

Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools

USC and *Building Capacity* host Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden at Roundtable on Military-Connected Schools



Building Capacity-Dr. Jill Biden Roundtable Participants

The *Building Capacity* project in the USC School of Social Work is a "perfect example" of changing how schools view and incorporate military children and their families, Dr. Jill Biden said last week during a roundtable forum held on the USC campus.

Biden--who along with First Lady Michelle Obama is leading the national "Joining Forces" effort to support military families--heard from educators, interns, parents and military students who have been impacted by the work of the MSW interns in the consortium schools.

"One of the goals of Joining Forces is really to change the culture, all across America," Biden said. "The work of this consortium is so important."

Her visit was also highlighted in this week's [Joining Forces](#) newsletter and noted on the [Department of Defense](#) site.

The event highlighted some of the best practices that schools in the project are using to become more military-friendly and more responsive to the needs and concerns of military families, such as last year's Marine birthday ceremony at Jefferson Middle School in Oceanside and the Pride Club created at Wolf Canyon Elementary in Chula Vista.

Military spouse Monique Felizardo and her family experienced an abrupt transfer from Japan to San Diego. But her daughter, Kayla, was able to form friendships in Pride Club at Wolf Canyon and find support through the transition period.

"It was like my life had been turned upside down," Felizardo said. "The Pride Club had a really big impact on me--knowing that she was ok."

Creating Connections

Victoria Downs, (below, center), the Jefferson Middle student who received the Marine Birthday cake, told Biden that the ceremony showed her that both military and civilian students could appreciate the traditions of the military.

One of primary goals of *Building Capacity* is "bridging the military and civilian divide" in schools, Dr. Ron Astor, the principal investigator for the project, told Biden. And school principals play an important role in creating those connections.

"Me being a civilian, I needed to learn a lot," said Tanya Beth Belsan, the principal of Dewey Elementary School in San Diego. "And it was definitely my goal to do so."

Dewey is the site of one of the district's transition rooms for schools with high military student enrollments. Called the "Connections Corner," the room serves as a welcome center for new military children and parents.

Janelle Larson O'Hara, a mother of three who was helped through an illness because of the Connections Corner and who now volunteers there, said the program serves a dual purpose.

"It's not just for the parents," she says. "It's also for the teachers."

Now that the school has a more military-friendly environment, O'Hara says, the staff understands that when children move on, they are facing another transition. The teachers, she says, "make a big deal out of it" so the students know they will be missed.

Herself the mother of a Army National Guardsman, Biden recounted a story of how her granddaughter's teacher put a photo of the Bidens' son outside the classroom door when he was deployed so the little girl could see his face every morning.

"School can be a supportive environment for military children," Biden said. "This work, as you can probably tell, is personal to me."



Spotlight On: Kimberly Israel

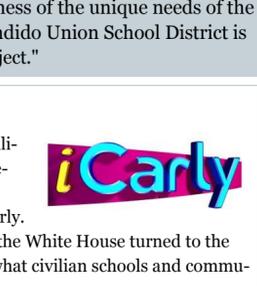
In 2000, Kimberly Israel became the Escondido Union School District's first school social worker.

Now, as director of the CARE Youth Project--the district's social services department--she has been part of seeing the social work staff grow to 15 full-time positions and eight school social work interns.

The CARE Youth Project's mission is to link students, families, school staff and community agencies together to create a safer and healthier Escondido. The project is funded by the school district, the federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students project, the City of Escondido, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, and the *Building Capacity* project.

As project director, Israel serves as an educational administrator, trainer and manager for district administrative, credentialed and certificated staff, and is also the liaison between the district and a number of community agencies and governmental programs.

Building Capacity "has expanded our district's School Social Work Internship program, assisted with funding initiatives to connect students and families with the school and community, increased our knowledge of best practices in school responsive services, and has raised our staff's awareness of the unique needs of the military-connected student," Israel says. "The Escondido Union School District is honored and grateful to be a part of this wonderful project."



Team Contributes to iCarly Episode

As part of her "Joining Forces" campaign to support military families, First Lady Michelle Obama appeared on a recent episode of the popular Nickelodeon show "iCarly."



Because the storyline was about the main character, Carly, missing her deployed father, who serves in the Air Force, the White House turned to the *Building Capacity* team to provide some suggestions on what civilian schools and communities can do to show friendship and comfort.

Find the suggestions [here](#).

Featured Resource: Operation Military Kids

Children with parents who serve in the National Guard or the reserves are often referred to as "suddenly military kids" because they typically lead lives that are the same as their civilian peers, but then when their parent is called to active duty, they must suddenly adapt to the life-style of a military child.



[Operation: Military Kids](#), a project of the U.S. Army, is an effort to support these students and inform educators and others in the public about the challenges faced by these students.

This brief [handout](#) highlights key issues affecting "suddenly military" children and ways that Operation: Military Kids can help.

Building Capacity Guidebook Preview: Building Blocks of Resilience

Dr. Kenneth Ginsberg, a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine, teaches that there are seven "essential building blocks of resilience" that can help military children--and all children--overcome difficult periods in their lives.

These seven qualities are based on the American Academy of Pediatrics' definition of resilience.

The seven building blocks are: competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control. These traits can help young people withstand adversity and avoid risky behavior during their adolescent years.

Read more about Dr. Ginsberg's work on his [website](#) and in our forthcoming guidebook for pupil personnel.

Spreading Holiday Cheer

The holidays are a wonderful time to show appreciation to members of the military.



Working with her school's liaison officer, Nita Martinez, an MSW intern attending San Diego State University, invited students at Liberty Elementary in Chula Vista to make holiday cards for wounded warriors at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego.

The students responded with enthusiasm, making over 150 cards during their morning recess period. The cards were delivered by the school liaison officer.

"It was awesome to see the kids rush to the table to make cards," Martinez says. "The words they wrote were so inspirational."

Upcoming Events:

Family Readiness Express: The FRE is scheduled to visit more schools in the *Building Capacity* consortium. Veterans Elementary School in the Chula Vista school district will host the FRE on Feb. 23-24. Visit our special newsletter issue from [October](#) to read more about this mobile service for military families.

Headlines

We regularly feature important articles on schools and programs serving military students on our website. Check the [site](#) often to stay informed.

This [story](#) in *The New York Times* highlights the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which show that children attending Department of Defense Educational Activity schools continue to score higher on tests of reading and math than their peers in traditional public schools.

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