



A Study of the

Purple Star School Designation Program

SUMMARY REPORT



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project



MCEC[®]



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About the Center for Public Research and Leadership

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University strives to revitalize public school systems while reinventing professional education. CPRL conducts high -impact research and consulting projects for clients in the education sector and provides rigorous coursework, skills training, and real-world experiential learning for our graduate students who attend programs at Columbia University and across the country. Since our founding in 2011, CPRL has provided research and consulting support to more than 150 state agencies, school districts, charter school organizations, foundations, and advocacy groups, among others.

About the Military Child Education Coalition®

Established in 1998, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) is a nonprofit organization that solely exists to help the military-connected child and youth thrive. MCEC supports all military-connected children by educating, advocating, and collaborating to resolve education challenges associated with the military lifestyle.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not have been possible without the time and commitment of the more than 70 individuals — students, parents, school administrators, teachers, district leaders, and state-level Purple Star program leaders — who spoke with us. They generously shared their histories, their knowledge, and, often, other contacts. In addition, several professionals who have spent their careers supporting military children in one capacity or another also gave generously of their time. Finally, it has been a joy to continue our work with MCEC, and Colonel (ret) Jack Ballantyne in particular. We have been repeatedly impressed by these professionals' knowledge and regularly inspired by their deep commitment to serving military families and children.

INTRODUCTION

[Military families] reach a point where most of us know the things to look for and ask for. And we put on our armor and are ready to fight the battle...you'd hope to not have to settle for good enough.

Parent

Military-connected (MC) families are tough *and* agile. Moving three times more often, on average, than their civilian counterparts, parents and students quickly learn to become fierce advocates for themselves, lobbying schools to provide the basic educational services and social-emotional supports to which all American children are entitled. But this advocacy becomes exhausting and draws time away from the other pressing demands of relocation and family life. What relief might parents feel if they did not have to constantly put on their armor to fight these battles? And what more could students accomplish if they did not have to settle for good enough?

One promising new initiative — the Purple Star School designation program (Purple Star program) — seeks to reduce this burden on families. By articulating the most critical transition supports for military-connected families and publicly designating schools that meet those requirements, the program signals to military-connected families which schools are the most committed and best equipped to meet their needs.

To better understand the landscape around and impact of the Purple Star program, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the initiative's national advocate, engaged the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University (CPRL) to conduct a study of the program across four states. In this report, we summarize the findings of that investigation, assessing the strengths of current initiatives, identifying potential areas of growth, and offering recommendations to guide the improvement of both extant and emergent initiatives.

In brief, we found that:

- The Purple Star program has already gained traction and motivated hundreds of schools and scores of districts to improve services for military-connected (MC) students and families. This is especially notable given that the program has been in place for less than three years in most states, with a third of that time overlapping the COVID-19 health crisis.
- The Purple Star program's true value derives from its potential to:
 - Centralize and make knowledge accessible,
 - Develop stakeholder networks, and
 - Support schools in cultivating and communicating cultural competency in supporting military-connected families.
- Most Purple Star schools and districts already had programming for military-families in place before seeking designation. Still, staff and faculty report that they have benefitted from the Purple Star application process and the encouragement to refine and expand programming related to the program designation requirements.

- Of the core designation requirements, selecting a point-of-contact, training more staff and faculty, and establishing new student transition programs are commonly cited as the highest-impact activities. Designing an accessible and relevant dedicated webpage is still a need for many schools.
- Schools and districts appreciate and benefit from the recognition and publicity the designation offers, but brand recognition for the program among families is still fairly low.
- A number of simple steps — outlined throughout this report — can help states, districts, and schools continue to refine Purple Star programs and offerings as well as build recognition for the program.

BACKGROUND

Military members make up one of the largest workforces in the United States, with approximately 1.3 million active duty service members and 818,000 individuals serving in the National Guard and Reserves (Mancini, O’Neal, Lucier - Greer, 2020). Roughly 40% percent of these service members are parents or guardians to two or more minor children (Mancini et al., 2020). The frequent relocations (i.e., Permanent Changes of Station or PCS) required of military personnel mean that, on average, military-connected children move between six and nine times between kindergarten and high school graduation (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2018). As they transition between schools, these students must adapt to varying cultures, school populations, curricula, standards, course offerings, schedules, and graduation requirements (Esqueda, Astor, Tunac De Pedro, 2012). As a result, military-connected students often face unique academic and social-emotional challenges.

Academic Challenges

- **Academic Gaps:** Variations in state curricula and standards mean that highly mobile students often experience gaps and overlaps in academic content as they transfer between states. This results in a knowledge gap relative to their peers and may cause feelings of confusion and inadequacy that interfere with the academic and skill development of the students. On the other hand, when content is repeated, students may lose opportunity to advance or may simply become bored and detached. These content misalignments can also cause mobile students to miss prerequisite classes for desired tracks in advanced or specialized coursework. Finally, repeated transfers often compound these learning gaps, affecting students’ achievement and habits in the classroom (Center for Public Research and Leadership, 2017).
- **Credit transfers:** As part of the transition, students transfer academic credits between institutions. However, when credits are not properly interpreted by the new school or communicated by the old school, or simply do not align with the requirements of the new school, the student can face a deeply troublesome mismatch. Students may find themselves repeating courses, losing credits, dropping class rank, and or struggling to keep up in classes. High school students may be affected most by this problem. Since states have varying credit requirements for graduation, students who move later in their high school years may face significant challenges meeting the new school or state requirements and find themselves cramming extra classes into their schedules or graduating late because of resulting credit deficiencies (Weisman, 2012).

- **Scheduling and administrative challenges:** Differences in enrollment practices, academic calendars, schedules, and program admissions further complicate academic transitions. Schools across the country start and end at different times of the year, and transferring students sometimes miss weeks of school because of these unexpected calendar differences. Mobile students may also miss application deadlines or testing requirements for special programs.

Social-emotional Challenges

- **Loss of support system:** For many children, entering a new school causes nervousness and anxiety. With each move, too, the children are separated from their friends, extended family, and mentors who serve as support networks to buffer stress. Because of the misaligned scheduling previously mentioned, students also may lose access to, or face complications to joining, the activities, sports, and clubs that ordinarily serve as supports or forms of connection. These emotional challenges, which also have implications for families, make it harder for children to acclimate to new school environments and can have an impact on their academic and social-emotional development (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, Tanielian, Burns., Ruder & Han, 2009).
- **Disconnection from the new social environment:** Highly mobile students can become disaffected and find it harder and harder to connect to their school and peers. Being on the move may decrease the incentive to connect and commit to a new community. Families, too, may feel disconnected and thus be less likely to engage in the school or other institutions, exacerbating their children's disconnection (Drummet et al., 2003).
- **Deployment:** Parental deployment, particularly when combined with a school change, heightens the risk of social-emotional struggles for military-connected children. When dealing with deployment, children face a unique kind of instability at home that may lead to increased anxiety and depression, as well as additional disconnection from adults and peers.

The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (often called the Military Interstate Compact or, simply, the Compact), an agreement among all 50 states and the District of Columbia, has sought to mitigate these challenges and offer families increased stability as they move between schools. The Compact sets national standards for how schools should address transition issues related to enrollment, placement and attendance, eligibility for extracurriculars, and graduation requirements. Though the Compact's standards have been in place for a decade, some schools and districts still struggle to operationalize their commitment to the Compact as they face competing priorities and differing local conditions. Many also fail to communicate consistently about the Compact's support and commitment to military-connected families.

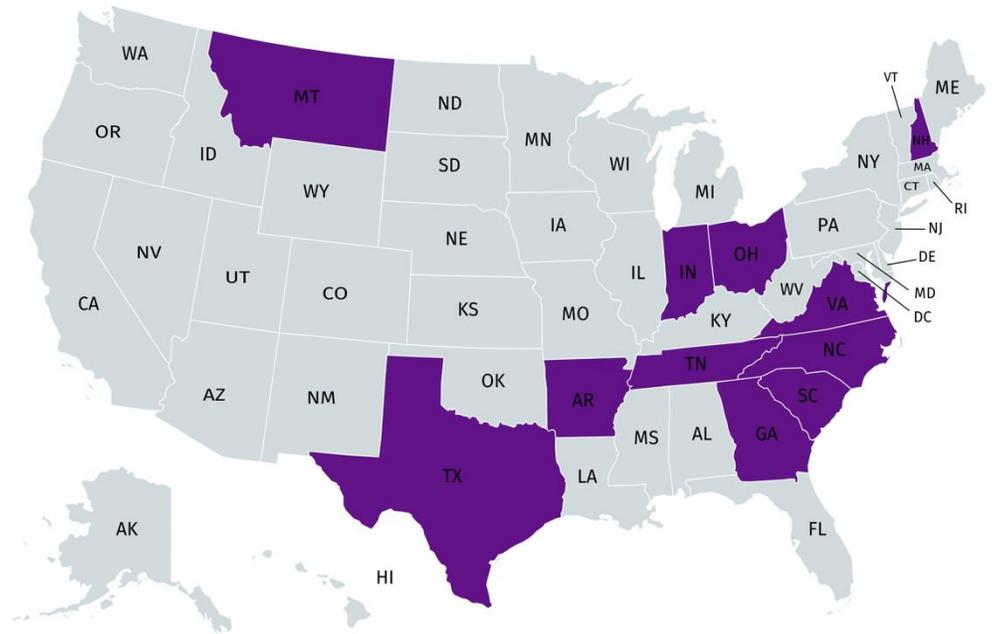
THE PURPLE STAR PROGRAM

The Purple Star program was designed to help mitigate the challenges of high mobility by setting standards for and publicly designating military-friendly schools. Launched as a grassroots initiative in Ohio in 2017, there are now active or developing Purple Star initiatives in 11 states:

Arkansas, Georgia,¹ Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

The Purple Star program is a ground-up initiative with no central governing body. As such, each state — or other granting body, such as a district — may use their discretion to enact, design, and administer its own iteration of the program.

Accordingly, there is some variation nationally in how programs are executed and in the criteria schools must meet to become Purple Star-designated. Still, a number of shared, research-driven components have come to define the designation at the national level.



- **Designated Point-of-Contact:** Schools should appoint a staff member to act as a liaison between military families and the school, easing military-connected students' enrollment and acclimation period.
- **Professional Development:** Schools should train staff on the unique considerations for and needs of military-connected students.
- **Dedicated Webpage:** Schools should develop a dedicated page on the school or district website with easily accessible information and resources for military-connected families.
- **Transition Programs:** Schools should implement a transition program to welcome and socially acclimate incoming military-connected students. Some, but not all states, require that this program be student-led.
- **Military Recognition Events:** Schools should host programming and events to celebrate and honor service members and military-connected students, families, and community members.

¹ Called the Military Flagship School Award

Beyond these core components, most states also require schools to meet some combination of additional criteria, including passing resolutions to publicize support for military families and offering opportunities for military-connected parents to volunteer at the school.

In all states, schools and districts apply for designation by submitting to the state's designating body an application and materials that demonstrate their fulfillment of the programmatic requirements. Upon review, schools and districts that earn the award are certified and publicly recognized. Most states require that schools and districts apply for recertification every two to three years.

METHODOLOGY

Tasked with developing an understanding of the impact of the Purple Star program on districts, schools, families, and students, our team was guided by two primary research questions:

- **How do schools and districts describe the experience of obtaining and maintaining a Purple Star School designation?**
- **How do military-connected students and families describe the experience of transitioning into, attending, and transitioning out of a Purple Star School?**

Our work began in September 2020 with a review of the extant literature on the needs of military-connected students and desktop research on the current landscape of the program nationally. Using this research, we generated a Theory of Action for the program (see Figure 1), which served as a grounding framework for the design of the study.

In collaboration with MCEC, we then narrowed our field research strategy to four states' Purple Star initiatives: Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Arkansas. Given the objectives of the study, our intention was not to evaluate formally or compare state programs to each other, but instead to better understand the impact of the program in aggregate. To that end, each state-level program added unique value and diversity to the sample. As the founding state, Ohio has the longest running program and offers insight into the impact of the designation over time. Virginia and North Carolina are high-density military states with a significant number of Purple Star Schools. Finally, Arkansas was selected primarily because of the unique circumstance of the Cabot School District, where all of the district's schools have earned the Purple Star designation.

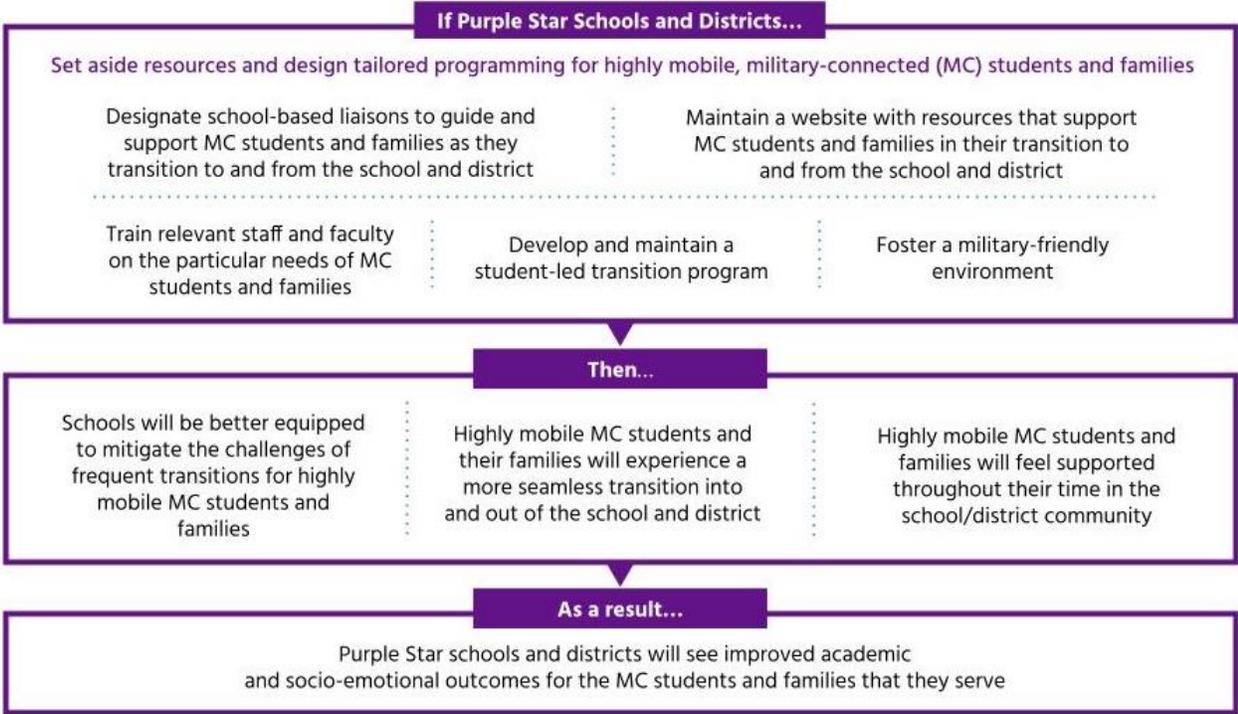
Once the focus states were identified, we conducted an intensive website review that mirrored, at a larger scale, the type of research military-connected families often engage in upon a move. Surveying the websites of over 550 Purple Star-designated schools across the four focus states, we (a) looked for the presence of a dedicated military family page on the school website and assessed its accessibility relative to the homepage; (b) established whether a school- or district-based point-of-contact was identified and codified their contact information if available; and (c) made note of any Purple Star branding.

Using this research, our team then turned to data collection, designing semi-structured interview protocols and surveys aligned to our research questions. Our sampling strategy focused on schools identified by our aforementioned field review, schools with established MCEC partnerships, and individuals at all levels referred to us by interviewees and survey respondents. In all, we interviewed 71 Purple Star stakeholders, including state-level administrators of the

program, district leaders, school staff and faculty, and parents and students at both Purple Star and non-Purple Star schools. Additionally, 190 school staff and faculty members, parents, and students completed surveys.

To analyze collected data, we reviewed the qualitative survey responses and interview transcripts and coded the data into categories derived from our theory of action (see Figure 1), identifying broad recurring themes across stakeholder groups. Then, we used exploratory data analysis to review our quantitative survey results and compared those findings to our conclusions from the qualitative analysis. Final themes, overall structure, and the relative pertinence of each of our findings emerged from deliberation throughout this process.

Figure 1. Theory of Action for the Purple Star Program



Impact of COVID-19

It is important to note that this study was conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in March of 2020, forced most schools to abruptly shift to remote or hybrid-learning. This affected both the implementation of Purple Star programming and our team’s data collection. Many schools, overwhelmed with the unprecedented shift in operations, were unable to implement Purple Star components as robustly as planned, in part because some program elements naturally lend themselves to in-person implementation. Because the majority of schools in our sample have been designated for under two years, this reality undoubtedly influenced their perceptions of the impact of as well as their actual implementation of the program. From a methodological standpoint, data collection opportunities were more limited than they might have been; all interviews were conducted remotely, via videoconference or phone, and our team was unable to travel to conduct field observations.

FINDINGS

The Purple Star program is anchored by two parallel goals: (1) building and recognizing the capacity of schools and districts to serve military-connected students and families and (2) helping families identify the schools and districts that are best prepared to meet their needs.

Though the program is still very new — less than two years old in most states — our data suggest that state-level initiatives have made considerable progress on the first aim. Hundreds of schools and districts have opted into the program, with those in our sample citing as incentives for participation both the relative ease of enacting program components and the value of being recognized. Better yet, schools and districts report that their efforts to refine existing programming and launch new initiatives have fostered more supportive environments for military-connected students and families. In fact, 77 percent of school staff survey respondents report that the Purple Star program has had a positive impact on their school.

If I saw that designation, I would immediately think “Phew, I don’t have to explain from square one.” It would signify that they understand the MIC3, that my situation may not be cookie cutter.

Parent

While there has also been some progress toward the second goal, the next step for the program is ensuring that families are more aware of and excited about the designation. Generally, our data suggest that parents and students have both responded positively to the supports required by the program and had positive experiences in designated schools. Still, because of the novelty of the initiative and its relatively limited national scope, families are, for the most part, unfamiliar with the designation.

The following section will describe these findings, first focusing on the experiences and reactions of states and schools and districts to the program establishment and application process, and then exploring the experience of all stakeholders — including school and district personnel and students and families — with each of the five core program components.

Establishing the Program at the State Level

Data from state-level Purple Star leaders show that the process of creating and implementing the initiative has become easier with each new state. Ohio, the founding program, did much of the heavy lifting by bringing together stakeholders from different military branches and schools to formulate the basic requirements we now see in most iterations of the program. Our interview data suggest that, for many states, the design of the subsequent states’ programs required only minor tweaks to these core requirements and implementation plans, though most states did still opt to draw on the input of local stakeholders to appropriately contextualize the program design. One state actor emphasized that this had eased the development process because their state did not have to “reinvent the wheel.”

State leaders did note some minor roadblocks to implementation. Several state program leaders talked about the difficulty of tailoring the requirements so that schools with varying levels of resources have an equal opportunity to earn the designation. And one state emphasized weighing the benefits and limitations of using a formal legislative process or informal state DOE action to establish the program. Overall, however, states emphasized that roadblocks to the programs were minor and the benefits the program provided to schools and military-connected families were unequivocal.

Applying for Designation

Overwhelmingly, schools and districts report that the process of applying for the Purple Star designation and maintaining Purple Star programming has not represented a significant administrative challenge. When asked about the difficulty of establishing programming in their schools, 86 percent of school-level survey respondents report that the process was either “very easy,” “easy,” or “neither difficult nor easy” (see Figure 2). Similarly, 96 percent of respondents note that maintaining the designation once awarded has been “very easy,” “easy,” or “neither difficult nor easy” (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. How challenging was it to establish the Purple Star program at your school?

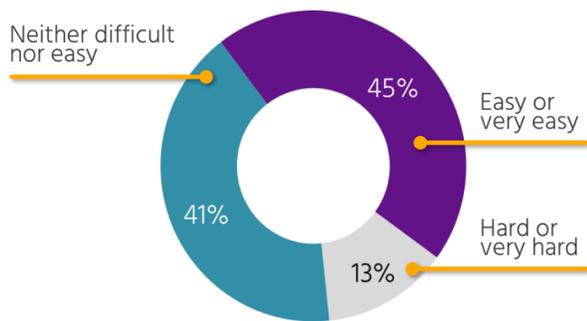
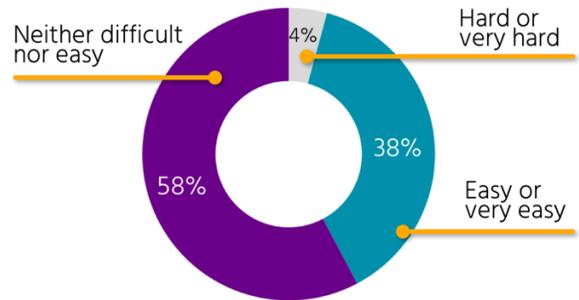
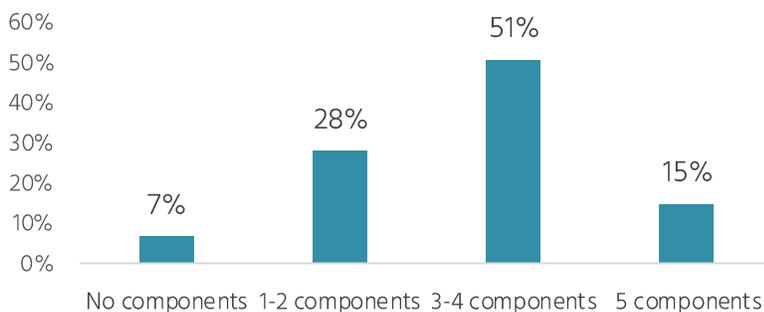


Figure 3. How challenging has it been to maintain the Purple Star program at your school?



Our data suggest that many schools — and especially those with large military-connected populations — found the designation application process relatively straightforward because they already had some or most of the required Purple Star components in place. Approximately two-thirds of survey respondents who led the Purple Star effort at their schools report that they had between 3 and 5 program elements in place before applying for the designation (see Figure 4). In these types of schools, the application process still offered an important benefit: the opportunity to reflect on, codify, improve, and supplement existing programming. A smaller cohort — around 35 percent of survey respondents — reported having two or fewer components in place before applying for the designation. These types of schools used the program as an impetus to and roadmap for initiating more robust military-friendly programming.

Figure 4. Percentage of schools with components in place before designation



Beyond the fact that the vast majority of participating schools already had some supportive programming in place before applying, most schools found the logistical aspect of the application process relatively simple to navigate. In all four focus states, applicants fill out a form and provide supporting documentation to demonstrate the completion of various requirements. In large part, school staff who led these efforts noted that the application was straightforward and that the primary

burden in completing it was collecting documentation of existing programming that had happened throughout the school year. Several other interviewees noted that the timing of the application had initially posed a challenge, but that the state-level granting body had adjusted the submission deadline in response to their feedback.

In several instances, staff and faculty reported working together in groups or teams to complete the application, which made the process even easier and more collaborative. Several of these Purple Star working groups were exclusively school-based. In other instances, a district or regional staff member helped coordinate the process across schools, in at least one case providing both bespoke one-to-one support for individual schools and access for all schools to a virtual message board through which applicants could offer advice to each other. Coordination by a district staff member not only helped schools navigate the application, but also publicized the program and motivated additional schools to apply in subsequent cycles.

Folks here at the school level, the points-of-contact, the folks who are completing the applications, would tell you that looking at it as a district-wide effort, sharing information probably is really good practice.

District Liaison

Program Components

To guide our analysis, we organized our research around five core program components that show up in various combinations across state programs:



A designated point-of-contact for military-connected families,



Staff professional development on serving military-connected students and families,



A dedicated website with information relevant to military-connected families,



A new student transition program, and



Military recognition events.

The following sections unpack findings on each of these components, identifying the benefits, challenges, and recommendations reported by districts, schools, families, and students.



The first core Purple Star component is the designation of a school-level point-of-contact (POC). Broadly, POCs serve as the primary link between the school and military-connected families, helping students navigate the transition into and out of the school and connecting them to resources and information on an ongoing basis. To ensure that POCs are prepared to fill this role and implement appropriate supports, most state programs require that POCs complete specialized professional development.

Responsibilities of the POC role vary somewhat across the four focus states. The Arkansas and Ohio programs require that POCs inform teachers of any military-connected students enrolled in their classes. In Virginia and optionally in North Carolina, POCs coordinate training for other school staff. North Carolina is unique in requiring both a school-level POC and a central office staff member to support that POC and military-connected families.

Benefits of Designating a Point-of-Contact

According to schools and families, establishing a POC for military-connected families has been among the most impactful components of the program. And an overwhelming majority of schools — 76 percent — report that the component is “easy” or “very easy” to administer. The following benefits emerged as major themes in our data.

- **POCs provide practical support:** Throughout the transition and relocation process, POCs help relieve logistical burdens on the family by (a) informing other faculty and staff of their arrival and (b) efficiently coordinating welcome information, registration issues, credit transfers, and extracurricular enrollment issues with other staff. Because POCs are both trained in the requirements of the Compact and familiar with school and district policy, they are well-prepared to help families navigate enrollment.
- **POCs serve as a guide to school culture:** POCs also act as personalized guides for incoming families, ensuring that students and parents feel supported throughout their time in the school community. Parents note that schools often have an “unwritten curriculum” that dictates how things work beyond any formal, codified protocols or policies. POCs act as guides to these nuances of school culture, helping families more quickly adjust and get to know “how things are done.”
- **POCs act as a consistent resource:** POCs are a steady support throughout a student’s time at a school. Typically a family’s first touchpoint, the POC is well-positioned to immediately assess how a student is feeling about a move and connect that student to appropriate support if needed. POCs in our sample often coordinate school clubs and special activities for military-connected students, allowing them to build strong relationships with children and identify any emergent issues. Through those relationships and strong connections with both parents and local installations, the POC helps keep staff up to date on issues that may be impacting students’ lives outside of the classroom, like parental

We moved to the area mid-year and I was connected with the liaison person who is also the counselor. She was helpful in making us feel welcome and answering questions. She met us the day we got into town at the school and we also did a tour from other older military students. It was great hearing from them about their experiences and helped us feel welcome.

Parent

deployments and upcoming PCS orders. By assigning one key contact to monitor military students, schools ensure that students and families always have a familiar, knowledgeable staff member they can turn to and that other school staff can be efficiently mobilized when needed.

- **POCs centralize resources:** Instead of having to independently navigate various complex and diffuse institutional networks to find resources, families lean on the POCs as a central knowledge hub. The POC helps coordinate supports both from within the school and through other institutions, like the school district, military installations, and military-specific non-profits. Many POCs in our sample were passionate about their role, putting in extra time to become well-versed in available school and community resources. This consolidation of information through the POC benefits not only students and families but also the resource providers themselves by streamlining communication and increasing their visibility.

I think [the]...partnership is critical, because I can connect any student with resources on the installation. And if [the SLO] gets a call from somebody moving in, or has an issue, she knows she can call me and I can connect them with the right person.

District Point-of-Contact

- **POCs coordinate maintenance of the designation:** Finally, from a logistical point of view, the school POC frequently coordinates the maintenance of the Purple Star designation, both by ensuring that the school lives up to its Purple Star commitments (e.g., regularly updating the website with resources) and by gathering artifacts over the course of the year to support the designation renewal effort.

Challenges of Establishing and Maintaining the Point-of-Contact Role

Though families, schools, and districts reported many benefits of designating a point-of-contact, several notable challenges emerged.

- **Lack of state-level guidance for role:** While most schools reported that designating a POC was among the easiest components to implement, some interviewees noted that a lack of clarity from states in the precise role requirements had made choosing an appropriate POC difficult. Further, because an infrastructure for family support often already exists through the installation, in some cases, an initial investment of time was required to clarify and differentiate each actor's responsibilities. Finally, an absence of firm guidelines has led to some inconsistency in how the role is defined and applied across different schools, which may lead to confusion about what supports different POCs will offer when families move between Purple Star schools.
- **Burden in filling the role:** The most effective POCs are those that are passionate about the position and devote time and energy to being a strong resource and advocate for students and families. In most cases, however, the POC responsibilities are uncompensated and added on top of already intensive workloads. Finding volunteers who are willing and able to take on the extra task can be challenging.
- **Accessibility:** Though most parents in our sample found Purple Star POCs to be a helpful support, in some instances, POCs were reportedly either inaccessible or lacking in expertise or passion. Additionally, parents noted that it can be more difficult to reach POCs during the summer months, when many school staff are offline. And though uncommon, our team did encounter several instances during outreach where POC email or contact information was outdated or inaccurate.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for the POC component emerged during data collection.

- **States should communicate clear expectations for the role:** States should articulate clear baseline POC expectations and responsibilities in the Purple Star application guidelines. Further, collaborating across state lines to pursue standardization will provide consistency as the program scales and families move more frequently between designated schools.
- **POCs should gather feedback to improve programming:** Families feel heard and included when schools make real efforts to gather their feedback and responsively improve school practices and programming. Because POCs have extensive contact with both parents and students, they are well-positioned to coordinate this task. Even small-scale, low-effort data collection efforts (e.g., brief family satisfaction surveys) can support dramatic improvements within the school.
- **POCs should strive to develop their networks:** POCs are most effective when they develop strong ties with contacts at state-level agencies, installations, the district, and other schools. The exchange of information, resources, and practices enabled by networking often spurs the development of more creative and integrated programming. In North Carolina and Arkansas, particularly, district-level liaisons supported this effort by setting up the digital infrastructure needed to maintain such relationships.
- **When possible, POCs should be compensated or have other duties lessened:** Compensating POCs or lessening the scope of their other responsibilities can allow POCs to engage more fully in the role. Interviewees also suggested that assigning both a school- and district-level POC can help distribute responsibility and ensure that families are fully supported.
- **POCs should be accessible:** POC contact information should be easily accessible on the school's website and kept up-to-date.

That's the primary role...to come up with creative ideas, to make sure that [parents and students] know that supports are in place and that we appreciate them and that we recognize what they go through and we're willing to learn in the areas that we have blind spots.

School Counselor, Point-of-Contact

The families most satisfied with their experience in Purple Star schools are those who have felt supported by a passionate key contact. The following recommendations highlight best practices for schools when selecting this POC.

- **POCs should have a passion for the role and knowledge of military life:** Interviewees suggested that the best POCs are staff members who are already familiar with military culture and who “speak the same language” as families. In this regard, veterans, former brats, and military spouses were highlighted as particularly effective choices. POCs who are not military-connected should be willing to invest in developing an understanding of the lifestyle.
- **POCs should be fluent in the Compact:** The most effective POCs are well-versed in the Compact and have influence within the school to help apply it during transfer and enrollment.
- **POCs should have ample bandwidth for the role:** Staff and families alike noted that POCs are particularly effective when they have ample bandwidth for the role. Given that most school actors are typically working at or

over full capacity, schools should consider which staff have responsibilities that already overlap significantly with those of the POC. Though this varies between schools, most often, POCs in our sample have been counselors, registrars, or associate principals.

- **POCs should be accessible to families:** It is critical that the POC be available to families throughout the year, including over summer vacation. As such, a 12-month employee is likely the best choice for the role.

Whoever sits in that position, who's a liaison, whether they're military or not, really has to have a clear understanding of the community that they're serving...So it's good practice if you have military-connected staff, to use one of them because they will speak a similar language. But at the very least your staff should be Interstate Compact-trained.

District Point-of-Contact



All state programs require school and district staff to complete professional development (PD) on (a) special considerations for working with military-connected students and families, (b) standards set out by the Compact, and (c) effective strategies for supporting military-connected students.

While all four focus states require specialized PD for POCs, the particular requirements for the PD component vary across states, districts, and schools.

- **Who is trained:** Both the North Carolina and Virginia programs require that school staff beyond the POC be trained, while Ohio and Arkansas include all-staff training as a recommended but optional component.
- **Who trains:** In some schools and districts, the POC develops and conducts the training, while in others, the POC collaborates with other experts (e.g., School Liaison Officers, Military & Family Life Counselors, district-level specialists, organizations like MCEC) to coordinate the PD. And some states, including Virginia, have opted to develop standard state-level training modules in collaboration with university partners.
- **How often training occurs:** Only the North Carolina program requires annual training; in other states, schools and districts may determine how frequently to train staff.

Benefits of Professional Development

Stakeholders at all levels highlighted PD as one of the most valuable elements of the Purple Star program and the biggest “game-changer” for schools that receive the designation. Indeed, our survey results suggest a 33 percentage point increase — from 56 to 89 percent — in the number of schools that report training staff after earning the designation. The following section outlines the major benefits of PD as articulated by interviewees.

- **PD advises staff and faculty on the Compact:** In many schools nationally, administrators and teachers are unaware of Compact guidelines on flexibility in areas like class placement, graduation requirements, and extracurricular participation. Interviewed staff noted that PD has been an efficient mechanism for increasing awareness and understanding of the Compact, such that all staff are better prepared to accommodate incoming military-connected students.
- **PD cultivates awareness and empathy:** District and school level staff frequently noted that PD was an essential tool for raising awareness of the challenges faced by military-connected children. In many cases, interviewees noted that staff and faculty had always been theoretically committed to supporting military-connected students, but simply lacked insight into how deeply frequent moves and deployment can affect children. PD has helped develop empathy around the often invisible emotional challenges that military-connected children face.

We are now more aware of what's going on with the kids of military families. This process kind of forced us to take a look at this population, that was kind of just hidden back in the background...it's been kind of an eye opener for everybody on our faculty.

District Military Liaison

- **PD equips staff and faculty to provide emotional support to students:** Beyond awareness and empathy, district and school staff reported that PD had armed them with the practical skills needed to serve military students' social-emotional needs. For example, in one school, staff reported that PD on common behavioral responses to the stresses of parental deployment prepared faculty and staff to identify students who need specialized support from counseling staff.
- **PD recognizes military-connected staff:** Finally, a number of interviewees noted that the Purple Star program, and PD in particular, had helped highlight military-connected staff within the building. This recognition not only honored these staff, but also ultimately helped improve programming, as civilian staff and faculty were able to identify military-connected community members whom they could seek out for advice.

Our staff members that weren't military connected start[ed] seeking resources from...our veterans [on staff]. [They were] able to speak wisdom into these teachers lives. It's been an interesting experience to be able to see our traditional educators...seeking help from someone that wouldn't be in a traditional educational leadership role.

School Leader

Challenges of Professional Development

Though response to the professional development component was strongly positive, a couple challenges did emerge.

- **Time commitment:** Several interviewees noted that the time commitment required to complete PD was challenging to negotiate with often overburdened staff. Especially in schools with smaller military-connected populations, Purple Star leaders at the school sometimes had to make extra efforts to motivate buy-in. Similarly, state-level training materials, while comprehensive, are often reported to be excessively time-intensive to deliver.
- **Adapting PD during a pandemic:** As might be expected, the pandemic threw a wrench in many of the best-laid plans for staff training. In most cases, interviewees were able to creatively retool training for the online space, but noted that the switch was a challenge.

I saw very individualized responses – modifying assignments, chats with the families. Before the training, the teachers didn't have a really good idea of what the kid was going through. We have seen teachers seeking tools to better support kids that are going through this very rough time, very traditional teachers seeking help from non-conventional methods.

District Military Liaison

Recommendations for Professional Development

The following recommendations highlight effective practices that emerged from data collection.

- **States should support the development of a repository of training materials:** A vetted archive of training materials at the state level could help circulate effective training practices, ensure the accuracy of content, and offer support to school-based PD facilitators. In the case where the PD is led by POCs, this can help decrease the time burden placed on them by their POC responsibilities. While there are many resources available online, their accuracy is not universally reliable. Providing a bank of reputable resources would ensure that schools and districts are working with the best information available. Another option may be to develop standardized training materials or online modules at the state level.

But the training part is where I saw some of the biggest bang for our buck...as far as awareness level, communication, creation of an energy.

District Leader
- **States and districts should leverage the digital training space to connect educators:** Though COVID-19 has undoubtedly made implementing PD more challenging, it has also presented opportunities to use the virtual space innovatively to connect educators. Moving forward, states, regions, and districts should consider how synchronous virtual trainings might facilitate capacity building, consistency in content, and stronger network ties among participants while also reducing the burden on district- and school-level trainers.
- **Schools and districts should regularly train staff and faculty:** When possible, schools should administer PD on military-connected student needs annually, especially to ensure that incoming faculty and staff are appropriately trained. One school reported developing a “101” level module that they administer to all new faculty and staff and then rotating through a suite of other trainings from year to year to avoid redundancy. Across the sample, a constant refrain was that, given their close relationships with students, teachers need to be included in PD. Interviewed trainers recommended that PD be differentiated for teachers and administrators, with teachers receiving more student-focused social-emotional content, and administrative training focusing on parent-level enrollment and registration issues.

We were able to overcome that initial [faculty] skepticism of the program...because we had such an intense and specific focus on child needs, that yes, it is to help the whole family, but the teachers role is not going to be ushering the kids through the registration process... Having the teachers focus on child need, that was big buy in for them because we're going to the things that spoke directly to their work.

School Point-of-Contact, Trainer
- **Trainers should simulate the challenges of high-mobility:** Many interviewed trainers highly recommended interactive activities that allowed staff to viscerally experience the challenges of mobility. One interviewee recalled an activity in which she compelled attendees to sit with staff they did not normally interact with and reflect on that experience. In an innovative virtual activity in this vein, a trainer reported sending attendees on a scavenger hunt to find various items around their home in just a minute or two, simulating the stress of locating

necessary supplies after a move. These types of activities make real the emotional impact of mobility and spur empathy that can improve service to children and families.

- **Trainers should customize their instruction for the local military population:** While some standardization of training across states and districts can ensure consistency in messaging, interviewees recommended that PD be customized to the particular military population(s) the school serves. Generalizing broadly can obscure important nuance in the experiences of families connected to different service branches.

You've got to be careful, it's not one size fits, all right? You know, how the Navy lives is different than how the Army lives and the Marines. So you've got to...really watch what you do when you talk in generalities [at a training].

District Liaison

I think the community has also gained awareness. And the community as a whole tends to be, "Oh, we support the military community," but they don't necessarily have a deeper understanding of what that means, or what those challenges look like. So, as we have worked forward as a division, and added in Purple Star status, and its designations and events, we've really tried to work to deepen the community's understanding of what that looks like.

School Counselor



Dedicated Webpage

Designated schools and districts are also required to develop and maintain a dedicated webpage with information and resources for military-connected students and families. Of our four focus states, only Virginia’s initiative articulates a required structure for the dedicated page. That said, in most cases, these sites include some or all of the following items:

- Contact information for the POC and other supportive actors (e.g., SLOs, MFLCs),
- Information or links to resources on transferring and enrollment,
- Links to local and virtual military-specific resources, and
- A calendar of local military recognition events.

State guidance on where the dedicated page should be housed differs somewhat. In both Arkansas and Ohio, the school website itself must include a dedicated page. In North Carolina, the school must also maintain a dedicated page, but it may link to a more robust district-level page. In Virginia, division-level sites, rather than schools’, may house the page.

Benefits of the Dedicated Webpage

The following themes capture the major themes benefits of the dedicated webpage, as articulated by interviewees.

- **The webpage acts as a home base for incoming parents:** Parents report that they often start school research long before relocating and commonly cite an easily-navigable website as a critical resource in easing the stress of a move. The page acts as an important first stop for parents looking for military-specific information on enrollment, academics, extracurriculars, and school culture. And in this way, dedicated pages ease the burden on school staff as well by fielding early questions that might otherwise require back-and-forth email or phone exchanges. Once parents have gleaned basic information from linked resources, the dedicated page makes clear who their point-of-contact should be, helping them avoid the common experience of seemingly endless referrals from one staff member to the next.
- **The webpage signals military friendliness:** Parents often have many choices when selecting schools, especially as the school choice landscape becomes more robust. A welcoming dedicated page for military families — especially when it includes the Purple Star logo and welcoming pictures of military recognition events — is an important opportunity for specialized schools, in particular, to signal military-friendliness. Furthermore, interviewed parents explained that they often “brace themselves” to advocate for their children upon a move because most schools simply do not understand the accommodations required by the Compact. Parents noted that a mention of the Compact on a school website quickly signals that the institution is aware of the challenges of frequent mobility and will be willing to work with military-connected families.

[The families] have that opportunity to go to some of the resources without necessarily having to find me.

Counselor, Point-of-Contact

- **The webpage centralizes resources for families at the school:** School staff highlighted the importance of the website in organizing and centralizing the huge volume of resources available to military families. Though families will almost certainly already be connected with some resources, schools can help highlight local, school-based, and novel supports with which families may be less familiar (e.g., tax support for military spouses; scholarship opportunities, etc.). This may be especially important for newer or younger military families, who may not be as connected with spouse groups and other networks through which resources are often disseminated.

From financial assistance to having your taxes done when your husband's deployed and maybe you haven't done it before, you know, or child support. I mean, there's so much out there, and just making sure our military families know where to find everything. And if they didn't, we have a pretty nice website now with all kinds of links.

Counselor

Challenges Regarding the Dedicated Webpage

Our team's independent audit of dedicated webpages suggests that there is room for improvement on this Purple Star program component in particular.

- **Absence of campus-level dedicated page:** In some cases, designated schools simply do not have a dedicated page for military families. In a review of 429 Purple Star school websites in Arkansas, North Carolina, and Ohio,² our team found that 22 percent of schools did not have a school-level specific page for military families.
- **Inaccessibility:** Generally speaking, school websites tend to be crowded and difficult to navigate, with one school counselor referring to them as “Cheesecake Factory menus.” This can make locating and accessing a dedicated page challenging. In a review of 552 school and district websites across all four focus states, our team found that nearly 20 percent of the pages were difficult to access (i.e., the page was more than two clicks away from the home page) and that another 20 percent were entirely inaccessible (i.e., the dedicated page for military families was absent, non-functioning, or required special access permissions).
- **Incomplete information:** Even when pages are accessible, in some cases, schools are not providing important information to families. Of the 441 schools with accessible dedicated pages, 36 percent did not provide contact information for either a campus- or district-level POC. 39 percent provided contact information for only a district-level POC.

Recommendation for the Dedicated Webpage

The following recommendations highlight best practices for improving and maintaining dedicated websites.

- **Schools and districts should set website maintenance routines:** An up-to-date website is among the most useful tools for any highly mobile parent and has become especially critical during the current COVID-19 health crisis. Schools should consider using the Purple Star application process as an opportunity to (a) audit their website and (b) refine or set regular routines for maintenance.
- **Schools and districts should leverage social media:** For some schools and districts, updating the website may be a complex bureaucratic project, requiring input and approval from various dispersed actors across the system.

² Virginia was excluded from this analysis because the state program does not require a school-level dedicated page.

Instead of listing information that might quickly become out-of-date, schools might consider including links on the dedicated page to more easily updated social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) to capture time-bound information about activities and events.

- **Schools and districts should solicit family feedback:** Of course, the true experts on what should be included on dedicated pages are military families themselves. Schools should regularly solicit feedback from families on the information and resources they have found most relevant and then responsively update the page.
- **States should provide guidance for dedicated pages:** States should consider including in the designation application: (a) a recommended template for dedicated pages, (b) links to model pages, and (c) a list of vetted resources to consider for inclusion on the page. Drawing from the [Virginia DOE PSS requirements](#), recommendations from parents, and findings from our team’s website review, we recommend including the following components on dedicated sites:

- **Purple Star School logo or branding**
- **Contact information**
 - Up-to-date school- and district-level point-of-contact
- **Resources on transferal into and out of the school**
 - A welcome video
 - School calendar
 - Links to summaries of academic information
 - Links to online enrollment and registration resources
 - Transfer checklists and documents
 - Information on extracurriculars
- **Academics**
 - Information on specialized academic programs and application deadlines
 - Special needs resources and points-of-contact
 - Graduation requirements and diploma options
 - Home and online instruction options
 -
- **Resources on the Compact**
 - Links to information on the Compact and accommodations within the district and school
- **Other school-specific resources**
 - Student-Parent feedback surveys
 - Information and points of contact for parent groups (e.g., PTA/PTO)
- **Other military-specific resources**
 - Local support organizations
 - Virtual resources for military families, including links or contacts for local spouse groups
 - College application materials
- **Calendar of military-specific local events**
- **Pictures and artifacts that provide insight into school culture**



Student Transition Programs

Some state programs require designated schools to implement transition programs to help incoming students acclimate to their new community. In middle and high schools, transition programs are often organized as staff-sponsored student clubs,³ through which current students welcome newcomers to the school, showing them to their classes, introducing them to teachers, and eating lunch with them. In elementary schools, transition supports include similar activities but are often staff-directed, with students playing an auxiliary role.

Of the Purple Star program components, student transition programs are the rarest requirement both broadly and among the four focus states, with only North Carolina and Virginia requiring programming. Still, research suggests that student transition programs are among the most impactful social-emotional supports for highly mobile students.

Benefits of Student Transition Programs

Though student transition clubs are the least common component — only 49 percent of surveyed schools report having a program — parents and students report that they are extremely beneficial when in place. Stakeholders described several key benefits, outlined below.

- **Transition programs help new students acclimate:**

Students, parents, and school and district staff all noted the importance of the support and guidance of peer buddies when arriving at a new school. A welcoming face helps ease the stress of joining a new community and makes kids feel like “somebody has [their] back.” School staff report that transition programs are especially effective when they match incoming students with military-connected peers; the similarities in experiences often spur excitement and pride, and can make the process of making friends more natural.

You have a friend to help you and then that helps you develop confidence, and the feeling that somebody has your back. So if you need help, you can ask them.

Student

- **Transition programs spur ongoing connections in the school and broader community:** The impact of student transition programs are far-reaching and continue long after a student has assimilated into the school. A number of staff interviewees noted that student transition programs had propelled the development of other military-specific clubs and lunch groups, linking students to ongoing support networks. Often, these clubs engage in service projects for veterans and active-duty service-members, benefitting the broader military community. And, of course, when kids become friends, their parents often do too, providing a parallel supportive benefit to adults who are new to the community.

We invited current military students to welcome the new students. And that was very well received. And then out of that grew a more regular group, a monthly lunch for military students.

Counselor

³ For example, [MCEC's Student 2 Student®](#) or [Junior Student to Student®](#) programs

- **Transition programs develop student leadership skills:** Peer-to-peer programs create leadership opportunities for students who choose to or are selected to participate as buddies or ambassadors. These students — who often understand participation as an honor — have a chance to hone their leadership skills by acting as a guide for new students and helping design and execute welcome programs. One school mentioned regularly rotating student ambassadors so that more children had the opportunity to build their leadership skills.

Challenges of Enacting Student Transition Programs

Though a transition program is incredibly effective when executed well, schools report that it is the most challenging program component to administer.

- **Commitment from staff:** To be successful, transition programs must be led by a passionate staff member with the time and expertise to manage complex student relationships. This type of commitment can be difficult to maintain in schools where staff and faculty already serve many functions and manage many responsibilities.
- **Dependence on student participation:** Student transition programs are sometimes challenging to maintain given dependency on the willingness, interest, and availability of student participants. In some cases, staff reported that student interest in attending meetings waned over the course of the year or that different groups of students attended club meetings from week to week, making it challenging to build a truly cohesive community. Further, because the intended constituency of the group is highly mobile students, it is common that students transition out of the group as they move.
- **Planning during a pandemic:** The challenges presented by in-person, hybrid, and remote learning environments in a global pandemic — during which schools and their staffs have been enormously overburdened — have put the planning for many new transition programs on hold. Some schools report experimenting with virtual programming to welcome new students, but this practice is not widespread and competes with other adjustments necessitated by the health crisis.

Recommendations for Student Transition Programs

Though enacting student transition programming can be challenging, the social-emotional benefits to military-connected students and families far outweigh the logistical burden. As such, we strongly recommend that student-led transition programs be included in state-level Purple Star requirements. The following recommendations from stakeholders may help facilitate new and improve existing transition programs in schools.

- **Keep it simple:** While the implementation of a transition program can seem overwhelming, for the most part, incoming students just want the opportunity to connect with other students and staff. The most effective programming is often as simple as hosting an afterschool movie party or lunchtime discussion group.
- **Empower students to guide programming:** Encouraging the students themselves to determine which supports and activities would be most helpful — and fun! — can ensure that groups are relevant and engaging. Interviewees report that letting students take the lead helps develop leadership and advocacy skills and relieves some of the pressure on staff facilitators.

- **Capitalize on the opportunities of the virtual space:**

Though organizing transition programming during a pandemic is challenging, it is perhaps more important now than it has ever been: military-connected students report that it has been especially difficult to make friends after a PCS into hybrid or distance learning environments. Maintaining welcome and transition programming for incoming students to connect with peers is critical. Even informal activities that are not specifically branded as “new-student programming” (e.g., academic and extracurricular-themed lunch meetings) can help new students connect with peers. And one exciting emergent benefit of movement to the online space is the opportunity for students to stay connected with students and staff from their previous school(s) after a PCS by attending meetings virtually.

We started with the middle school kids, and those are our leaders..And then we included some of the younger kids as part of the team just to represent the community. And then we develop the Military Kids Club, and the Student Transition Team kind of runs the club. So they're the leaders, they bring up the topics, what do you want to talk about, what kind of fun activities do you want to do?

Counselor

- **Encourage POCs to lead transition clubs:** As possible, schools should consider assigning the POC and transition support roles to a single staff member. Having one point person leading military-connected support efforts can streamline services and ensure the continuity of military-specific programming.

- **Train student ambassadors:** Incoming students often develop closer relationships with ambassadors or buddies than they do with staff. As such, it is important that ambassadors have both an awareness of the challenges faced by military-connected students and tangible skills to help address concerns or, when necessary, escalate them to staff. Similarly, it is important that ambassadors be deeply connected to and knowledgeable about the school, so they can readily field questions about culture, extracurriculars, and available supports.

They can ask all their questions without adult interference...kids are gonna learn better from kids sometimes than they learn from adults.

School Leader

To train students, administrators of the program might consider drawing from existing student training modules on peer support or adapting staff PD materials.

- **Pair welcome ambassadors and encourage ongoing relationships:**

Several schools recommended connecting incoming students with two student ambassadors, instead of just one, to increase the likelihood that the incoming student will find someone they truly connect with. Schools have also found it helpful to extend buddy relationships beyond the initial welcome week, establishing a formal check-in routine for several weeks or longer.

Students really value the student group. So that's my main function is just to get them together to know each other. So when they see each other in the hallway, or if they want to message each other in our messaging system, they can do that. That's the first part and that of course links the families together too.

Counselor

- **Find ways to include parents in welcome programming:**

Finding avenues to include parents in welcome programming can help spur deeper community connections for families. Informal, low-stakes weekly coffee sessions or virtual hangouts can help new parents connect with each other and get more involved in the school.



Military Recognition Events

A final core component of the Purple Star program is hosting events that recognize military families for their contributions and sacrifice. Common events include programming for military holidays (e.g., Veterans Day, Flag Day, Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day) and recognition of the Month of the Military Child.

While all four focus programs include recognition events as one of several options from which schools can pick to earn Purple Star designation, our data suggest that nearly all designated schools hold military recognition events. The programs in Arkansas, Ohio, and Virginia ask schools that select the event option to host at least one annually, though many schools go above and beyond this expectation. In contrast, the North Carolina program presents schools with a list of military-friendly options, including a military recognition event, a Military Child of the Year nomination, or a support project connecting the school with the military community at large.

Benefits of Military Recognition Events

School staff reported that recognition events are positively received by families. And though 88 percent of schools had events in place before earning the designation, codifying those events on the Purple Star application reportedly motivated schools “do them bigger and better.” The following benefits of events emerged as major themes.

- **Recognition events honor and increase awareness of MC students and families:**

Military recognition events give schools the opportunity to create a welcoming environment for families by publicly honoring and recognizing active duty, reserve, and retired military personnel and families. Parents and students — and especially younger children — report that recognition events make them feel welcomed, honored, and included within the community. Highly mobile kids especially appreciate that events give them the opportunity to share more about the military lifestyle with their peers.

[Events] create a physical presence in the school and [they] let the military kids feel as if this is important. They feel like they're in good company and they don't feel isolated.

Parent

- **Recognition events offer opportunities for integration into the community:** When families move, it can be difficult to find ways to organically integrate into the community. School-sponsored events provide an easy opportunity to meet other families, parents, and students in a safe and fun environment.

- **Recognition events highlight military-connected staff and faculty:** Schools often employ veteran and reserve military personnel, especially in communities located near major installations. Military recognition events give schools the opportunity to not only recognize and honor staff service members, but also connect those staff members with military families at the school.

It's pretty cool because people are telling each other about stories of military lives. And...it's really cool to pass that on because...military life is super awesome and it's an adventurous life and you're...letting other people know that it's not just this thing...that these kids should be ostracized for...They're supporting their dads or moms or whoever's in the military.

Student

Challenges of Military Recognition Events

Our data suggest several minor challenges related to implementing events.

- **Finding balance at schools with smaller populations:** Schools with smaller military populations have sometimes struggled to find balance between effectively recognizing military students without unnecessarily putting them in the spotlight.
- **COVID-19 adaptations:** Many schools noted that implementing military recognition events has been challenging during the pandemic, both logistically and due to competing pressing demands on both school staff and family time. While this challenge has led some schools to abstain from programming altogether, others schools have experimented with online events and recognition programs, though many report that they have struggled to make those events feel as engaging or meaningful for families.

Recommendations for Military Recognition Events

Recognition events contribute to a military-friendly school environment and are worth the investment of effort for schools, districts, and communities. The following best practices and recommendations for events emerged from data collection.

- **Use various modalities to include all community members:** Large-scale recognition events can be overwhelming for the children and families who prefer not to be the center of attention. Varying the types of programming used to honor military families and pairing more public events (e.g., parades, performances, and recognition at sporting events) with more intimate activities (e.g., shared meals, videos, career days, poster displays, decorations) can make more space for all personal preferences.
- **Recognize all members of the community:** Schools should endeavor to recognize the contributions and sacrifices of not only active-duty personnel, but also National Guard and Reserve personnel, veterans, and military-connected students and spouses.
- **Highlight contributions, not just sacrifice:** The best events honor not only the sacrifices made by military-connected families but also celebrate their contributions and the “adventurous,” positive aspects of the military lifestyle. Giving students and families the chance to share their own stories can ensure that the military experience is represented in a holistic, respectful way.

Having those opportunities for students to see that they're not alone, that there are other kiddos who are from military families, and then that they really connect and have friendships, and understand the frequent moving...just connecting those kids, it's a big, big part of all of this.

School Counselor

CONNECTING THEMES

While each Purple Star component has, on its own, spurred unique benefits for students, families, schools, and districts, [it is the intersection of these requirements that reveals the greater promise of the program](#). The following section outlines three themes that demonstrate the potential for Purple Star programming to have a significant and ongoing impact on military-connected students and families, schools, and districts.



Centralizing Knowledge



Developing Networks



Cultivating and Communicating Cultural Competency

Centralizing Knowledge

Purple Star programming helps schools and districts aggregate and centralize knowledge so that critical information is easily accessible to students, families, and school and district faculty and staff.

First and foremost, the Purple Star program assists schools in streamlining access to information for students and families. While many Purple Star designees have long offered supports for military-connected families, the application process itself prompts schools to consolidate diffuse programming and tacit institutional knowledge into a unified suite of resources and supports. By streamlining access through a trained point of contact and dedicated webpage, schools ensure that military-connected students and families know exactly to whom and where to turn for help. This can be especially important for younger military families and those relocating from other states and countries, who may not yet have developed connections to the local support networks that can help illuminate the nuances of local systems.

If I saw that designation, I would immediately think, “Phew, I don’t have to explain from square one.” It would signify that they understand the MIC3, that my situation may not be cookie cutter.

Parent

The effort to centralize and streamline access to knowledge is even more potent when the Purple Star designation effort includes not just school representatives, but district ones as well. The application process can offer the central administrations an opportunity to take stock of, align, and centrally codify information about military-specific policies across the district. With that information in hand, a specialized central office point of contact and website can simplify the process of school selection and enrollment by acting as a knowledge bank for incoming parents, and especially those with children enrolling children in different schools.

Staff and faculty benefit from the institutional organization of knowledge and resources in much the same way that parents do. Even accounting for efforts to improve and expand PD opportunities, it is unrealistic to expect that every staff or faculty member will or can be an expert on military populations, policies, and resources. Our data suggest that Purple Star school and district points of contact function as knowledge hubs for faculty and staff, efficiently directing them to the (a) information, (b) supportive staff (e.g., MFLCs, counselors, social workers), and (c) programming (e.g., peer transition groups, lunch bunch) that can help mitigate emergent student issues. Similarly, the best dedicated webpages help staff access aggregated, vetted military-specific resources (e.g., community support groups, tutoring) and opportunities (e.g., scholarships).

Finally, the most effective Purple Star schools and districts go a step beyond centralizing school- and district-specific resources and act as a gateway to the larger community. Schools are often a community's home base and are thus well-positioned to connect students and parents to the activities and groups that help them feel at home. Suggesting a local orchestra, gymnastics club, or Little League organization; pointing new families to the popular local college football game; or helping connect parents to a religious community or advocacy group; these small steps make families feel welcomed. When the functional supports required by the Purple Star program are representative of a broader ethos of care, schools can do much more than meet military-connected students' and families' basic needs.

There's so much more to the educational experience than just what happens in that public school. It's...investing in the community, in the clubs they're in...An administrator could create just a list of resources for new families to the area — hey, if your child does gymnastics, here's all the studios, clubs. Just compiling those, because when you are moving as a military family, especially with kids who have different interests, I mean, it is days and days and days of research, just to figure out how to get back to baseline.

Parent

Developing Networks

We've been out and around enough, I think, walking in the Fourth of July parade. Two years ago, we carried our big banner that said, "We are Purple Star" and kids wore their shirts. And we had many of the parents walk with us, too...I think so many people started asking questions at that point. And, you know, being a small town, they could recognize the families, and then they all started talking to one another...They're like, we want to help. We want to we want to help take care of your students and your families. What can we do?

We're Purple Star and our town is proud of it.

Counselor

The Purple Star program also has enormous potential to create a robust network of local, state, and national stakeholders. In just a few years, the program has already spurred the development of a number of local and regional networks, and there is ample opportunity to formalize and scale these efforts as the initiative grows nationally.

The Purple Star program has helped unite previously siloed cohorts of passionate advocates in schools and communities around the common purpose of improving the lives of military-connected students and families. Many interviewees noted that the application process, professional development opportunities, and events have helped make military-connected staff, students, families, colleagues, and community members more visible to one another, organically strengthening and growing local support networks.

At the student level, students, families, and staff have cited strengthened social networks as an essential outcome of the program. Frequent moves can be extremely isolating for children, but Purple Star programming like transition clubs fosters opportunities to connect with other students from both military and civilian backgrounds. These peer networks are essential to helping children feel welcomed and included in their school community. And in the last

If you walk into a military meeting and you see somebody else, your first thought...is, "Oh, they're another military kid like me."...There is so much more of a bridge and a connection that gets built there because you walk in there and, as I said before, it's your stress reliever for the day. I can talk to these people, and it's not, "How many ways we are different?" that's walking through [your mind]. The first thing you think is okay, like, how are we the same?

Student

decade, social media and smart phones have made it increasingly possible for students to maintain these relationships virtually as they move from school to school; parents often noted that their children have begun developing and maintaining networks of friends around the world. Purple Star supports help build the first connections that blossom into enduring and sustaining friendships.

More broadly, the designation itself lays the groundwork for effective practitioner networks among schools in different communities and even different states. Both locally and regionally, the Purple Star award has already given schools and districts a banner under which to connect informally, share resources, and improve collectively. In several states, state, regional, and district staff have begun using virtual platforms to link designated schools with those applying for the program. These links build connections that continue beyond the application process into PD

supports and other programs. These cross-school networking opportunities can be particularly critical for designees with less mature programs who may benefit from opportunities to collaborate with and learn from more veteran schools.

There is a real opportunity to formalize these emergent networks at the state and national level and amplify their impact. Already, founders, advocates, and administrators of state-level programs have developed informal networks, offering each other advice on the design and implementation of the initiative. There is fertile ground for these leadership-level connections to inform a broader, national network of Purple Star schools. The prospect of such a network is exciting; though schools in different states will never offer identical programming, a collaborative that helps better align offerings nationally could help operationalize the consistency in transition the Compact seeks to provide for military-connected families.

[The most important benefit of the Purple Star program is] just the sheer fact that it will connect people together. So people that are interested in helping military families, families that are looking for some type of sign that they can get help or that somebody understands what they're going through, connecting military youths together, connecting buildings with other buildings...We're just connecting people to each other...And that's how we can give back to those military families.

Counselor

Cultivating and Communicating Cultural Competency

Cultivating Competency

While many elements of the program have helped schools develop greater cultural competency, professional development for school personnel has emerged as the biggest game-changer in this regard. Training has demonstrably shifted the way school staff and faculty conceive of and address the challenges faced by military-connected children, building empathy and providing concrete resources to help accommodate student needs. In particular, staff note that professional development has helped familiarize more staff with the Compact and, accordingly, has prompted more flexibility during the transition and enrollment process. The impact of increasing the number of staff who are well-informed, sensitive to the needs of military students, and willing to go the extra mile to support them has been among the greatest benefits to families in Purple Star schools.

We want the staff and the people to understand this is really tough...very unique situation. But then there's also resources available...It just connects people and reassures for a small minority population that we understand what they are going through. We have people here to support you and if we don't have answers, we will find someone.

Counselor

Staff seem to be a little more sensitive to the needs of being a military kid...This [student] had moved three times in the last three years. So his transcript was all over the place, but we were able to make it work...I wonder if that would have been the same response had [staff] not already been exposed to some of the challenges that military kids deal with...

District Military Liaison

Beyond these core trainings, other elements of the program contribute to cultivating increased cultural competency in schools. Working with families directly through the point-of-contact role or as the staff sponsor of a school transition club has helped staff and faculty build reciprocal relationships with kids and families that help improve their practice over time. And ongoing public events and programming help to continuously foreground the contributions and sacrifices made by military students and their families, sparking empathy and understanding.

Communicating Competency

The Purple Star program also offers schools the opportunity to demonstrate their cultural fluency to parents and families. In many cases, schools reported that they have, for years, endeavored to develop and improve programming and foster an inclusive climate for military-connected students and families. For these and all Purple Star schools the designation itself serves as a badge of honor that recognizes that effort and signals to incoming families that they will be welcomed and well-supported.

Schools have taken advantage of many opportunities to publicize their Purple Star status, from posting the award logo on the school website and social media channels, to advocating for its inclusion on state-level report cards, to hanging the award banner publicly and marching with it in local parades. These efforts all help build community

The benefit is bragging rights for schools, bragging rights for the district. And when parents go on the website, and they start researching the schools here...it's good for them to see that they have that Purple Star designation.

District-level Liaison

recognition of the program and publicize that the school is military-friendly, an opportunity that is especially beneficial for non-traditional schools (e.g., private institutions, charter schools) that have to recruit families.

As the program scales nationally, there is great opportunity to amplify the reach of this recognition and, in so doing, provide families with a helpful guidepost as they select schools. Though academic performance and extracurricular availability are the criteria military-connected parents report using most often to

select schools, many parents noted that a Purple Star designation would be a factor they would consider, especially for elementary and middle schools. A common theme was that parents felt it would be a relief to know that a school was culturally fluent and ready to meet their needs.

Still, overwhelmingly, schools and parents report that recognition of the Purple Star brand among families remains low. Further efforts to scale the program to more states and to publicize the designation will be key to growing awareness.

Leveraging a Purple Star school's local parent networks will also be critical, as one of the sources of information cited most often by parents was local military-spouse clubs and parent groups.

In these early years of the program, as the program is still establishing its brand, it is critical that Purple Star schools maintain high-quality programming. The most critical actions schools can take to demonstrate that they are culturally competent and worthy of the award are to build sincere relationships with students and families, work diligently to accommodate their needs, and strive to incorporate family feedback to continuously improve programming. Though most families who had attend designated schools were quite satisfied with school offerings, in several cases negative experiences significantly colored parents' perception of the Purple Star program overall. If the designation is seen as simply "checking a box," it will lose its value before it meaningfully gets off the ground.

It would be a really big deal [to have the Purple Star program in my state] and an easy way for families to distinguish the schools that are military friendly. Because you're so overwhelmed when you move ...You have to make so many decisions so fast based on so little information with such big consequences that anything to be like a little beacon is a wonderful thing.

Parent

I would choose to be Purple Star because it's a constant reminder to be motivated, to do more and to think of new ways to serve the military population and the students...We want to continue to earn it. We feel honored that we have it. So it keeps us motivated. It keeps us accountable. It keeps us on our toes.

School Registrar

MEASURABLE IMPACT TO DATE

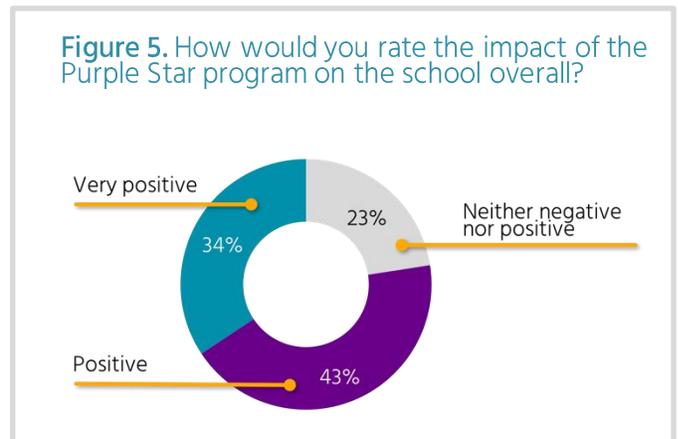
It is early yet to expect a rigorous study on this new program’s efficacy. At this point, therefore, states, districts, and schools are primarily assessing the impact of the Purple Star designation and programming anecdotally. To begin filling the impact data gap, our team developed and administered surveys to assess the perceived effect of the program from the perspective of both schools and families.

Schools

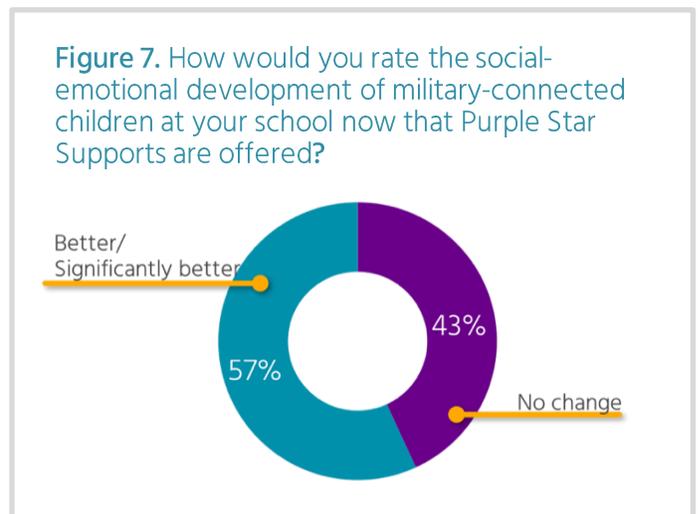
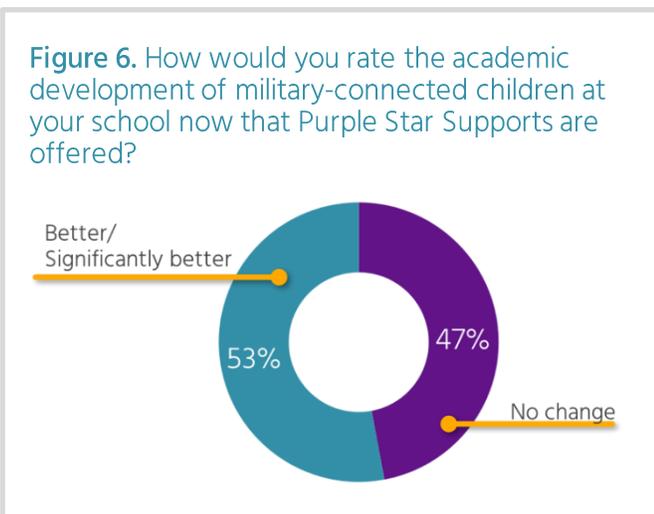
The results in this section are based on 102 responses to a survey of staff and faculty members at Purple Star - designated schools from all four focus states.

Findings

Broadly speaking, school staff survey respondents report that the Purple Star designation and related programming has been beneficial. Seventy-seven percent of schools report that the program has had a “positive” or “very positive” impact on the school overall (see Figure 5), with no schools reporting a “negative” or “very negative” outcome. Further, 77 percent observe that the program has specifically helped improve their relationships with military-connected families, again with no schools reporting a negative impact.



And despite being a very new initiative, a majority of schools also report that Purple Star programming has already had a beneficial social-emotional and academic impact on students. Fifty-seven percent and 53 percent of schools link an improvement in their students’ social-emotional development (see Figure 6) and academic experience (see Figure 7) to Purple Star programming, with no schools reporting a detrimental impact. Though a close to half of respondents noted no change, this is likely partially attributable to the fact that many schools had Purple Star - required programming in place before earning the designation.



Families

The following findings are based on two parallel surveys, one aimed at parents and the other at students. The parent survey was completed by 59 parents, 22 of whom had children who attended a Purple Star school. Notably, of the Purple Star subgroup, Virginia parents make up over half of respondents. The student survey was completed by 28 students, 26 of whom had attended a Purple Star school. Again, survey responses are skewed towards one state, with a majority of student respondents reporting from North Carolina.

[The Purple Star program] has made this move the smoothest one yet. We had to move 2 times in 12 months and she attended 3 different schools at one point. Having a school that understands this unique life makes it that much easier on the family unit as a whole.

Parent

The results of both surveys offer a compelling window into the perceived impact of the program. Given the relatively small sample size of the parent and student surveys, however, results should be interpreted and generalized with caution.

Findings

Broadly speaking, a majority of families reported having better experiences at Purple Star schools than at non-designated institutions. Fifty-seven percent of parents and 50 percent of students noted that their experience at a designated school had been better than their experiences at non-designated institutions. This result is particularly notable in light of the fact that many families were reporting on Purple Star schools that they had only attended remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Parents also reported that Purple Star programming had a positive social-emotional impact on their children. Of particular interest is the notable difference between parents whose children had attended a Purple Star school and those who had not: 77 percent of parents in Purple Star schools were satisfied with their children's social-emotional experience, compared to just 54 percent of their peers in non-designated schools (see Figure 8). This result is echoed in the student data: 61 percent of students reported that they felt welcomed when they first started attending their Purple Star school. These results suggest that designated schools are offering strong social-emotional support.

Figure 8. How would you rate your child's social-emotional experience at their school?

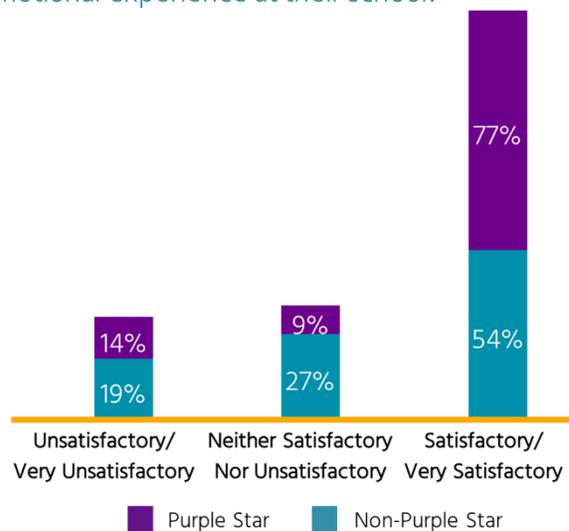
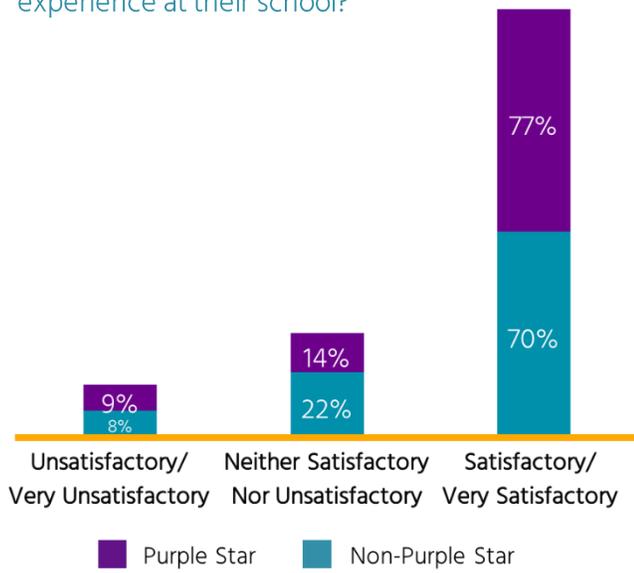


Figure 9. How would you rate your child’s academic experience at their school?



On the other hand, parents reported relatively similar levels of satisfaction with their children’s academic experiences at designated and non-designated schools, with 77 percent of Purple Star and 70 percent of non-Purple Star parents reporting positive experiences (see Figure 9). Though these results are generally good news for the academic experiences of military-connected students, the results suggest that Purple Star programming has a greater social-emotional impact than it does academic. This is not unexpected, given the strong focus of the program on social-emotional support, but suggests that an academic component — like that of Georgia’s Purple Star equivalent, the Military Flagship Schools program — could help further differentiate Purple Star schools from their non-designated counterparts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From scratch and with limited resources, the four states in our sample developed innovative accreditation programs that have quickly spurred benefits for districts, schools, and the military-connected students and families they serve. As these programs mature and similar initiatives proliferate nationally, this study offers an opportunity to engage in formative reflection with an eye toward improvement for these four focus programs as well as those developing in other states. The following summarize the recommendations alluded to throughout this report, capturing some of the learnings and insights from the first several years of Purple Star implementation.

Recommendations For States or Other Designation-Granting Agencies

- **Build recognition of the Purple Star brand:** The Purple Star program is still quite young, and state-level implementation efforts thus far have coalesced around honing the application process and publicizing the program to prospective districts and schools. With programs now firmly in place, an important next step will be increasing brand visibility with military-connected families. In the longer term, the expansion of the Purple Star program to additional states will organically support this effort, but more immediately, states should leverage existing networks (e.g., spouse clubs, online communities) to advertise program benefits. Further, acknowledging designated schools in school report cards, directories, universal enrollment portals and other school-search tools families commonly use will support increased awareness.
- **Ensure that designees enact program components with reasonable fidelity:** Though most families reported having positive experiences at Purple Star schools, it is clear that negative incidents at designated institutions — as with any program — can strongly affect perceptions of the program on the whole. Rigorously assessing both new and renewal applicants to ensure fidelity to required programmatic components will be critical to developing and maintaining a positive reputation for the Purple Star brand.
- **Provide models for core components:** States should provide exemplar application materials (e.g., links to webpages, example PD agendas and materials, etc.) on the application portal. These models both clarify expectations around program components and inspire improvements in programming.
- **Provide feedback to applicant schools that miss the mark:** A key benefit of Purple Star programs is their potential to support improvements at schools and districts that may not already have robust programming in place. Some focus states have elected to offer feedback to unsuccessful applicants, such that those schools can make improvements and reapply with more success the following year. For borderline applications, states might also consider providing prompt feedback and allowing resubmission within the same granting period so the school does not miss out on being designated for that year.
- **Develop measurement systems to evaluate Purple Star impact:** Currently, most states assess the impact of their programs anecdotally. To better understand, improve, and amplify the impact of programs, states should articulate explicit measures of success and develop systems to collect and analyze data on progress toward those goals. For example, states might consider making a standard yearly survey for staff and military-connected students and families a requirement of continued designation. It is critical that such systems be feasible to implement with state resources and bandwidth: a system is only useful if it is used.

- **Invite district-level applications:** District-level coordination of school applications can help streamline the application process, entice more schools to seek designation, and align supports across the district. Allowing and providing incentives for district-driven applications — like simplified application processes, extended application periods, and specialized district-level awards — would help extend the reach and impact of the program.
- **Encourage non-traditional schools to apply:** Purple Star recognition provides a particular benefit to specialized schools seeking to attract families, as the PS stamp of approval and inclusion in lists of recommended schools helps publicize and validate these institutions. States should allow and encourage private, parochial, vocational, and charter schools to seek designation.
- **Leverage the program to establish formal practitioner networks:** Purple Star programs naturally lay the groundwork for formalized practitioner networks that can help proliferate effective practices and learnings. States can easily capitalize on this opportunity by linking applicants to straightforward virtual networking tools (e.g., listservs, Slack channels, Facebook groups) and incentivizing their use. Further, facilitating semi-annual virtual Purple Star networking convenings from the state level could invite further innovation and collaboration, while providing a venue for responsive adaptation to unpredictable emergent challenges, like those raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

States that are newly initiating programming might also consider the following additional recommendations.

- **Draw on existing expertise:** When establishing a new Purple Star program, draw on the expertise of both program leads in other states and program sponsors like MCEC. State-level interviewees consistently emphasized the value of connecting with and learning from their peers in other states as they developed their programs. Similarly, MCEC offers a [suite of resources](#) and personalized support for states, districts, or other entities considering initiating programs.
- **Engage stakeholders:** To ensure that the designation process and program components are feasible for schools and districts and aligned with the priorities of students and families, states should frequently consult with stakeholders during the program design phase. For example, states would benefit from working closely with district- and school-level staff to determine the optimal application platform and submission dates. Similarly, states should connect with parents to help hone programmatic requirements and ensure that they are relevant and helpful.
- **Weight the benefits of “certifying” versus “awarding” schools:** While all four states in our sample have treated the Purple Star as a certification — granting the designation to any schools that fulfill program criteria — there are other ways to conceptualize the program. Georgia’s Military Flagship Program has opted to treat the designation as an award, assessing applications against a rubric and granting the honor to only the top scoring schools. Both approaches have advantages and limitations, and states should determine which approach may be most appropriate for their local context.
 - **Certification** opens the opportunity for more schools to participate and improve their offerings, touching the lives of more children and families. But this approach also allows for greater variation in the strength of programming across schools, which may affect family perceptions of the quality of the program overall. Logistically, a certification process is also likely to require an increasingly

greater commitment of time and manpower from the state granting agency as the program matures, gains popularity, and sees an increase in the total volume of first-time and re-designation applicants.

- Treating the designation as an **award** allows the state to set an even higher bar for what a military-friendly school should look like, and may require fewer state resources to administer than certification. On the other hand, an award-based designation may discourage schools with less robust programming from considering participating in the application process, preventing the exciting expansion of Purple Star supports to a larger cohort of schools.

Recommendations For Schools and Districts

- **Establish collaborative Purple Star working groups:** Purple Star programming is most effective when a broad and diverse coalition of staff actors are mobilized behind it. Many interviewees recommended forming a team to complete the designation application, plan and enact programming and events, and publicize the initiative to families, staff, and faculty.
- **Designate both district- and school-level points-of-contact:** Interviewees frequently highlighted the benefits of designating military-specific points-of-contact at both the school- and district-levels. Distributing responsibility can ease the burden on staff members and ensure that all military families are receiving the time and attention they deserve. More specifically, the district-level staff person is a huge value add for incoming families with children of different ages by providing an initial, central touchpoint to help navigate the research and enrollment processes at various schools in the district. Finally, having several representatives can help mitigate any gaps in service due to staff turnover.
- **Train all staff, regardless of state-level requirements:** All school staff and faculty should regularly participate in professional development that increases awareness of the unique needs of military-connected students and families. Interviewees particularly noted the importance of annual training that is differentiated for administrators and teachers and tailored to the unique military population at the school.
- **Implement student-led transition programs:** Though many states do not require student-led transition programs to earn the designation, students, parents, and staff noted how critical such initiatives were to fostering a welcoming environment for new students, military and civilian alike. Establishing programming requires a significant initial investment from staff but has an outsized impact on children. And allowing student voices to guide the design and execution of the club can help build student leadership skills while ensuring that programming maintains relevance.
- **Involve students and families in program development:** Those actors closest to problems are often best prepared to address them. As such, military-connected students and families are well-positioned to provide valuable context as schools develop and improve supports, especially when schools “don’t know what they don’t know.” Establishing routines to regularly collect, analyze, and responsively adapt programming in response to feedback not only enhances school offerings but also makes families feel heard and valued.
- **Compensate or reduce other workload for staff taking on additional responsibility:** Much Purple Star programming — and especially the POC requirement — can be time and energy intensive for already

overburdened staff. Providing compensation or otherwise reducing workload for those taking on these tasks can help ensure that staff are able to fulfill their responsibilities.

- **Include other highly mobile populations in programming:** Military-connected students are often just one of many highly mobile populations in school communities. To make the best use of often limited resources, schools should consider how Purple Star supports might be designed or adapted to be inclusive of other highly mobile populations. For example, some schools in our sample have extended professional development opportunities such that they cover the overlapping and differentiated needs of other mobile populations. Interviewed staff also highlighted the opportunity to open student transition clubs to all incoming students.
- **Honor all identities:** Being military-connected is just one of many identities that students bring to schools. Our data suggest that race, national origin, home language, and religious affiliation can significantly affect military-connected families' experiences in a new community. Racism and other forms of discrimination compound the challenges of mobility and make it difficult for families to ever feel truly at home, even when a school is exceptionally military-friendly. Schools must work to confront and root out all forms of prejudice if they are to ensure that all military-connected students and families are treated with dignity and respect.

CLOSING

Our investigation into the Purple Star program found a well-designed, galvanizing effort that has already reaped benefits for students, families, schools, districts, and communities. The five recommended pillars of the program coalesce to empower stakeholders through the centralization of resources, development of networks, and cultivation and communication of cultural competency. By addressing common issues in communication during transition, creating social-emotional safety nets for students, and generally raising awareness of the unique challenges of the highly mobile military lifestyle, the Purple Star School Designation Program provides a roadmap to building a more inclusive educational landscape for military-connected students.

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