Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs
Of Military Students in Public Schools
Annual Report
Year 1

Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs of Military Students in Public Schools, Department of Defense Education Activity Grant # HE125420130260248

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Welcoming Practices is a Consortium comprised of the University of Southern California and five southern California School Districts. The Chula Vista Elementary School District is the primary recipient on behalf of the other four districts and USC. The Consortium districts are:

• Bonsall Unified School District, Superintendent Justin Cunningham
• Chula Vista Elementary School District, Superintendent Francisco Escobedo
• Fallbrook Union High School District, Superintendent Hugo A. Pedroza
• Oceanside School District, Superintendent Duane Coleman
• Temecula Valley Unified School District, Superintendent Tim Ritter

The views expressed in this report are those of the Welcoming Practices research team, based at the University of Southern California, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Consortium school districts and schools, collaborating agencies, or the Department of Defense Education Activity. For information about this report, please contact Dr. Ron Astor at rastor@usc.edu.

This Year 1 report was written by Linda Jacobson, editor and writer for Welcoming Practices, in close collaboration with the PI, co-principal investigators, the Consortium, the USC team and the evaluation team at Bar Ilan University.
Table of Contents

Introduction 4
The Voices of Parents 6
Transition Centers and Teams 9
Students Welcoming Students, And Parents Welcoming Parents 12
Developing Web and Mobile Applications 18
Conclusion 25
Introduction

All students deal with transition at various points during their K-12 years. But few in our society experience transition as often as children growing up in military families. Military children attend an average range of six to nine schools during their K-12 years. In addition, they cope with shifting arrangements at home when a parent leaves for and returns from deployment.

Some research has shown that with each move in a new school and community, some military children grow even more mature and resilient and find it easy to adapt to new schools and surroundings. But over the past 13 years of war, a large proportion of military families have endured multiple deployments to conflict zones and this unprecedented and prolonged period has resulted in difficulties for many children, such as symptoms of depression, being picked on in school and substance use.

In *Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs of Military Students in Public Schools* (*Welcoming Practices*), five southern California school districts have joined together with the University of Southern California (USC) to relieve some of the stress that students and families experience when they face these transitions. This Consortium is funded by a grant from the Department of Defense Education Activity’s (DoDEA) partnership program (# HE125420130260248) to the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) on behalf of USC and the four other districts. All of the districts in the Consortium have a significant number of military-connected students and also participated in a prior Consortium called *Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools*. The lessons learned as part of *Building Capacity* helped to formulate the goals and strategies of *Welcoming Practices*. These goals are:

- To increase transitioning military students’ well-being, academic achievement, sense of belonging and engagement in school
- To increase transitioning military-connected parents’ sense of satisfaction, involvement and engagement in school
- To increase awareness of the needs of transitioning military students and families and spread best practices and technologies developed by the Consortium, regionally and nationally.

To accomplish these goals, the Consortium is using several interrelated strategies that involve digital technology as well as on-the-ground strategies to help military families feel welcome and to give them all the information they need to comfortably settle into their new school communities. This report covers progress that has been made in Year 1 and includes the following sections:

- **Surveying Parents**—This section discusses what we learned from parents about their registration experiences and how school staff members received them and
their children.

- **Transition Centers and Teams**—We highlight the progress districts and schools have made in developing transition centers and identifying staff members to take responsibility for creating welcoming routines and practices.

- **Students Welcoming Students, and Parents Welcoming Parents**—This section focuses on the implementation of two Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) programs, Student-to-Student (S2S) and Parent-to-Parent (PtoP).

- **Developing Applications**—In combination with face-to-face programs, *Welcoming Practices* is creating a “suite” of online and mobile applications that help to facilitate the school registration process and connect families to local military, school district and community-based programs that meet their needs.

While the Consortium was formed with the needs of military families in mind, the knowledge gleaned and practices implemented can benefit any student or parent in the Consortium that is going through the transition process. In looking over what the Consortium districts and schools have accomplished in the first year, it’s clear that creating practices to welcome and provide transition support to students and families as they move in and out of schools will take many forms. Not every site will do it exactly the same way. But each school district will employ practices—ongoing routines that schools incorporate into their regular operations and that don’t dwindle off as people move or leaders change.

It’s also important to note that all of the efforts of the Consortium are designed to work together. Staff working in welcoming centers and students leading S2S groups will inform new families about the app, and in turn, the app will direct students and parents to the key contacts in their schools and communities. Both the virtual and face-to-face parts of the system are necessary. The welcome centers might also be able to accommodate PtoP workshops or be used for S2S meetings or activities.

As the pieces of the *Welcoming Practices* initiative continue to fall into place, we will document innovative models and lessons that can be shared with other schools and districts.

Finally, in this first year, the Consortium districts are also planning for the sustainability of both the face-to-face strategies as well as the technological aspects. As *Building Capacity* did, the work of *Welcoming Practices* will hopefully inspire other school districts looking for ways to support transitioning families, so the impact of the Consortium can spread widely.
The Voices of Parents

To improve the way schools support incoming families, it’s important to better understand parents and students’ prior experiences with registering for school and being a new student in an unfamiliar school and community.

To help inform this work and determine how the transition process could be improved, the Consortium districts posted an online feedback form to gather information from families on their transition experiences. We believe gathering feedback from parents on the school registration process and whether the school creates a welcoming atmosphere is extremely rare, but this input is important to collect—not just for the Consortium, but to inform other districts as well.

Initially, the plan was to target the survey just to families that had recently relocated to the area, but it was difficult for the districts to identify them. So the anonymous, online questionnaire regarding issues of transition was instead sent to all families. Initial baseline responses were received from over 1,400 parents, representing over 2,300 children. About 9 percent of the respondents were military-connected and about 18 percent were veteran-connected. Over time, the evaluation team will follow-up with families who agreed to be interviewed further. The findings presented here are from the five districts as a whole. There was variation between the districts, so all findings pertain to Consortium-level strategies and are not specific to any particular district. Each district will also receive its own district-level report.

Findings

The respondents had several suggestions on how districts can be more inviting and helpful during the transition process, and they felt that districts could be doing more to support the needs of their children. On a 5-point scale, parents were also asked to rate how welcoming they felt schools were. Table 1 on the next page shows parents’ responses.

On whether they and their children felt welcomed in general by the school, the respondents gave ratings above a 4. But on some of the details involved in greeting new families—such as connecting them to other families and making an effort to refer them to programs or services their children might need—the ratings were much lower, closer to a 3.
Table 1: Mean and SD’s of Assessment of how Welcoming is the School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child felt welcomed by the school.</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt welcomed by the school.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school made my child feel like he/she were part of the school community.</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped my child succeed in school.</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school made us feel like we were part of the school community.</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped my child connect with other students.</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school made special efforts to accommodate the needs of my child.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped me connect to other families.</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped connecting me to services and resources in the community.</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree 5 = Strongly Agree

A few military families responding to the survey also had mixed written feedback regarding their experiences with transitioning into the districts. Some expressed that school staff members were not very welcoming and suggested there was a lack of awareness about the lives of military children. “There’s a lack of support, understanding or compassion for children who move a lot due to life in the military. Extremely disappointed in and with the school in this manner,” one parent said.

Others said their service to the country was not only appreciated, but also honored. For example, one parent said, “My son’s teachers have always been understanding and supportive of my son as we have gone through three deployments. These deployments have been hard on my son, who is close to his dad, and it has been nice to know that my son’s teachers have shown him patience and compassion while he deals with his dad being in a war zone.”

It’s clear, however, that some military parents still resist the idea that their children should receive any special attention or be perceived as having unique needs. One parent said, “If the school keeps telling my children they are at some type of disadvantage or require some sort of special services because they are military, they may begin to believe it. The best way for a child to acclimate to any environment is for them to be
treated the same as anyone else, and they will believe they are equal to and as capable as their peers.

This sensitivity and potential stigma that could be attached to military children by singling them out reinforces the whole-school approach that the Consortium districts have used since they were also part of Building Capacity. The programs implemented through Welcoming Practices are applied to all students and families, not just those in military families. Another goal is to address the lack of consistency between schools that shows up in the parents’ comments on their experiences. Each school has its own culture and practices will vary, but all are developing new routines and putting structures in place to welcome new families and attend to the questions that arise when a student is adjusting to new classes and a new social environment.

The old adage of not getting a second chance to make a first impression may apply to schools just like it does people. The school registration process—especially for those moving in from outside the community—is a district’s first opportunity to demonstrate that a family’s concerns, needs and interests are important to the district. With the technology now available, districts can take full advantage of this opportunity. The various components of Welcoming Practices are designed to send a strong message—both virtually and when transitioning families first step on to a campus—that their children are important and that the school will make every effort to support their children academically, socially and emotionally.
Transition Centers and Teams

It has sometimes been said that when a task is considered everyone’s responsibility, it essentially becomes no one’s responsibility. That idea can certainly apply to welcoming new students into a school. Transition would be less challenging for students if all teachers, administrators and even students were kind toward newcomers, helped them make new friends and oriented them to the school campus and procedures. But in schools across the country it doesn’t always work out that way. New students often must fend for themselves in an unfamiliar building and try to establish relationships on their own.

The goal of the Welcoming Practices Consortium is to change that by providing support and the exchange of ideas between schools and districts. An important aspect of Welcoming Practices is that specific staff members take the lead in creating the routines and practices that help families settle in to their new community. In addition to welcoming students and families, they make sure families have important information about the district, school and community. They provide support if a student or parent is struggling and appears overwhelmed. They connect the students and parents to specific resources and programs—including the specific contact people. And they follow-up over time to make sure students are adapting and feeling like they are a part of the school community.

During Year 1, the Consortium districts took steps toward determining how they would create a system for welcoming new students and their families. This report highlights significant developments regarding transition teams and structures.

Welcome Centers

Leaders in the Consortium districts have been familiar with transition rooms or welcome centers, particularly in the San Diego Unified School District. Transition centers were featured on our website so others could learn about the different models that exist. At Dewey Elementary, the Connections Corner, described in this video, Navy school liaison officers help run the center and greet new families. In another model, such as the Eagles Nest at Hancock Elementary, parents volunteer to help support other new parents.

Best practices for creating transition rooms and other structures to support transitioning families are also captured in this handbook from the Navy school liaison officers—Connections: Navy School-Based Programming Guidebook.

Creating separate spaces or centers in which to welcome new families is an important strategy simply because district and local school offices are often hectic, and sometimes confusing places. The people working in them are busy, there are frequent interruptions and sometimes staff members seem more concerned with a new student’s paperwork than the actual student. Of course, turning in any necessary enrollment forms or
documents is important, but incoming families also need an inviting place where they don’t feel rushed and can ask as many questions as they want.

Both district and school-based welcome centers or transition rooms are important. Since districts often handle registration at the central office, a centrally located welcome center can serve families when they come to register.

At the centers, parents are able to meet other parents in the district, pick up information on various programs and find out exactly whom they need to contact to get involved in local groups and activities. During Year 1, the Consortium districts were at various stages of creating district-level welcome centers. Some of the sites will also be large enough to accommodate parent meetings or other gatherings, such as workshops arranged by the PtoP team, described in the next section. This is one example of how the different strategies being implemented by the Consortium are intended to complement each other in order to create an infrastructure for new families.

The Temecula Valley Unified School District’s (TVUSD) Welcome Center, for example, is housed at the district’s central office—right next to registration. The center provides computers for parents to use as well as information on community programs and services for both military and non-military families.

There is also an important role for local, school-based welcome centers since each school has unique features. In the Oceanside Unified School District (OUSD), for example, several schools have created welcome centers as part of their implementation of the S2S program, described in the next session.

**Staff Focusing on Transition**

While it’s important to have a welcome center, it is the people working inside the center that will make new families feel comfortable and will be able to direct them to local programs, services and activities that can meet their needs.

In TVUSD, this person is Belisa Guerrero, the district’s new family engagement specialist. "We make sure they have everything they need to get themselves into our community," she said in our special fall 2014 newsletter.
A Marine wife and a former elementary school teacher, Guerrero oversees the Welcome Center and would like to create a group for military parents. She also began visiting all of the schools in the district to make sure staff members are aware of the center and know to refer new families there. "I just want to see what kind of parent involvement activities they have in place, and how I can help," she said.

In OUSD, a staff member at the district office has been taking the lead on improving the transition process in the district. Whether working in a transition center or at the district level, these individuals will also help to link students and families to the components of the grant, such as S2S and PtoP. And they’ll make sure families know how to use the registration site and the mobile app so they can have around-the-clock access to information on available resources. For example, Guerrero is also collaborating with the new San Diego PtoP team to schedule workshops.
Students Welcoming Students, And Parents Welcoming Parents

For most students transferring into a new school, their top concern is how they will make new friends and “fit in” to the new school. On that first day, they wonder how they will find their way around the building, who they will sit with at lunch, and maybe if they’ll understand what the other students are doing in class.

Even with district personnel working to improve transition experiences for children and their parents, it’s critical that incoming students have someone their own age to connect with and to help make sure that integration into the school is going well.

Likewise, parents of transitioning students can benefit from connecting with other parents who are willing to answer questions and provide support during what is usually a confusing and overwhelming time for a family.

For these reasons, Welcoming Practices decided to bring two MCEC programs to the Consortium districts—S2S and PtoP. Again, while some aspects of these programs are very focused on the unique experiences of military children and families, there are elements that can benefit all families. These programs have not been widely used or evaluated in civilian school districts. Creating S2S and PtoP groups will allow the districts to examine promising practices learned from the implementation of the programs in the Welcoming Practices schools.

S2S

There are actually three versions of S2S, but all of them focus on “100 percent acceptance” of new students and ensuring that children are transitioning smoothly into their new school.

The program also has three major themes--academics, building relationships and finding the way, which means orienting new students to the campus, policies and culture of the school. Many of the students who lead S2S groups in their schools are military-connected, understand what other students are going through and want to help.

"I am a military child and I know how hard it is for people to move around," Michael Ottewell, an Oceanside High student, said during one of the S2S training sessions.

Students like Michael are trained to inform incoming students about school routines and classes as well as attend to the social aspects of making new friends and finding school activities that might interest them. These student leaders also following up during the school year to see if the student has adjusted, is involved in something they enjoy and knows how to reach a counselor or other school staff member if there are questions about classes or requirements.
• S2S is the original model led by high school students with support from a teacher or other school staff member. The student leaders take most of the responsibility for creating their S2S program, organizing activities and deciding how to reach out to new students.
• Junior S2S is the middle school model, which is still led by students, but includes more guidance and support from adults. The program also has a strong emphasis on bullying prevention and addresses issues facing young adolescents.
• Elementary S2S, the newest version, is entirely led by school staff members and focuses on helping elementary students develop leadership skills. The Consortium schools are among the first to ever implement the elementary school version.

Four of the Consortium districts—Oceanside, Temecula, Bonsall and Chula Vista—are participating in at least one version of S2S. The Fallbrook Union High School District has been using Safe School Ambassadors, which focuses on bullying prevention, and decided to continue with that program.

S2S Training

Year 1 was mostly dedicated to training S2S teams in the schools. Table 2 gives the number of people participating in the different training sessions. Led by experienced MCEC trainers, the two-day sessions gave the participants a solid background on the needs of transitioning students and provided them time to craft plans for their individual schools. The students, for example, planned to make maps of their schools and practiced “ice-breaker” games that can help new acquaintances get to know each other better.

Table 2: Training Sessions and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ES2S</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS2S</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2S</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Some of the participants attended only one day of training and some school principals entered and left training sessions, as they were busy carrying out their roles.

The participants completed surveys, and members of the USC Building Capacity/Welcoming Practices team also recorded observations, which were used to evaluate the training process. The surveys asked the participants for their feedback on what they learned from the training and on the training experience itself.
In general, the student trainees said that they gained a variety of skills, such as knowing how to help new students make connections with friends and teaching students how to get around the campus. But they felt less knowledgeable about topics related to academics, such as grading scales, course credit, and post-secondary options for students. MCEC trainer Bill Lawson, however, assured them that their job is not to try to advise students, but to make sure newcomers find the counselors, administrators or coaches who have the answers.

The participants rated highly the interactive and collaborative aspects of the training and enjoyed learning activities that they could later use in their schools. Some of the observers, however, thought the students needed more time to present their plans, and others commented that perhaps the training sessions were too long for students. The trainers also integrated movie clips into the workshops to illustrate the concepts of acceptance and breaking down social barriers, but some observers felt that the clips were perhaps too outdated. They suggested that it might have been more helpful to the students and school staff members to see videos of best practices that other schools are already using.

Table 3 on the next page shows how well the students felt that they learned the knowledge and skills covered by the training, such as explaining the layout of the building to new students, local expressions and slang, and the availability of after-school programs or extracurricular activities. Many were confident that they could help newcomers learn their way around campus and meet new friends. But not surprisingly, the students felt less prepared to explain topics such as grading scales and course credit and said they were the least knowledgeable about options after high school.
Table 3: Assessing the Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills (JS2S & ES2S)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to make connections and friends</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to be accepted by their peers</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to communicate with transitioning students?</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to deal with peer pressure</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to become part of the ‘in crowd’</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting around the campus</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School celebrations</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School diversity</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local points of interest</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School policies and procedures</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community culture</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedules and scheduling</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local expressions (e.g. slang)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insights on being an outsider</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterschool programs, clubs, and sports</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different courses in the school</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen hang outs / Popular locations</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tests and exams in the school</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading scales and GPA in the school</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the credit/points system works for courses</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post high school options</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = not at all/to a very small extent to 5 = to a large extent
Early Implementation

Even though most teams weren’t expected to begin implementing their S2S plans until the fall of 2014, some of the students jumped into carrying out their action plans right away. For example, JS2S students from Stuart Mesa Elementary, a pre-K to 8th school in OUSD, created a welcome video, which was featured on the school’s home page.

Once the 2014-15 academic year began, many more teams had made significant progress on implementing their plans and have already demonstrated a commitment to the goals of the program. Here are some highlights:

- In OUSD, S2S team at Oceanside High created a student center, like a welcome center, called The Pirate’s Deck. The JS2S programs at the three schools on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton are receiving community support, such as donated arts and crafts materials and pizza for monthly meetings, and the Stuart Mesa JS2S team has scheduled a “welcoming lunch” on the fourth Friday of each month for new students.
- In CVESD, the ES2S team at McMillin Elementary has held a military coffee for parents, organized a parent support group and given a list of all military students to classroom teachers. Student ambassadors are also being selected to give tours to new students. At Wolf Canyon Elementary, a resource tab for military families will be added to the school blog and counseling services are being made available in partnership with Fleet and Family Services.
- In BUSD, the Sullivan Middle JS2S group has been meeting regularly to discuss recruitment and upcoming activities. A Bonsall High School S2S group is also being formed, and the new school counselor at Bonsall Elementary was added to the ES2S team.
- In TVUSD, Temecula Valley High School S2S members helped to give school tours to incoming freshmen. At Abby Renke Elementary, a welcoming PowerPoint was created, a student welcome team was formed, and a map showing where parents are deployed was put up in the hallway.

MCEC trainers also returned to the Consortium districts in the middle of the school year to provide “booster” training sessions and provide additional support as the school teams move forward. These sessions are not typically held but are important for addressing any obstacles or questions the students encountered once they put their plans into place. In light of the turnover that often happens among staff and students, this additional review is also necessary for sustainability of the program.

PtoP

PtoP is a parent outreach program in which trainers present workshops that are designed to empower parents to advocate and support their children through challenges such as transition, staying on track in school and preparing for post-
secondary success. The PtoP concept supports the research showing that when military parents—particularly mothers—feel positive about a move, the experience can be less stressful for their children.

As with S2S, PtoP trainers also serve as a support system for incoming families and help to link them to other resources and contact people in the community, such as school liaison officers for the Navy and the Marines.

Four parent trainers were hired as part of the San Diego team working with the Consortium districts. Their primary job will be to organize workshops that address topics that interest both military and civilian parents. The workshops cover issues such as school readiness, transition and preparing for college. While other PtoP teams often hold their gatherings in community locations, a unique feature of the Welcoming Practices PtoP effort is that the team’s work will be nested within schools.

"I'm so excited to be part of this," Jen Gibbons, one of the trainers, said in the Welcoming Practices newsletter. "Nothing like this has ever been done in southern California."

In this first year, the team has been focusing on raising awareness about the PtoP program and has been layering its work on top of existing parent gatherings at schools, such as principal coffee hours or PTA and PTO meetings.

Gibbons was also planning to survey parents to better determine their interests and needs. As the school year moves forward, the trainers will be working to have more of a “presence” in the schools so that families are aware of the unique perspective that they can provide.

Evaluation

As mentioned, S2S and PtoP are well-established MCEC programs, but there is no data on how effective they are at helping to smooth transitions for families or whether there are particular strategies that can help these programs be successful. As part of Welcoming Practices, the researchers are evaluating the programs to see, for example, whether students can be taught to help welcome newcomers to their school, and whether these efforts can be sustained over time. Outcomes of the PtoP program are also being monitored. Researchers at USC and Bar Ilan University are continuing to collect data on the implementation process to learn what works and doesn’t work in creating networks of students, school staff members and parents to be that welcoming presence in a school.
Developing Web and Mobile Applications

A family moving to the San Diego area from Japan, or Germany, or even from across the U.S. has to take care of more arrangements, details and frustrations than most of us can imagine. But school districts can help to alleviate some of those headaches by allowing parents take care of the school registration process and search for programs and services in their new community well before the family arrives in their new home.

Because they transfer so often, many military parents are organized to attend to these kinds of details as soon as they receive their orders. Knowing a child can participate in comparable programs or activities in the new school and town can also bring peace of mind and alleviate some of the stress involved with moving a family. Contacting a specific program director or service provider in the new district or neighborhood—even before the move—can bring added reassurance for both the parents and the children.

For these reasons, the Consortium districts—in addition to providing the important face-to-face aspects of Welcoming Practices—will also be the first to implement a uniquely designed online student registration site and a mobile app for smartphones and tablets.

In keeping with the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which all states have now adopted, the registration site and the app are intended to expedite the registration and enrollment process for military students in transition and ensure continuity of services. This includes not only academic classes, but also extra-curricular activities.

In our digital age, the registration site goes beyond just asking for routine information on the family and children and the app will do much more that provide basic information on the schools. Both of these tools will be customized to respond to the particular interests and needs of the students. Instead of having to make multiple phone calls or Web searches, the Welcoming Practices apps will bring everything together so families can save time.

Early Decisions

The Welcoming Practices team has expertise in social work and education. So they partnered with faculty in the Viterbi School of Engineering at USC, which is nationally recognized for its work in designing mobile and web applications.
Mapping Resources

The *Welcoming Practices* team went through an extensive and meticulous process of gathering information on military, school district and community resources in the region surrounding the Consortium districts.

The process began by identifying a small group of broad topics. Web sources that could act as resource “nodes” or categories were then identified, based on previous project reports, group discussions and observations, and a previously developed resource directory. These nodes include websites affiliated with schools and districts, military installations, the Veterans Administration and 2-1-1 San Diego—a resource database and 24-hour phone service.

When looking at these nodes, the team briefly surveyed the structure and organization of each website and then compiled each of the services, programs, etc. into a detailed database that includes the type of resource, services provided, contact names, location, and hours of operation.

Approximately 2,000 different programs and services were compiled and include school and district services as well as resources related to early-childhood programs, housing, transportation, health care, mental health, crisis services, substance abuse, income and employment help, legal assistance, family services, youth services, and services for military members and veterans.

The San Diego Military Family Collaborative (SDMFC), a close partner of the *Building Capacity* Consortium that preceded *Welcoming Practices*, was especially helpful in this process. The Collaborative also continues to connect the *Welcoming Practices* team to additional programs and services that become available.

Web Registration

Again, the Consortium decided to make the online registration site a part of *Welcoming Practices* so parents can sign their children up for school even before they move in to the community. As the survey of parents showed, this was an area in which parents felt that schools were not doing a very good job. With the online registration site, the districts are connecting with families as soon as they know where they are relocating. As long as a family has an internet connection, they can view the district website and at least begin the registration process.
Before the site could be developed, the USC team needed to do a thorough review of all
the forms, procedures and steps that the Consortium districts currently used to register
students for school. Some, for example, require everything to be submitted in person.
Others allow some pieces of the process to be completed online but still require certain
documents to be copied at the district office. The more “red tape” or steps involved in
the process, however, the less friendly and welcoming a school district might seem to a
family that is moving from overseas—or even from another state. Some chose to
continue requiring these steps simply because that’s the way their district has always
done it, but website security has now been improved to the point where submitting
documents online can be done in a way that protects student privacy.

One of the important contributions of the Welcoming Practices Consortium is the
modification of the registration process so that it refers to the parent’s connection to
the military. Other registration programs that already exist in the Consortium districts,
as thousands of school districts across the country, could adopt this unique aspect.

The registration site was created to accommodate all of the districts’ existing
registration policies and procedures, but to also have a template in place for those
districts that wanted to allow the entire process to be completed online—if not now,
then maybe in the future. Looking ahead, this feature also paves the way for long-term
use of the application and for the possibility that other districts will adopt the model.
The web registration tool is also “branded” to match the logo and color scheme of each
individual district, and the display is designed to adjust so it will function on a tablet as well as on a desktop or laptop.

The other unique, but essential feature of the registration site is that during the registration process, parents are asked to indicate their interests in various programs and services that might be available in the district or locally, such as tutoring, extracurricular activities or sports. Here is where parents can indicate any special needs or concerns regarding their child. This gives districts a “heads-up” so they can match families with the right information and contact people even before they arrive at the school.

Again, showing how the different pieces of Welcoming Practices work together, those who indicate preferences or interests during the registration process will see that information transferred into the app, described below.

*Mobile App*

In addition to the online registration site, the Welcoming Practices team is also designing a mobile app for smartphones and tablets that gives parents and students instant access to district and school information as well as the resources and programs that interest them.
Early examples of the app were available in the fall of 2014 and the development is expected to be complete by the spring of 2015.

If the parent has already used the web registration tool, he or she would just use the same email and password to log in. New users can also sign up directly from the login page. The goal was to make the process as seamless as possible, so when a parent or student logs in, he or she will automatically see their district and school information. This “My Info” page is shown in App Image 1.

Another benefit of using the web registration site is that a parent’s preferences regarding programs or activities that were chosen during the registration process will automatically appear when the user is logged in to the app.

App Image 2 shows how the various programs and services are filtered based on the user’s choices.

Both registration site users and those who sign up directly on the app can save favorites in the app. In App Image 3, for example, the user’s child is involved in band and theater and possibly attends an after-
school activity or tutoring program. This page could also reflect favorite resources or programs attended by more than one child.

Users will also be able to easily find contact information for the directors or other staff members working with specific programs. An example is shown in App Image 4.

Links to maps for the resources, organizations, and programs that families plan to use, as shown in App Image 5, are also available from the app. This helps parents moving into a new area know what is in close proximity to their children’s schools and homes and get an idea of commutes to different programs or make after-school transportation plans.

Connections to contact people and information related to S2S and PtoP will also be available in the app, again demonstrating how the different pieces of the Welcome Practices Consortium are interrelated and support each other.

The app will also have a comment function so users can leave feedback on programs or services that might be useful to other new families entering the district. The app is also being designed for both iOS and Android devices to avoid any compatibility issues.
Planning for Sustainability

In Year 1, the Welcoming Practices team was already investigating different ways to ensure that the tools being designed as part of the Consortium would continue to be used even after the grant ends. The site and the app have tremendous potential to improve the ways families interact with the schools their children will attend and can serve as models for how educators handle transition. These applications could be used in all districts.

One question the team is considering, for example, is who will be in charge of providing ongoing updates to the information and contact names and numbers for the resources gathered for the app. It’s possible, for example, that 2-1-1 could take over maintaining the community resources, the military branches could update their information and the school districts could update theirs. Another idea is to create a nonprofit to maintain and update the information.

Another issue is that some of the Consortium districts already have other apps, such as ParentLink and Infinite Campus, to communicate with parents. Instead of seeing these alternate apps as a barrier, the Consortium is working on ways to connect the information on local resources with these existing services. Linking with these companies is also a means of scaling up the use of the app to more districts.

Involving the S2S and PtoP teams in introducing families to the site and the app can also help solidify the tools as a routine part of the transition and welcoming process and create an ongoing demand for the tools once the grant is over. When people get used to certain conveniences, they tend to not want to give them up. Again, this demonstrates why all of the pieces of Welcoming Practices are equally important parts of supporting new students and integrating families into the school and the community.
Conclusion

On the first day in a new school, a student will make a judgment about whether they feel accepted or overlooked. Parents, making phone calls and searching the web from across town or overseas, will either feel frustrated that they keep getting transferred or relieved that someone was able to answer their questions.

In Welcoming Practices, the five Consortium districts are working—with the benefit of technology—to create an infrastructure that will surround students and families with support when they need it. These schools are building models for how to integrate new students into school communities, follow-up over time, and help parents feel good about the schools in which they choose to enroll their children.

With programs like S2S, we are already seeing the creativity that comes when students are given a challenge and work together to improve their school.

“It's so important for us to stand back and let them own it," says Margaret Malek, the K-12 program specialist for the Kids First Initiative in OUSD, which focuses on helping students develop positive relationships. She adds that she believes S2S can “completely shift the culture and the community” of schools serving both military-connected and non-military students.

It’s also important to reiterate that the components of Welcoming Practices—transition rooms, S2S, PtoP and applications—are not meant to be standalone efforts. Each one will support and work with the other programs. As with Building Capacity, there is also room within Welcoming Practices for schools to come up with their own creative plans for supporting and following-up with new students and parents.

The USC team will continue to document these innovative efforts so that other schools can learn strategies for creating welcoming schools.