



Operation Educate the Educators at George Mason University

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUPPORTING
MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES



Executive Summary

Teachers and other human services personnel are rarely prepared to address the unique issues that face military-connected children. As a result, a critical need exists to develop services, programs, and research that provides support for them within our schools and communities.

George Mason University’s College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) has long recognized this need, and was among the first participants in Operation Educate the Educators, an initiative to better prepare future teachers and school personnel to

support military-connected children. To build on the momentum of the nationwide Operation Educate the Educators effort, CEHD has developed a blueprint for promoting best practices and evidence-based programs in this domain.

We envision serving as a hub for the Washington, D.C. area, a region with a large population of military families, and as a resource for universities, schools, researchers, teachers, communities, and families nationwide.

To achieve these ambitious goals, we seek short- and long-term philanthropic support.

“Our military children are awesome, just as their parents are. But they have extra hurdles to clear, burdens to bear...we have a sacred responsibility to take care of them.”

Robert M. Gates
former United States Secretary of Defense

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Background

A MISSION TO EDUCATE The Nation's Future Teachers

In April 2011, the Military Child Education Coalition and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education joined forces to develop Operation Educate the Educators. This national initiative was conceived in support of two goals:

1. Provide schools with greater capacity to serve military-connected students and their families.
2. Prepare teachers to understand the military community's unique needs and provide appropriate support to students.

Achieving these goals requires the participation of universities that educate future teachers. Today, more than 100 colleges and universities are signed on to the Operation Educate the Educators program.

The work of these institutions, however, tends to be scattered. There has been no systematic effort to build on these individual initiatives...until now.

Vision

LEADING THE WAY In Support of Military-Connected Children

It is our vision to create a service that supports Operation Educate the Educators' mission, especially in the Washington, D.C. area and particularly through research, leadership, and education around the needs of military families.

Based at George Mason University, this service will develop and sustain efforts to engage and inform educators about best practices, while also promoting evidence-based programs that meet the needs of military-connected children. With a focus on schools and communities, the service will identify and develop leading-edge practices, policy, and research.

George Mason University, located amid the region's large population of military families, offers an unparalleled opportunity to forge partnerships and deliver outcomes with both local and national impact.





Why Schools Need to Act

FOUR MILLION STUDENTS ARE MILITARY-CONNECTED

Military-connected students are present in every level of our education system, from pre-school through high school, trade schools, and institutions of higher education. Currently, there are at least 4,000,000 military-connected students whose parents are active duty members of the National Guard or Reserves, or veterans of the United States military.

These children live in communities in every state and attend schools in virtually every school system in the country. Most military-connected students attend public schools.

EDUCATORS ARE UNPREPARED

Educators are uniquely positioned to identify at-risk students. And yet, teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, principals, and others may not be aware of the social, emotional, and learning challenges specific to military-connected students.

For example, military-connected children often feel anxiety around the multiple transitions they experience, including moving to a new home. If an informed teacher notices that a student is falling behind or acting distant, he or she can find out if a military transition is the cause and then proceed with an appropriate response and an intentional strategy.

Teachers and other community personnel rarely receive training to prepare them to meet the unique needs of military-connected children. The development of services, programs, and research is thus critically needed.

STUDENTS FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

■ High Mobility Rates

Active-duty families typically move every two to three years. Students often experience six to nine moves during their P-12 school years.

■ Access to Special Needs

Students face difficulties qualifying for, receiving, or continuing special needs services due to differences in regulation, testing, and resource availability in school districts. Between 10-12% of military-connected students are served in special education programs.

■ Elevated Stress

Relocation, making new friends, deployment of a parent, and adjusting to new curriculum or instructional methods can put students at-risk for distress and emotional challenges, including depression and anxiety.

THE RISKS ARE REAL

Research confirms that children of military families often exhibit increased levels of social-emotional and behavioral problems, including anxiety, regression, irritability, sleep issues, and high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse.

Some children also have difficulty with academic performance in school, mostly as a result of life-stressors attributable to a parent's military service.





From At-Risk to Resilient

TO KNOW BETTER IS TO DO BETTER

Educators are uniquely positioned to identify military-connected children who are at risk and help them build resiliency.

Studies confirm that responsive school environments and teacher-student relationships positively impact students' social, emotional, and academic functioning. If teachers and community members are aware of military-connected children's needs and develop responsive frameworks, they can serve as an important stabilizing force for our military-connected children.

To do so, however, it is necessary for teachers and others to have a deeper understanding of the military community, lifestyle, and culture so they are able to provide well-informed, responsive, and systematic support.

SUPPORT CHILDREN BY SUPPORTING TEACHERS

To address this need, George Mason University's College of Education and Human Development has developed a blueprint for promoting best practices and evidence-based programs. It starts by informing aspiring teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs. It then extends to professional development for educators and others in schools and community support agencies.

Seven Proposed Solutions

A MULTI-FACETED BLUEPRINT

Operation Educate the Educators at George Mason University will initiate a range of activities to fulfill its role as a resource to educators and other human services professionals, including the following:

- 1. Education Modules.** For military-connected children, poor or slipping school performance may be related to a family member's military service. When teachers are aware of these types of issues, they can better respond. To facilitate this, George Mason University will develop online education modules to train teachers. These modules will provide contemporary information on the needs of military-connected children and their families. The modules will be offered through George Mason University's academic programs, will be distributed to higher education institutions throughout the nation, and will be made available online as continuing education courses for current teachers.
- 2. Summer Academies.** In order to provide intense, multi-day courses on the unique needs of military-connected children and their families, George Mason University will develop a summer academy. Participants will be drawn from throughout the country, and the academy courses will be taught by leading researchers and educators.
- 3. Scholarly Research.** George Mason University will support scholarly research and program evaluations that are key to better understanding military-connected children. Topics will include: What is the impact of mobility on academic performance among military-connected children? And how well do current





nonprofit programs succeed in addressing the needs of military-connected children and spouses? Scholars will identify evidence-based responses and interventions best suited to support teachers in their day-to-day interactions with military-connected families.

- 4. Resource Bank.** Currently, the efforts of individual institutions are scattered, with few opportunities to learn from each other. George Mason University will provide schools and human services agencies an online bank of resources focused on the unique needs of military-connected children and families, including video models and best practices.
- 5. Summer Camps for Children.** Summer camps provide a safe environment for children who have similar family and life experiences, thus enhancing their resiliency when coping with military-related stressors. George Mason University will develop and host camps that provide military-connected children with a supportive experience while also providing a forum for teachers-in-training, practicing teachers, and other human services professionals to learn firsthand about the needs of these students.
- 6. Community of Practice.** George Mason University will provide informed and critical leadership. The university will convene educators, human services professionals, schools, community organizations, and others to build a networked community of practice and caring in support of military-connected children and their families.
- 7. Stakeholder Conferences.** George Mason University will host regional, national, and web-based conferences to further disseminate information about the unique needs of military-connected children and their families, including models and best practices for schools and community organizations.

Why George Mason University

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE In the Nation's Capital

George Mason University has a large local footprint in the Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Each year, the College of Education and Human Development enrolls more than 4,000 students and works in close partnership with the region's world-class school systems.

As part of Operation Educate the Educators at George Mason University, the College of Education and Human Development will draw upon multiple areas of expertise within the university, including the College of Health and Human Services and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. This alliance among disciplines promises a visionary, multi-disciplinary, and multi-dimensional lens through which to view, understand, and support military-connected children and their families.

Operation Educate the Educators at George Mason University is positioned to have a vast and immediate impact, not just in the region but as a model for other school systems, universities, and communities nationwide.



Partnerships and Funding

WORKING TOGETHER FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

The needs of military-connected children and families are well documented and virtually universal. We believe it's time to address these needs by educating aspiring and current teachers as well as human services professionals.

In order to succeed, Operation Educate the Educators at George Mason University seeks philanthropic support. Such funding will allow us to implement education, professional development, and continuing education for teachers and human services professionals, while strengthening the capacity of schools and community organizations to meet the needs of military-connected children and families.

George Mason University requires both short- and long-term philanthropic funding. There are many opportunities for co-branding and for ensuring that this program has maximum, positive impact. We invite individual, corporate, foundation, state, and national organizations to partner with us.

Please contact the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University at cehd@gmu.edu for more information.



ALLIES

- Association of the United States Army (AUSA)
- Blue Star Families
- Child Care Aware of America
- Dare Mighty Things, Inc.
- George Mason University's College of Health and Human Services and College of Humanities and Social Sciences
- Gordon Sumner Consulting
- Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)
- National Military Family Association
- They Serve 2
- Virginia Department of Education
- Zero To Three

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