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A Call to Duty: Educational Policy and School Reform Addressing the Needs of Children From Military Families

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KEYWORDS: Educational policy, educational reform, military education, policy analysis

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Military children are exposed to a variety of stressors, including, but not limited to parental deployment(s), war trauma, disability, illness, and/or death, high levels of uncertainty, and geographic mobility, each of which can affect mental health and academic performance.
- Researchers believe that by creating an environment that is similar to that of Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools, military-connected public school systems will be better equipped to handle the challenges associated with military family life.
- The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (MIC3) is a policy instrument designed to reduce or eliminate challenges to educational success for military children attending public schools. The policy goals encompassed by the MIC3 provide an effective template for understanding issues related to enrollment, course and program placement, eligibility, and graduation.

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ABSTRACT:

“More than 90% of the nation’s 1.2 million military children attend civilian-operated public schools. Education researchers, however, often overlook the educational experiences and needs of military children attending civilian-operated public schools (i.e., schools that are administered by and under the purview of local education agencies). This article is the first in an educational research journal to examine the intersections among state policy, school reform, and the educational experiences of military children. This article also highlights new data sources and funding opportunities for research on military students.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Approximately 90 percent of the nation's 1.2 million military children attend civilian-operated public schools. Multiple deployments, frequent moves, war trauma, disability, illness, high levels of uncertainty, and death are some of the psychological and behavioral stressors placed on military children and families within these school systems. These stressors can be a factor in the development of behavioral and stress disorders, mental health issues, and poor academic performance. The DoDEA oversees 'on post/base' schools for select military bases in the United States and abroad, which provide educational supports to 87,224 students across 195 schools. These supports are tailored to meet the needs of military children and families. These supports include a uniform curriculum and set of standards to reduce the difficulties associated with multiple moves, structured peer support groups and parent groups for those experiencing a deployment. Educational professionals are also specifically trained to invest in the development and maintenance of these military-focused systems. Military students who attend these schools tend to function at high levels and score above average on standardized tests of achievement. Military-connected schools (i.e., public schools with high proportions of military students) should implement programs and procedures that support student transition and to consider some of the best practices found in DoDEA schools. Local education agencies should also monitor the number of military children enrolled in order to better allocate resources. These data can also be used to inform school practices and train personnel.

FOR POLICY

The MIC3 is a policy instrument designed to reduce or eliminate educational challenges experienced by military children. The MIC3 provides an effective template for understanding issues related to enrollment, course and program placement, eligibility, and graduation. The compact also addresses problems related to conflicting state laws regarding the transition of military children.

The MIC3 has been well-received; however, a disconnection between state legislatures, district personnel and school personnel has hindered the implementation of various guidelines. Federal and state agencies should collaborate to streamline the implementation of the MIC3. Detailed coordination between these entities is needed. An evaluation of the policy's effectiveness at the national, state, and local level is also needed and could significantly improve the education and lives of military children attending public schools.

Partnerships between professional educational organizations and military organizations can bring awareness to the needs of military children and can be leveraged to implement policy reform. For example, a partnership between the American Educational Research Association, the National Military Family Association, and the Military Impacted Schools Association could be especially effective in initiating policy reforms that would support military children. Such a partnership could also garner support for education research on military family communities.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future education research plays a major role in conceptualizing and measuring the impact, efficacy, and sustainability of program changes at both the policy and classroom level. Researchers should explore how military-connected schools currently utilize existing programs to respond to the needs of military children and improve their academic performance. Researchers should also examine the efficacy of external support, such as the DoDEA partnership grant program. It is also important to measure outcomes related to the MIC3 and identify practices that best support military children in transition (e.g., comparing academic outcomes in states that have implemented the MIC3 with those that have not). Finally, education researchers need to examine the postsecondary aspirations, enrollment, and outcomes of military-connected students. The current focus of multiple federal agencies and newly directed funding resources has created a window of opportunity for educational researchers to become involved in program and policy creation, and research that supports military-connected public schools.

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