

Special Issue

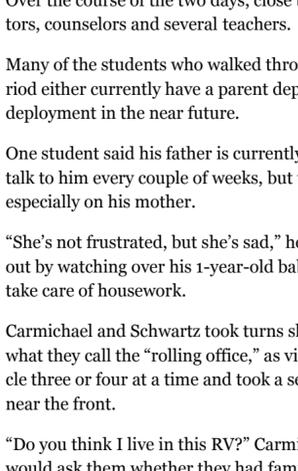
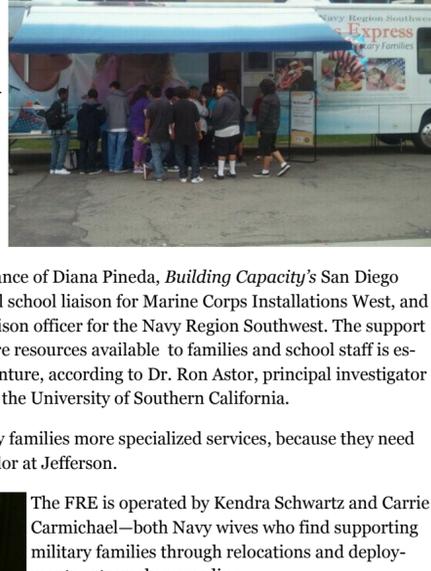
Oceanside Students Tour the 'Readiness Express'

The Navy's Family Readiness Express (FRE) rolled into Oceanside last week for a two-day stop at Jefferson Middle School, where students toured through the one-of-a-kind RV and received information on services available to military families.

The visit was the first of several that the *Building Capacity* team is scheduling at schools in the consortium to bring support to military students and their parents and to raise awareness among school communities about the challenges of being a military parent.

The coordinated school visits are being made possible with the assistance of Diana Pineda, *Building Capacity's* San Diego project manager, Kelli May, regional school liaison for Marine Corps Installations West, and Shannon Milder, regional school liaison officer for the Navy Region Southwest. The support of the school liaisons in making more resources available to families and school staff is essential to the success of this joint venture, according to Dr. Ron Astor, principal investigator for the *Building Capacity* project at the University of Southern California.

"I think it's fantastic to offer military families more specialized services, because they need it," said Alondra Figueroa, a counselor at Jefferson.



The FRE is operated by Kendra Schwartz and Carrie Carmichael—both Navy wives who find supporting military families through relocations and deployments extremely rewarding.

"This is my community, and I want to help them as much as I can," Carmichael said.

Schwartz has two sons who attend a school without a large military population. While the FRE's services are certainly needed at Jefferson, which is adjacent to Camp Pendleton, she says programs like theirs are also important for schools with fewer military children.

"They still go through the same things with deployment," she said, speaking from her own experience.

Over the course of the two days, close to 400 students visited the FRE, as well as administrators, counselors and several teachers.

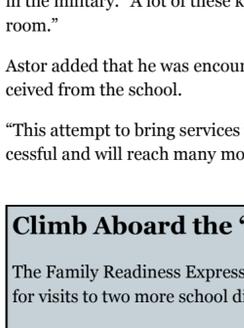
Many of the students who walked through during the two-day period either currently have a parent deployed or were preparing for a deployment in the near future.

One student said his father is currently in Afghanistan. He gets to talk to him every couple of weeks, but the separation is still hard, especially on his mother.

"She's not frustrated, but she's sad," he said, adding that he helps out by watching over his 1-year-old baby sister so his mother can take care of housework.

Carmichael and Schwartz took turns showing the students around what they call the "rolling office," as visitors climbed into the vehicle three or four at a time and took a seat in the conversation area near the front.

"Do you think I live in this RV?" Carmichael asked, joking around with the students. She would ask them whether they had family members in the military or if they have friends who are military children. "This lifestyle can be a little more challenging than the regular lifestyle."



The students were grateful for the break from class—and for the water bottle and granola bar at the end of the tour. Many of the boys were especially interested in the rear camera that keeps Carmichael from backing up into anything when she's driving the RV.

The "Express" is operated by the Navy's Fleet and Family Support Division, but Schwartz and Carmichael worked with the school liaison for the Marines to bring the vehicle to the largely Marine community.

Several of the publications given to students, such as those on Internet safety and reunions with parents returning from deployment, were not specific to any branch of the military.

The school liaison for the Marine Corps was also on hand to inform students about the Camp Pendleton teen center and other resources, such as Tutor.com, which provides free homework assistance for military students. On the first day of the visit, representatives from Operation Brig, a special program of Big Brothers Big Sisters designed for military children, were also there to share information on their services.

Figueroa says she was very impressed with the work done by last year's interns at Jefferson Middle.

"Just putting a group together is genius because then [the students] don't feel alone," she said.

Having the FRE on campus was a great way to "put a face" on the programs that are available to military families, said Justin Kern, assistant principal at Jefferson.

"There are a lot of resources out there, but the thing is connecting them," he said, adding that the visit was a wonderful opportunity for all the students—not just those with a parent in the military. "A lot of these kids have issues that go beyond the four walls of the classroom."

Astor added that he was encouraged by the turn-out and by the reception that the FRE received from the school.

"This attempt to bring services to the schools for the first time using the FRE was highly successful and will reach many more students, families and educators," he said.

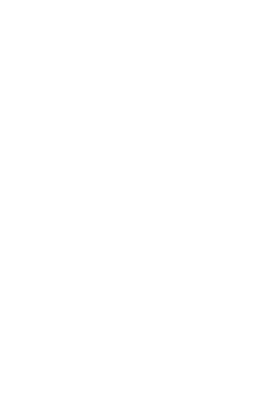
Climb Aboard the "Express"

The Family Readiness Express is currently scheduled for visits to two more school districts.

Oct. 24-28: Temecula Valley Unified School District at La Vorgna Elementary and Vintage Hills Elementary

Dec. 1-2: Chula Vista Elementary School District.

Stay tuned for more details.



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