



Supporting Youth Social-Emotional Health within Military-Connected Families

ACTION FOR
HEALTHY
KIDS 

Needs Assessment 2023

Overview

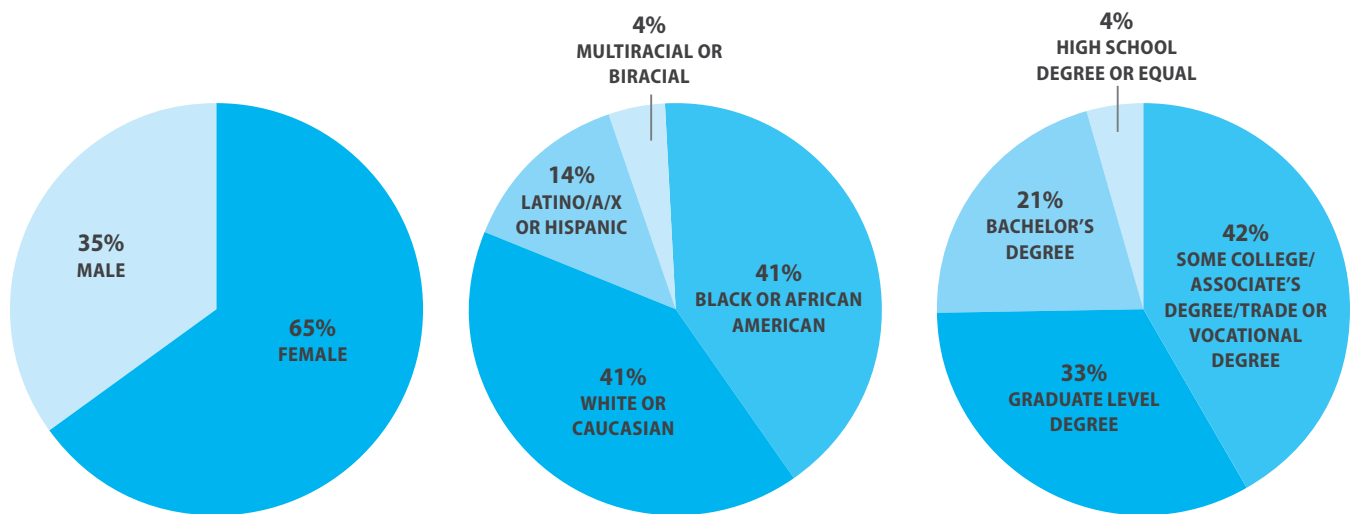
Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) seeks to strengthen the situational and caregiver-related factors that play a role in fostering resilience among military-connected children through the Family School Partnership Model.

During the 2022–2023 school year, in partnership with CSX, AFHK served military-connected school communities through programming around social-emotional health and risk behavior prevention, physical activity and active play, and food access and nutrition education. To better understand the needs and priorities that military-connected families have in supporting the health and wellbeing of military-connected youth, AFHK conducted a needs assessment in early 2023. The needs assessment included a survey and focus group. The sample for both included military-connected families in Clay County, Florida. The data from this needs assessment aims to inform the development of tools and resources to address military-connected families' primary concerns around the health and wellbeing of their children.

Survey Results

38 Parents/Caregivers of military-connected children enrolled in Clay County School District participated in the online survey.*

Demographics of Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondents

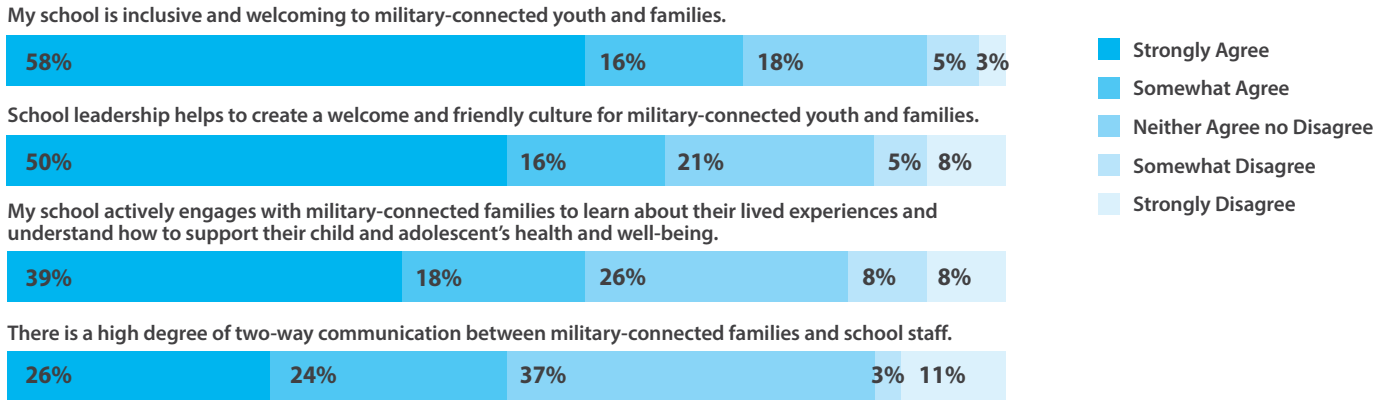


*Not all survey respondents answered each question.

Parents' and Caregivers' Experiences with Schools

Most military parent/caregiver respondents reported that they strongly or somewhat agreed that their school is inclusive and welcoming (74%, n=28) and that school leadership creates a welcome and friendly culture for military-connected youth and families (66%, n=25). Fewer respondents reported that they strongly or somewhat agreed that their school engages with them to learn about their lived experiences and understand how to support their child/adolescent's health and wellbeing (57%, n= 22) and that there is a high degree of two-way communication between military-connected families and school staff (50%, n=19).

FIGURE 1. Please rate your agreement with the following statements about your child or adolescent's school.

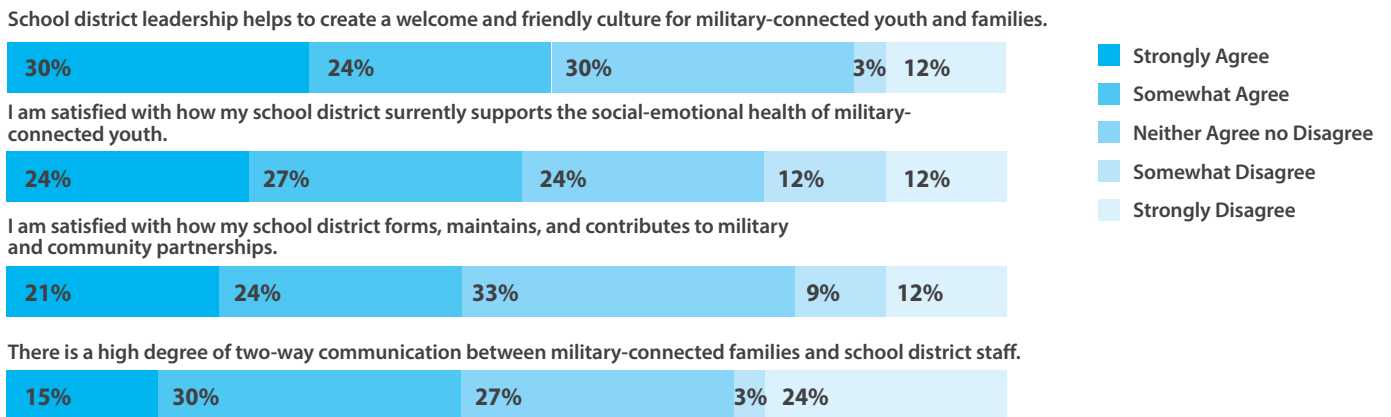


Note. Due to rounding, percentages across each row do not always add up to 100.

Parents' and Caregivers' Experiences with School Districts

Just over half of military parent/caregiver respondents reported that they strongly or somewhat agreed that their school district creates a welcome and friendly culture for military-connected youth and families (55%, n=18) and that they are satisfied with how their school district supports the social-emotional health of military-connected youth (52%, n=17). Fewer respondents reported that they strongly or somewhat agreed that they are satisfied with how their district engages with military and community partnerships (45%, n=15) and that there is a high degree of two-way communication between military-connected families and school district staff (45%, n=15).

FIGURE 2. Please rate your agreement with the following statements about your child or adolescent's school district.

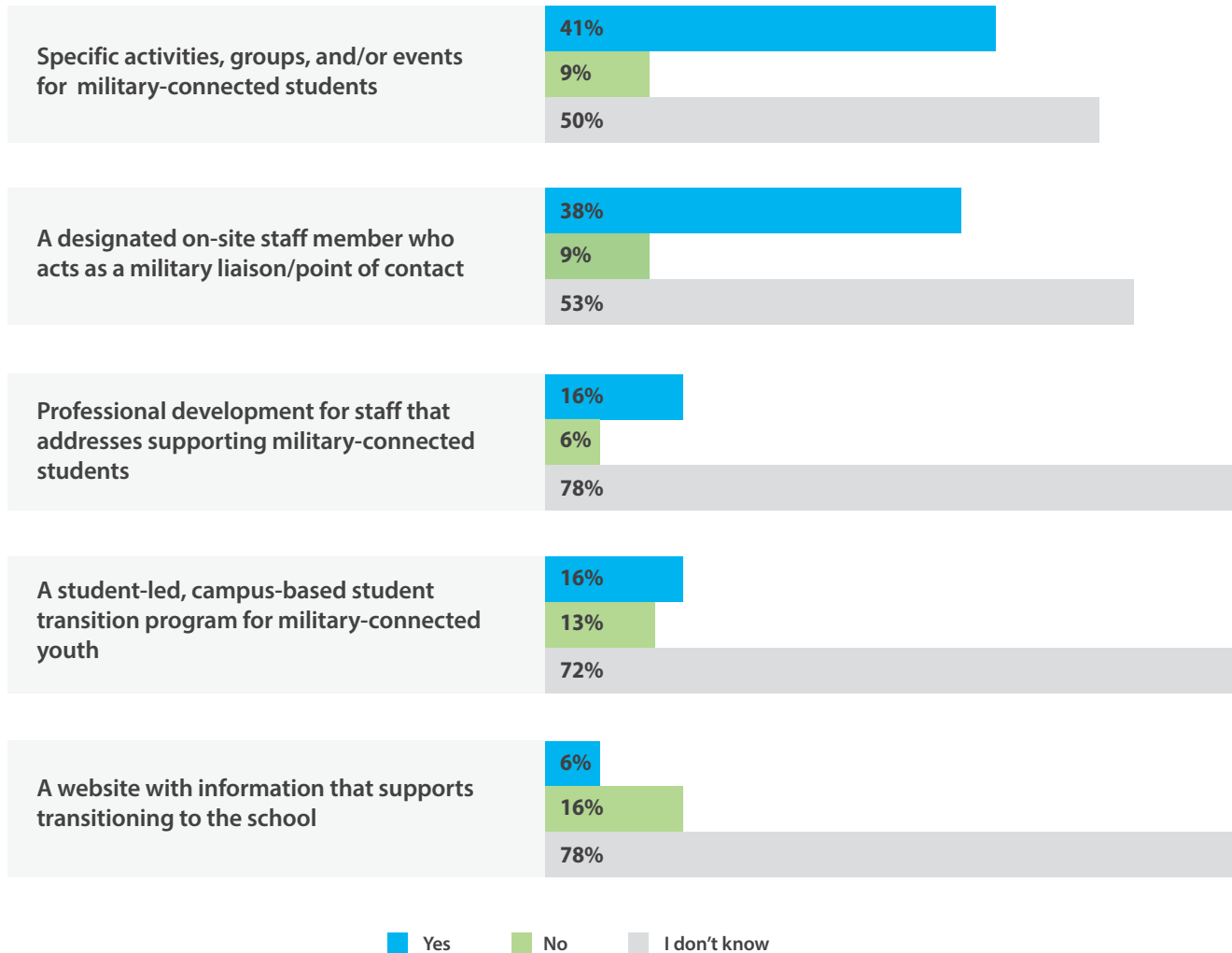


Note. Due to rounding, percentages across each row do not always add up to 100.

Presence of School Supports for Military-Connected Students

The most frequently reported school supports for military-connected students were specific activities, groups, and/or events (n=13) and a designated on-site staff member who acts as a military liaison/point of contact (n=12). Only a few military parent/caregiver respondents reported professional development for staff (n=5), a student-led, campus-based transition program (n=5), or a website with information on transitioning to the school (n=2). Many respondents reported that they do not know if their school has these supports for military-connected students.

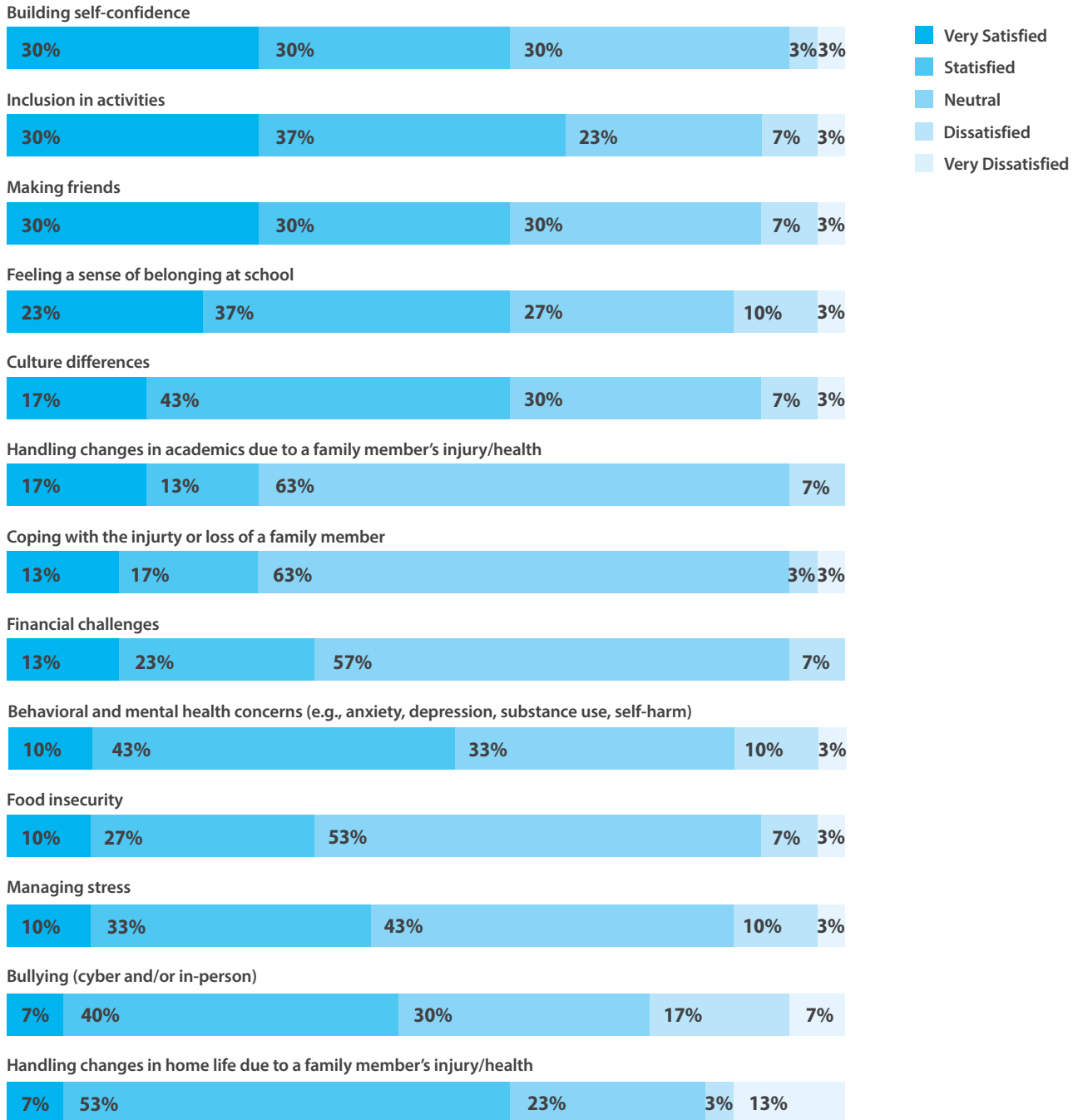
FIGURE 3. Please indicate whether your school has the following:



Satisfaction with Support for Military-Connected Students

Military parent/caregiver respondents indicated being most satisfied with inclusion in activities (n=20) and most dissatisfied with how schools support military-connected youth with bullying (n=7).

FIGURE 4. Please rate your satisfaction with how your school supports military-connected youth with the following:

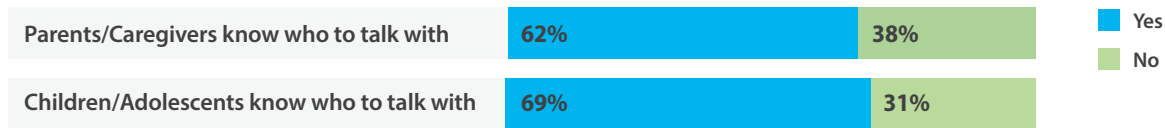


Note. Due to rounding, percentages across each row do not always add up to 100.

Support for Health and Wellbeing Needs

Among the sample of military parent/caregivers, 62% (n=18) reported that they know who to speak with at the school about their child’s health and wellbeing. Sixty-nine percent (n=20) reported that their child knows who to talk with at school about their health and wellbeing needs.

FIGURE 5. Do you, as a parent/caregiver, know who to talk with at school about your child or adolescent’s health and wellbeing needs? Does your child/adolescent know who to talk with at his/her school about his/her health and wellbeing needs?



Of military parent/caregiver respondents, 41% (n=12) reported that their school has a counselor and/or psychologist that supports military families and/or students.

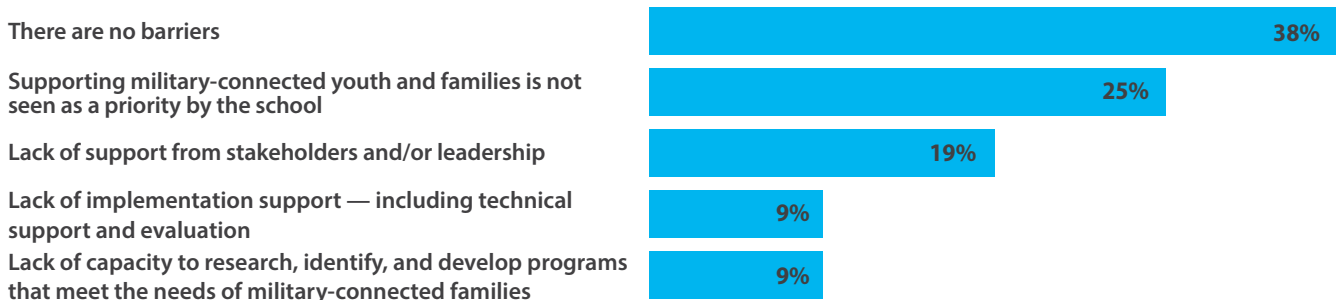
FIGURE 6. Does your school have a counselor and/or psychologist that supports military families and/or students?



Barriers to Supporting Military-Connected Youth and Families

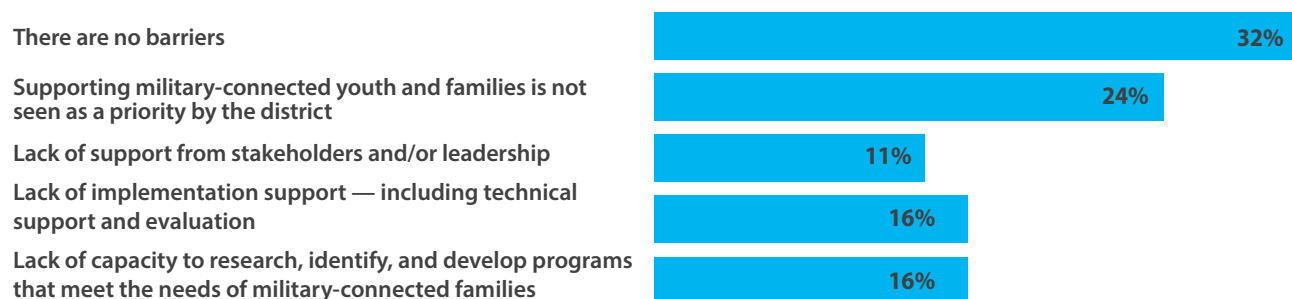
The most common school-level barrier to the support of military-connected youth and families reported by military parent/caregiver respondents was a lack of prioritization by schools (n=8). Notably, 12 respondents indicated that there are no barriers to school support and four respondents reported other barriers (e.g., lack of funding / staffing).

FIGURE 6. What barriers at the school-level are most relevant to the support of military-connected youth and families?



The most common district-level barrier reported by military parent/caregiver respondents was a lack of prioritization by district (n=9). In addition, 12 respondents indicated that there are no barriers to district support and five respondents reported other barriers (e.g., limited awareness).

FIGURE 7. What barriers at the district-level are most relevant to the support of military-connected youth and families?



Social-Emotional Health Priorities

Please share your top issue priorities related to child social-emotional health within your school district as it pertains to military-connected youth.

Respondents were provided an open-ended text response question. A few of the representative responses are reported below:



“Being able to identify kids with separation anxiety or stressful home situations that bleed over into school behavior.”

“Transitions and coping skills.”

“I hope every school has a Military Family Life Counselor. We are fortunate to have two at our kids’ school and they have been helpful in helping our kids manage the stresses, sadness and frustration that comes with a parent being away for a long time.”

“I would like to have more information on how to get a hold of the military liaison at the kids’ school and [they] should be more aware and proactive when an active-duty mom or dad deploys to be able to give extra support to the child at school.”

Needed Resources for Social-Emotional Health Priorities

What are some tools and resources needed to address your primary concerns for the health and wellbeing of military-connected youth and families, particularly as it pertains to social-emotional health?

Respondents were provided an open-ended text response question. A few of the responses are highlighted below:



“Continue the programs at our school or implementing a program that students can get more emotional help.”

“Maybe more specific local resources. We almost always get referred to military one source but that isn’t always the best way for us to find the care we need.”

“Peer counseling, an open floor where especially older kids could talk about their experience and see that they aren’t as different as they think.”

“YMH counselors specializing in military. Programs for younger children.”

Focus Group Results

A focus group was conducted in April, 2023 at a Clay County community venue with six participants who represented the following stakeholder groups:



MILITARY-CONNECTED
PARENTS/CAREGIVERS



MILITARY-CONNECTED
YOUTH



MILITARY-CONNECTED
TEACHERS

In addition, a military-connected parent who was unable to attend the focus group provided written responses to the focus group questions. The data collected from the focus group and written response is summarized below.

Participants shared that support is needed for military-connected youth in coping with stress surrounding deployment of a parent or caregiver. A parent noted that teachers and military liaisons should be made aware of deployments, suggesting that a questionnaire be given to military-connected families to gather information on upcoming deployments. A teacher and a parent suggested that school staff receive training in how to best support the unique emotional needs of military-connected students. Parents suggested extra support and empathy should be given to students who may struggle to complete their work during deployments.



I think the military liaison at school should be aware of students whose parents are deployed and be able to provide extra help and support through anger, depressive, and anxiety issues related to a parent being deployed.

– *Military-connected parent*

I have a student whose dad is Navy... he told me today he's real sad and didn't want to work. And it was because dad's leaving again next week... It's hard to see my 'school kids' hurting, and not being able to help them because I don't feel like I truly have the knowledge to help them. So maybe a training for teachers so that we can better support our children when they're going through those big transitions.

– *Clay County Teacher*

Participants noted that additional support is also needed for students in transitioning to a new school. One parent suggested a "Military Buddy" program or a "Military Kids Club" that provides peer-to-peer support. They noted that this, or other welcoming activities, could be led by teachers who are military veterans, as they would best understand how to support students. Another parent pointed out that simply gathering military-connected kids together does not provide sufficient support, but that these gatherings need to include socio-emotional skill building. A parent also shared that activities and events should happen in the middle of the year, as well as at the beginning, since military families often move mid-year.



What we don't see a lot of or maybe we're not paying attention to is the mental part of it. Pulling a kid from all of his friends that they've known for, you know, five or six years and uprooting them bring them to a whole new area... Have a group like when those kids come in, there's like other military kids already there to welcome them in and kind of say, 'Hey, we know what you've been through.'

– *Military-connected parent*

Participants expressed a desire for schools to better understand military-connected families' unique needs. One parent suggested using the school portal to create communication avenues specifically for military-connected families.



Ask about our specific family situation and keep that information on file so that it can be referenced and organized so that it is known where extra support may be needed and when.

– Military-connected parent

One parent suggested that schools support military-connected families by educating school staff, students, and families about the military through activities and events, such as on Veterans' Day. The participant suggested having a veteran come to the school and share their experience.



Key Takeaways

Survey and focus group data suggest that future efforts in supporting the health and well-being of military-connected youth and families should focus on the following:

Increasing communication and understanding between military-connected families and school/district staff

Survey results indicated that military-connected parents and caregivers do not perceive there to be a high degree of two-way communication between themselves and school or school district staff. Focus group participants expressed a desire for schools to better understand military-connected families' unique needs and suggested creating communication avenues specifically for military-connected families.

Providing professional development for school staff

Few survey respondents reported awareness of professional development for school staff around supporting military-connected youth and families. Focus group participants shared that school staff should receive training on how to best support the unique emotional needs of military-connected students. One open-ended survey response noted that funding is needed to support the professional development of school staff.

Supporting students and families in transition

Focus group data highlighted the social-emotional needs of military-connected youth when transitioning to a new school. Suggestions included peer support, as well as beginning-of-year and mid-year activities. Few survey respondents reported awareness of a student-led, campus-based transition program at their school or a website with information on transitioning to the school.

Supporting youth experiencing bullying

Survey respondents reported being most dissatisfied with how schools support military-connected youth with bullying (cyber and/or in-person). One survey respondent shared in an open-ended text response question: "My daughter quit the soccer team due to bullying and no one to reach out to." Military-connected parents who participated in the focus group shared that they/their child did not have personal experience with bullying.

Supporting youth experiencing stress and mental health concerns, particularly around parent/caregiver deployment

Survey respondents reported dissatisfaction with how schools support military-connected youth with managing stress and with behavioral and mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression, substance use, self-harm). A few survey respondents shared that their top concerns for their child(ren)'s socio-emotional health included the school being able to identify children with a deploying parent and provide extra support and counselors for helping kids cope with a parent being away for a long time. Focus group participants identified similar concerns, noting that schools should be aware of and provide support for children with deployed parents and that staff should be trained to support students in these situations.

Healthy Kids. Better World.



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