

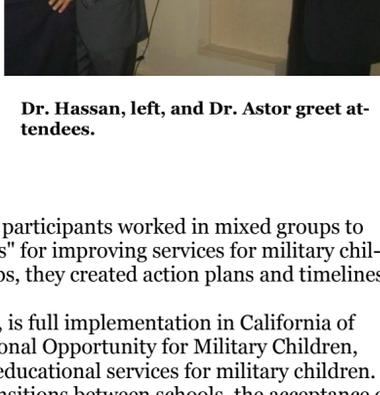
Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools

Leaders and VIPs from Seven Sectors Across Society Create Blueprint for Supporting Military Children in California

Over 100 civilian and military-connected VIPs from community organizations, CEOs, superintendents, school board presidents, college deans, religious leaders and senior military officers from across California gathered at USC last week to create the first statewide plan to support military children.

The California Public Engagement was jointly organized by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the *Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools* project at USC and the USC Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR) in order to bring together decision makers to identify future directions in services for military children and influence policy at the state and national levels.

"What is done here in California should spread to all states," said Dr. Ron Astor, who leads the Building Capacity project and co-chaired the California Engagement steering committee with Dr. Anthony Hassan, the director of CIR.



Dr. Hassan, left, and Dr. Astor greet attendees.

Forming Action Plans

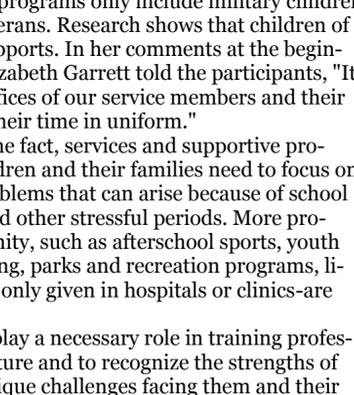
During the morning session, the participants worked in mixed groups to brainstorm "strategic opportunities" for improving services for military children. Then working in sector groups, they created action plans and timelines for implementing them.

One top priority, Dr. Astor said, is full implementation in California of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which seeks to remove barriers in educational services for military children. This Compact includes smooth transitions between schools, the acceptance of academic courses from different states, support for participation in varsity athletics despite residency requirements, and honoring military families. This is a nationwide effort that currently involves over 40 states.

Rich Riegel, the coordinator of student services for the Orange County Office of Education, agreed, saying, "Even though [California has signed the compact], it's not well implemented," he said.

A number of strong themes emerged throughout the day as the participants discussed how to better support military children in schools.

- A data and tracking system is needed statewide for identifying where military children are attending school, including the children of National Guard and Reserve families. Currently, many school districts and agencies are not aware that they have military children in their region. Many do not know which schools they attend and how many students attend each school.
- Any such system also needs to include the school-age children of veterans, considering the winding down of America's involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. California, in fact, is receiving more returning military service members and veterans than any other state, which increases the state's challenge to provide adequate services to them and their families. Currently, many educational support programs only include military children and do not include children of veterans. Research shows that children of veterans also need educational supports. In her comments at the beginning of the event, USC Provost Elizabeth Garrett told the participants, "It is crucial that we respect the sacrifices of our service members and their families before, during and after their time in uniform."
- Instead of only responding after the fact, services and supportive programs for military-connected children and their families need to focus on preventing the difficulties and problems that can arise because of school changes, parental deployments and other stressful periods. More programs integrated into the community, such as afterschool sports, youth groups, religious programs, tutoring, parks and recreation programs, library programs-rather than those only given in hospitals or clinics-are needed.
- It's clear that universities should play a necessary role in training professionals to understand military culture and to recognize the strengths of military children as well as the unique challenges facing them and their families. Currently, few universities see military families as a diversity group. Few have service-learning programs reaching out to military children, training at the pre-service level, or research efforts designed to provide support for military students. It's important for this mission to be adopted throughout the University of California and California State University (CSU) systems. Required training for all teachers, administrators, and student support personnel before they enter the workplace is necessary, Astor says. Currently, few teacher-training programs even mention how war and multiple transitions affect military children, and few provide specific strategies for supporting military students in the classroom.



MCEC facilitator Dr. Dave Splittek leads a group discussion.

Setting an Example

The day's events reaffirmed efforts that already exist in the state that could serve as models both for universities and for school districts. For example, many of recommendations made, such as training social workers and teachers and other school personnel, and improving school culture for military families, are central components of the work done by CIR, the *Building Capacity* project, military school liaison officers and military base programs. Many attendees at the event also noted that the state is already rich in resources and programs designed for military children. The challenge, they say, is better coordinating and promoting them across counties, regions and the state.

The *Building Capacity* team was also instrumental in working with the California Department of Education to add a question in the California Healthy Kids Survey asking all students if they have a parent or caregiver in the military. Now, all 10,000 schools in California who participate in the CHKS will have a rough estimate of how many military students they have in school.

"That is really cutting edge," said Sandy Franklin from MCEC. "I am so glad to hear that because I'm definitely going to use that as an example to other states."

Dr. Marilyn Flynn, professor and dean of the USC School of Social Work, noted that because of advancements in research, the state is in a strong position to make sure "no one is lost in the transition from service member to civilian. We have an opportunity to do this better than anyone since World War II."

'A Sense of Urgency'

Patty Shinseki, a board member for MCEC and the wife of U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, described the action plans as "do-able."

"There is a sense of urgency here in California," she said.

Dr. Astor added that because the participants are all influential leaders in their organizations and fields, the potential that these action plans will be implemented is strong. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District board President Monica Garcia said she would call for a resolution recognizing military children in the district. Leaders in the CSU system said they would work to include training for teachers in their bachelor and master's programs statewide. And Brigadier General Vincent Coglianese, the commanding general of Marine Corps Installations-West invited members of the event to visit Camp Pendleton and observe model programs and resources that could be emulated elsewhere.

"Each participant," Dr. Astor said, "has the ability to impact hundreds, even thousands of kids. Together, nationally, this could affect millions of students who have parents in the military or who are veterans."

Shannon Milder, the regional school liaison officer for the Navy Region Southwest, described the event as a "think tank" focused on military children.

"I think the networking opportunity alone was so valuable," she said. "I made some connections that I've needed to make for awhile."

California is the 26th state to have such a Public Engagement event. Shinseki added that the networking, action plans, policy advocacy, and ongoing work after the event are what are necessary to see tangible statewide change.

"This is something we can do as a society that will honor our promises to military families and veterans who endured great sacrifice for over a decade at war," Astor said. "A proper homecoming and welcoming integration into society is something we all can contribute to."



From left, Shinseki, U.S. Army Major General (Ret.) Paul Mock, Dr. Astor and Dr. Hassan listen to the presentation of the action plans from each sector.