schools and school personnel to maximize their own resources to meet the needs of military connected students.

Sustainability is possible if capacity is built simultaneously inside-out and outside-in (Bol, Nunnery, & Lowther, 1998). With this in mind, our recommendations for the Department of Defense and others seeking to enhance school responsiveness to the specific needs of military connected children are:

- 1. Provide sustained, comprehensive, job embedded professional development for school staff who work with military connected students to create the capacity for building school-wide programs and practices that meet the academic and social-emotional needs of military students and families.** The impacts of transition and deployment are realized at the school, classroom and individual levels. Accordingly, staff who work with military connected students at *all* these levels—namely administrators, teachers and other instructional staff, and counselors and other support service providers—must be aware of and able to address the educational needs created by transition and deployment. Furthermore, this training must extend beyond the simple awareness of issues and equip professionals with the methods and tools they need to be able to create and implement the academic and social-emotional supports needed by their students coping with transition and deployment related issues. Teachers, administrators, counselors and other school staff will be assisted in creating classrooms and schools in which all military connected students can succeed by equipping them with a repertoire of tools, exemplars and models they can use in their actual job capacities, time to explore them, assistance with implementation of these tools, and the construction of customized tools that fit their own local school contexts. According to the participants in our study, this sort of assistance would likely be well received and utilized at this time. Over 80% of the teachers we surveyed indicated that it is a priority for them to learn more about the needs of military connected students while only

11% indicated that they had received special training to address the needs of military connected students.

- 2. Provide support for additional school-based personnel to assist with the academic and social emotional challenges of transition and deployment.** Additional counselors, smaller student to teacher ratios, and additional administrative support all provide ‘boots on the ground’ where they are often most needed in schools. Because some of the needs associated with transitions and deployments are so highly individualized, requiring for example additional counseling to cope with stress, or quick turn-around evaluations, or individualized academic remediation, more on-site school staff to implement these specialized services logistically becomes a necessity if they are to be offered. Quite often the barrier to meeting the needs of students struggling with transition and deployment issues in our schools was described by our participants as not a “what to do” problem but a “who to do it” problem. Public schools with high concentrations of military connected students have unique staffing needs that, if not addressed, lower the capacity to provide a high quality education for *all* children, not just those whose parents are serving our country.
- 3. Assist schools in establishing systems to identify and respond to changing needs of military connected students, and monitor outcomes.** We did not find evidence that schools in our study had formal systems in place to specifically track and monitor the needs and progress of military connected students as a group, nor to systematically assess and reflect on their school-wide efforts to provide a military conscious school environment. We recommend that resources be dedicated to helping schools establish and share these systems and tools so they are better able to build and sustain comprehensive school wide approaches to meet the changing needs of their military connected students.
- 4. Enhance school-military partnerships and communications.** Most of the participants in our study mentioned desiring more information about upcoming transitions and deployments so they are better able to anticipate needs and target services, as well as more information about resources. While our counselor participants made us aware that many resources do exist, connecting them to teachers so they may be utilized in the day to day life of the classroom appears to be an area that requires more attention. Fewer than 25% of teachers we surveyed indicated they had access to a list of resources and services to support the needs of military connected students and fewer than 14% agreed that school staff were well informed about military-based support services for military connected students.

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Table 1. Summary of Participant Responses to Military Connected Schools Questionnaire (N=55)

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
When a military connected student transfers into my classroom, their previous academic record is usually accessible	5.5	14.5	38.2	27.3	0.0
When a military connected student transfers into my classroom, it is easy to use their previous academic record to determine their instructional placement	14.5	38.2	20.0	10.9	1.8
When a military connected student with an IEP transfers into my classroom, it is easy to use the previous IEP to determine how to meet that student's special educational needs	5.5	25.5	36.4	12.7	5.5
I have access to a list of resources and services that can support the emotional needs of military connected students	23.6	20.0	29.1	18.2	9.1
I prefer to find resources for military students by talking with a co-worker or acquaintance than by consulting a list	14.5	14.5	34.5	29.1	3.6
I find that I am often asked about options for emotional or academic services by parents and care-givers of military connected students	10.9	16.4	18.9	32.7	18.9
I am satisfied with the choices that exist for emotional support services for military connected students	12.7	30.9	36.4	12.7	3.6
Generally, school staff are well informed about school based emotional support services for military connected students	9.1	23.6	29.1	21.8	16.4
Generally, school staff are well informed about military-based emotional support services for military-connected students	29.1	30.9	23.6	12.7	1.8
I am well equipped to deal with the emotional needs presented by military connected students	5.5	12.7	43.6	34.5	3.6
It is a priority for me to learn more about the needs of military connected students	0.0	3.6	14.5	58.2	23.6

(continued)

Table 1 (continued).

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
As a teacher, there are more pressing issues for me than learning about military connected students	27.3	32.7	25.5	9.1	3.6
Specialized services are available to military connected students in my school	7.3	20.0	27.3	30.9	7.3
I have been specially trained to deal with the needs presented by military connected students	43.6	36.4	10.9	7.3	1.8
I actively promote peer relationships between military connected and civilian students	5.5	12.7	18.2	25.5	38.2
I actively promote networking among military connected parents/caregivers	7.3	23.6	32.7	14.5	18.2
I encourage military connected students to share their experiences with me	0.0	1.8	7.3	23.6	67.3
Overall, I am satisfied that I am doing a good job of meeting the needs of military connected students	1.8	5.5	29.1	49.1	14.5
I understand the culture of military families	5.5	20.0	27.3	25.5	21.8