



A Professional Development School in Action: Meeting the Needs of Military-Connected Students and Families

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The College of Education (COE) at Kansas State University and its Professional Development Schools (PDS) are partnering in innovative ways that demonstrate a commitment to work collaboratively to solve educational issues involving preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and faculty members, as well as K-12 students and their families. One such critical issue is the preparation of educators to work effectively with large numbers of military-connected students and their families. Since 2001, all branches of the U.S. military have experienced the largest sustained deployment of military servicemen and servicewomen in the history of the all-volunteer force. It is important that communities recognize and respond to the number of children who are connected to those serving in the military. The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Military for Community and Family Policy reports that as of 2012 there are nearly two million total military children (Military Community and Family Policy [MCFP], 2013).

While many think of military-connected students as those living on a military installation or attending a designated Department of Defense school, in reality more than 80% of these students are attending local public schools in every school district in the United States, with some of those children living the deployment cycle multiple times (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). In addition, due to the transitory nature of military families, military-connected students transfer between schools three times more frequently than civilian families, sometimes changing school districts six to nine times prior to their high school graduation (Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, Atuel, & Gilreath, 2012; Military Child Education Coalition, 2012). As transitions occur, students are expected to make adjustments based on different teaching methods, curriculum materials, pacing of instruction and different classroom behavioral expectations. These adjustments are stressful for some students and can have an effect on student behavior and student engagement (Arnold, Garner, & Nunnery, 2014; Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Chandra et al., 2009). However, it is also found that

these families possess a tremendous potential for resiliency: the ability to be exposed to adverse traumatic circumstances and yet successfully adapt following that exposure. Resiliency is not a static trait, but one that can be fostered through supportive environments (MacDermid, Samper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008). While educators are perfectly situated to offer that consistent, supportive environment, they must be provided the professional learning and tools to do so. Meeting the needs of this special demographic of student calls for collaborative effort and effective communication between teacher education faculty, K-12 administration and teachers, and community members. A PDS model provides the perfect framework for such work, improving teacher education while also enhancing K-12 education in partner schools through professional development for future teachers, practicing teachers, and university faculty.

Background of the KSU PDS Military-Connected Students Initiative

Kansas State University has the largest teacher preparation program in the state of Kansas, with close ties to Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth. Specifically at Ft. Riley, more than 8,300 dependent children of soldiers attend 16 regional public school districts across north central Kansas (Johnson, 2013). With three partnering school districts sharing boundaries with Ft. Riley, the majority of preservice teachers complete one or more field experiences in classrooms with high military-connected student populations. However, even with these field placements, the College of Education determined its teacher preparation program could more intentionally prepare teachers for working with military-connected students and their families. In the fall of 2011, an undergraduate student who is also a military spouse and mother of school-aged children shared with COE faculty her concerns about the necessity of intentional preparation of teachers and counselors regarding the unique needs of military-connected children. From that conversation the student and a faculty advisor for the university student chapter of the Kansas National Education Association (KNEA-SP) facilitated a presentation and panel discussion in which three military-connected families and their children engaged in a discussion with over one hundred elementary and secondary preservice teachers. The panel discussion allowed teacher candidates to hear about the lived experiences of military-connected families and the educational experiences they had encountered. In addition, the student, faculty, and a local military connected educator developed a workshop for a state Counseling Association Conference and interested faculty attended the State of Kansas Convening sponsored by the Military Child Education Coalition held at Kansas State University in the spring of 2012. These events started a dialog regarding opportunities for expanding the current professional educator curriculum to include topics focused on the unique needs of military children. Teachers often come into the profession without lived experience in the military and these conversations highlighted areas where faculty could better equip preservice teachers with information regarding the unique culture of the military-connected students they

would encounter in their classrooms, such as the greater transience as expressed by this secondary education major:

I think my biggest experience with military families is the consistency of students moving in the middle of the semester. Every week it seems like one of the students in our classroom is moving because their parent(s) have received orders, and it's been a very big lesson learned about how to work with students who are "checked out" for lack of a better phrase, and do not want to be engaged because they won't be around for much longer (C. Todd, personal communication, November 6, 2012).

While acknowledging the challenges military-connected students face, it is just as important that future and practicing teachers see the benefits these students possess, such as opportunities for travel and experiences in meeting and interacting with those living in other places. Without a balanced view of this unique group of students, conjecture and overgeneralization may skew a teacher's ability to make sound decisions about how to meet the needs of these students (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Recognizing the need to enhance this knowledge in faculty, students, and educators in partnering schools, Kansas State University joined a national program, Operation Educate the Educators, a nationwide Joining Forces initiative that was developed through collaborative efforts of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) to provide support for universities committed to meeting the needs of military-connected students.

Kansas State University PDS Initiative: Supporting Military-Connected Students

Kansas State University was one of the first 100 universities to join Operation Educate the Educators. The insight gained from this affiliation helped identify specific objectives for military-connected student education and supportive structures that could be initiated in the partnering schools. To help operationalize the project, a project coordinator was identified. Her training as a science educator and her experience as a 27-year spouse of a military service member and mother of two children provided her with an insider perspective for helping non-military connected faculty and students gain understanding of the culture of the military. With the goal to better prepare educators who are well-equipped to respond to the unique academic and social-emotional needs of military-connected students, the following four objectives were set forth:

- Identify the knowledge base that teacher education candidates need regarding the culture of the military and the challenges and benefits of military-connected students.
- Identify specifically where in coursework and teacher preparation experiences these concepts might best be introduced and applied.
- Develop professional learning opportunities for university faculty and PDS partners to build capacity

related to the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed by faculty and school leaders for working with military-connected students.

- Conduct research and disseminate resources and support to provide sustainability for the project.

Building a Knowledge Base for Working with Military-Connected Students

Initially, the project coordinator was engaged to work with faculty and students in the undergraduate teacher preparation program. She focused on building faculty understanding on topics such as:

- language and rich traditions of military service members;
- the deployment cycle and its impact on schooling and students' socio-emotional needs;
- facilitation of resiliency within students; and
- strategies, skills, and techniques for increased learning that support families in transition.

Faculty had the opportunity to partake in a book study using the text *The Teacher's Guide for Supporting Students from Military Families* (Astor et al., 2012). Meeting on a regular basis, they shared ideas gleaned from the readings and discussed meaningful ways to integrate the information into courses. Activities were conducted to help internalize the realities of military-connected students trying to navigate multiple school settings while facing changing standards, repeated use of identical textbooks, difficulty in joining athletic teams and exclusion from awards and activities due to failure to meet specific deadlines due to frequent transitioning. The book study was then extended to PDS sites where teachers and support staff took part in dialogue centered on two essential questions:

1. What is the education system's role in maintaining balance in the child's life?
2. How can educators support students and families during times of deployment, reintegration, transition, and loss?

These collaborative conversations targeted *all* staff as it is important to emphasize that children with one or more parents in the military rely not only on their teachers in the classroom, but also on counselors, service workers, office staff and administrators to guide and support them.

Experiential learning is a powerful tool. While Kansas State University is only 20 miles from Ft. Riley, many faculty members had never had the opportunity to visit the installation. Bus tours of the installation were arranged to allow teaching faculty, administration, PDS clinical instructors, and supervisors to gain a first-hand glimpse of life and work on a military installation. Participants ate a meal in the dining center, visited a model home, and were provided tours of schools and other facilities. They attended brief seminars regarding services and assistance available for military-connected students and their families, and were provided presentations by the Installation Garrison Commander and Child Youth and School Services Coordinator. As participants learned about the impact governmental funding or defunding

has on the services provided to youth on the installation, it became evident how important informed advocacy is for military-connected students and their families.

Through the efforts of the project coordinator and others in the partnership, a documentary entitled *A Walk in My Shoes: Military Life* (Kansas State University, 2013) was produced. This documentary captured the lived experiences of seven people, including veterans, spouses, children, and educators sharing their personal perspectives, thoughts, and ideas of life connected to the military. Issues addressed included the reality of the deployment cycle for families, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social and emotional needs of military-connected students, and ways schools can respond to these needs. This documentary premiered September 11, 2013, with a public showing made available to the entire university community; it is also available to enhance the professional learning of any school or organization. It has been used successfully within the local public school setting for professional learning, as well as in university classrooms, and can be viewed at: <http://www.coe.k-state.edu/documentaries/walk-in-my-shoes/militarylife.html> (Kansas State University College of Education, 2013).

Integrating Information into the Teacher Education Program

Acquisition of cultural knowledge of military students was needed first, but the goal of this COE initiative was not only to increase awareness of military-connected children's needs; it was also to determine how to integrate such knowledge into instructional practice. To accomplish this goal meant that COE methods coursework for teacher candidates needed to be reviewed and realigned to the initiative. Faculty met to identify what activities they could build into current course curriculum to teach and assess preservice teachers' understanding of working with students from military-connected families. Faculty engaged in field experiences were required to complete a modified contextual information document identifying the military-connected students in their practicum classrooms and explaining how this realization influenced their selection of materials and methods for classroom instruction. For this document, military-connected students were defined as the children of active-duty service or National Guard and Reserve members, as well as children of veterans including those whose family member(s) may have lost their lives in service to their country. The PDS clinical instructors and administrators were instrumental in helping candidates access this information. As the preservice teachers researched this demographic data it became apparent that while enrollment forms captured some of these students, many (especially Reservists and National Guard members) were not being identified. As a result, teachers were made aware (some for the first time) that these military-connected students were in their classes. University supervisors and clinical instructors observed lessons taught by candidates to observe evidence of their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for working with military-connected students in their instruction.



Student interns are becoming aware of means to assist the Military Connected child. This is vital to instruction in this district!



– Anna Haffner

Clinical Instructor, Geary County School District

To assure important key information was shared with all elementary and secondary preservice teachers, a seminar session, *The Military-Connected Student in the Classroom*, was developed by the project coordinator for use in methods courses during the semester in which preservice students were required to first plan, teach, and assess classroom students in the field. Content of the presentation included the culture of the military, the deployment cycle, and resources for building resiliency within students. The Resiliency Wheel model adapted by StudentsFIRST (Resilience, 2014) was introduced to preservice students to serve as a resource in their future classrooms. The use of children’s literature to gain understanding of military life was modeled and all students received an annotated bibliography of possible literature to consider integrating into future lessons. One specific book that was utilized in the seminar was Fink, Fink, and Blackwell’s *The Little CHAMPS: Child Heroes Attached to Military Personnel* (Fink, J., Fink, D., & Blackwell, 2012). This book, while meant for elementary students, served to further inform university students about the five branches of service and the experiences of military-connected children. A videographer captured the seminar presentation for future use.

In addition to integrating information into current course offerings, a new undergraduate course, *Teaching Military-Connected Students*, was developed. It was designed as an elective for preservice teachers to complete prior to graduation. Once completed, this course is documented on their university transcript to verify that they have successfully completed coursework focused on specifically addressing the needs of military-connected students.

Development of Professional Learning Opportunities

Preparing preservice teachers is an important goal of the PDS, but an equally important goal is providing professional learning opportunities to all partners, as well as gleaned knowledge from experienced teachers in the field. In terms of this initiative, that meant considering how various faculty, staff, and community members’ interactions (military and non-military) impacted military-connected children. Multiple groups of K-12 faculty, staff and other stakeholders in surrounding area schools participated in workshops to build understanding of the culture of the military-connected child, the social-emotional impact of the military deployment cycle on students, and ways to foster resiliency. These workshops covered concepts such as military lifestyle and culture, socio-emotional and educational needs of students, and special challenges that students and families face, such as separation, reunion, and death. The content for these workshops is detailed in a free e-book, *Military Connected Students in the*

Classroom (Risberg, 2013), which serves as a continuing resource for all PDS partners.

One district’s PDS schools held focus group conversations in their lead teacher curriculum councils. Teachers reflected on their professional readings and shared practical strategies to honor the culture of their military-connected students. They developed lists of ideas that had worked well for them, such as:

- service members joining students for lunch, and classroom activities, and/or playground games;
- service members assisting at athletic events, annual carnivals, and field days;
- schools facilitating optional groups such as Hearts Apart, BRAT Pack (Building Resilient Adaptable Teens), and Parents Around the World (PAWS) support group for students with deployed family members;
- schools hosting a military family night or military kids’ end-of-the year party;
- schools partnering with service members on Veteran’s Day parade marches, songs, and special programs;
- broadcasting high school commencement to deployed parents; and
- teachers using grade book parent portal to maintain parent involvement in student progress when parent deploys or leaves for training.

Ideas such as these provide educators, administrators, and community members ways to actively engage military-connected students and their families in the work of schools, thus building positive school-home relationships.

Dissemination of Resources and Research

Teachers are the essential element within schools having critical influence regarding the learning that goes on in classrooms (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Schulman, 2005). Understanding how effective practicing teachers engage and respond to military-connected students provides insight for others who are called to work in school settings. This insight informs relevant interventions that effectively assist military-connected student populations (Arnold et al., 2014). To capitalize on the professional wisdom of the PDS practicing teachers (some working daily with 100% military-connected students) a study was conducted for the purpose of learning what these experienced teachers perceived as the greatest challenges faced when working with military-connected student population, as well as the perceived strengths these students employ. Participants were asked to identify any tried and true techniques and strategies they found especially effective when working with these students and their families.

Data reflected that teachers perceived their greatest challenges to be providing support for the academic and socio-emotional well-being of students due to frequent transitioning during deployment or Permanent Change of Station (PCS); identifying and overcoming the educational gaps that occur from curriculum misalignment when students change schools; and supporting student learning in times of prolonged absence due to block leave. Teachers also

commented that this student population often made friends easily and showed empathy for others new to the classroom. They noted that student background knowledge might be very rich, depending on previous locations where they had been stationed. The data also provided helpful information for preservice candidates to consider as they enter their field placements such as:

- identification of quick assessments to assist teachers in identifying appropriate instructional materials or grouping for instruction of new students arriving;
- development of a protocol for welcoming new students which may include the use of a student mentor to model class procedures and rules;
- development of a plan to monitor students who are absent and provide academic support to keep them from falling behind classmates;
- suggestions for communication with parents, including deployed parents, as well as other caregivers to aid in times of transition;
- providing opportunities for intentional talk through use of class meetings that allow students to share any concerns, anxieties, and celebrations;
- utilization of patriotic books, poems, and songs to build comprehension and fluency in reading; and
- increased opportunities for student drawing/writing as a tool to share ideas and concerns related to the stress of transition or deployment.

Military families deserve educational teams that are well equipped to provide unique support. Discussions held with partnering school faculty determined ways to ease new school entry and student/family departure, identified opportunities for youth mentorship, and noted multiple ways to provide deployment support and academic monitoring. Specifically, teachers noted these insights:

- *It is important to maintain normalcy* – A key aspect in keeping students from military homes “centered” is sustaining a consistent, predictable routine. Teachers should encourage regular class attendance, but understand and adjust to prolonged absences when a family member returns or travel is scheduled to accommodate leave.
- *Communication is essential* – Educators found it imperative to support the entire family, as well as the student specifically. Technology allows teachers to email or videoconference with families in remote locations, sharing photographs, stories, and highlights of students’ school experiences.
- *Increased sensitivity is imperative* – After a military personnel injury or death in the family, students can respond with higher anxiety and need educators to respond with increased sensitivity. After military media coverage on either a local or global scale, educators must look for warning signs indicating feelings of loss or concern. Unexpected events, such as fire drills, can shatter a child’s composure and students may need extended time to talk to adults to be given the tools necessary to cope.

The power of a professional development school partnership in action is the collaboration at multiple levels to seek effective and meaningful ways to respond to educational challenges. The educational impact of this initiative has continued beyond the partnership into the greater civilian, military, and education community. Local, state, and national presentations at professional conferences have allowed faculty and school personnel to share with others the work the PDS has accomplished in striving to meet the needs of families connected to the military. Information has been sent out to the greater community through national publications such as a recent article, *Teachers Care about Military-connected Students* (Curtis & Risberg, 2014) published in the Military Child Education Coalition journal *On the Move*, as well as electronic resources, such as a blog published on the NBC Education Nation’s Parent Toolkit website that encourages military family communication with educators (Curtis, 2014). Curriculum has also been piloted and published to guide teachers in using *The Little CHAMPS: Child Heroes Attached to Military Personnel* book (Fink, J., Fink, D., & Blackwell, 2012) in elementary classrooms to help students better understand the lives of military-connected children and youth.

To deepen conversations, the project coordinator convened the first K-State Military Education and Family Initiatives Symposium during the spring of 2014, as a forum to openly discuss issues related to better serving all military-connected students as well as veterans and military spouses. The symposium disseminated current research being done and resources available at Kansas State University. The symposium brought into the conversation over 100 local community stakeholders, comprising College of Education faculty, K-12 school administrators and educators, school and family counselors, social workers, military relations committee members, and military service and family members. A future symposium is being planned to facilitate continuing dialogue.

The Future of the KSU PDS Military-Connected Initiative

Kansas State University’s College of Education and its PDS partners are committed to preparing and supporting all educators serving students, families, and communities connected to the military. Education is a community issue and when partners work together there is a greater opportunity to make significant progress. However, good programming includes continual needs assessment and must remain flexible and responsive to those it serves. Seeing the need to expand beyond the K-12 program, the College of Education has recently developed an enhanced college-wide military initiative program called K-State Military ED – OPS (Education Opportunities). This program will encompass military-connected college students and support the continued expansion of military-connected curriculum content in COE school counseling and graduate programs, providing direction as the college moves into the future.

There is also planning underway to continue to update and increase resources for university faculty, students, and K-12 partners to continue to build their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for working with military-connected students.

To accomplish that, free digital resources of curated materials using a variety of online applications are available through a dedicated webpage for the College of Education's military-connected initiatives (<https://coe.k-state.edu/about/military/>). The collection and organization of resources found at this site is dynamic and continues to grow.

Future directions for the project include promoting among all partners the proclaimed November as Month of the Military Family and April as the Month of the Military Child. These mark key times for month-long celebrations to intentionally honor the commitment and sacrifices made by the families of the nation's service members. Additional opportunities to reach and teach others what has been learned through this project, both in schools and in the greater community, will continue to be pursued. It is a commitment of Kansas State University Professional Development School Partnership to do our best to serve *all* our students, which includes our unique military-connected students - we are proud to serve those that serve.



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