Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs Of Military Students in Public Schools Annual Report Year 2

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 2 report was written by Linda Jacobson, editor and writer for Welcoming Practices, in close collaboration with the principal investigator, co-principal investigators, the Consortium, the USC team and the evaluation team at Bar Ilan University. The cover photo is of a display at Wolf Canyon Elementary School in the Chula Vista Elementary School District.
# Table of Contents

- Introduction 4
- Developing the WelConnect Mobile App 6
- The Voices of Parents 10
- Welcome Centers 14
- Students Welcoming Students, And Parents Welcoming Parents 18
- California Healthy Kids Survey 24
- Surveys of Parents and School Staff Members 27
- Developing a New Guidebook 30
- Beyond the Consortium 31
- Conclusion 33
Introduction

*Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs of Military Students in Public Schools* (*Welcoming Practices*) is a partnership between the University of Southern California School of Social Work and five school districts in the San Diego area. The goals of the project are to improve experiences for students and families transitioning in and out of schools by developing an innovative mobile app while also supporting programs that foster connections with caring members of the school community.

This combination of virtual tools and on-the-ground practices at the district and school level is necessary to meet the needs of today’s families who want the convenience of using online technology to search for information and handle routine tasks but also want to make sure their children feel comfortable and receive the support they need in a new school. A welcoming school culture is especially important for military-connected students who attend an average of six to nine schools over the course of their K-12 years.

This annual report focuses on Year 2 of the grant (# HE125420130260248), which is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) as part of its partnership program. The goals of the grant 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 spread the lessons schools have learned about serving military-connected students to other families experiencing school transition.

To reach these goals, *Welcoming Practices* involves several initiatives. This report describes these many components in the following sections:

- **Developing the WelConnect Mobile App**—A mobile app for iOS and Android devices has been created to allow incoming families to learn more the programs and services offered in their new schools and communities and connect with people who can answer their questions.
- **The Voices of Parents**—Surveying parents allows both the research team, school administrators and the broader research community to learn more about parents’ initial experiences in new schools, including the registration process, and how school staff members received them and their children.
- **Welcome Centers**—Districts and schools are developing transition centers and identifying staff members to take responsibility for creating welcoming routines and
practices.

- **Students Welcoming Students, and Parents Welcoming Parents**—The Consortium districts are implementing two Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) programs, Student-to-Student (S2S) and Parent-to-Parent (PtoP).

- **California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)**—The Consortium continues to monitor the results of the CHKS to identify students’ strengths as well as areas of need. Responses are showing overall reductions in risky behaviors but no real improvement in school climate.

- **Surveys of Parents and School Staff Members**—The survey system that includes the CHKS also includes surveys for parents and school staff members. These views are an important part of understanding school climate and whether adults see improvement over time.

- **Developing a New Guidebook**—Following the success of four guidebooks on supporting military-connected students, as part of Building Capacity, our team is now developing a guidebook focused on how schools can be more welcoming and helpful when families are changing schools.

- **Beyond the Consortium**—This section provides updates on other efforts outside of the Consortium to improve school experiences for military- and veteran-connected students and to support the development of monitoring and feedback systems similar to the CHKS.

Military-connected students and families are a special focus of Welcoming Practices, but the programs and efforts being implemented in the schools, as well as the lessons being learned, can be applied in any school to make families feel more welcome when they enroll in new schools.

As we are writing in our new guidebook, there is no one right way to welcome a new family. The Consortium districts and schools are demonstrating a variety of innovative and creative ways to improve the registration process, support new students during their first few weeks and help families find the programs and resources they need. In Years 3 and 4, the research team and the districts will focus on ways to sustain these efforts.
Developing the WelConnect Mobile App

The Welcoming Practices team accomplished one of its primary goals during 2015—the release of the WelConnect app for both iOS and Android mobile devices. The development of the app is a cornerstone of the project. WelConnect is built on the philosophy that military-connected families—and any family that is putting their children in a new school district—should have easy and on-demand access to information about what schools and community-based organizations provide in terms of services, extra-curricular activities or support programs, such as tutoring or after-school care.

WelConnect allows parents and students to learn about—and even sign up for—specific programs before they arrive in the district, which can help eliminate some of the unknowns and stress associated with moving to a new community. The app is linked to an extensive database of district, school, community and military-focused resources and programs and allows users to save programs as favorites for easy reference. WelConnect users can locate services on a map and connect with people who can answer questions. Even if a family has children in more than one school, the app can be customized to fit their needs.

While families are the ones who are moving between schools and districts, multiple groups will benefit from using the app.

For school district leaders, WelConnect is a powerful new source of information about families moving into the district and the services and programs they want for their children. The app also gives districts an additional means for communicating with parents and students in a way that is convenient for them. WelConnect will also provide school officials with information about the community agencies and programs that are operating in their area and could work as potential partners with schools to meet students’ needs.

Teachers can use the app to point families toward the resources, information and programs they need to have a successful transition into a new school and community. Teachers and other school staff members can also use it to stay informed of the many—and often changing—district, school, community, and military resources available to parents and students. The community-based organizations listed in the app can be potential partners for supporting classroom instruction or provide students with additional learning and extracurricular opportunities.

Military installations and community-based program providers can use the app to learn more about the schools and districts in their area and as a way to make families moving into the area
aware of their services and programs. When families relocate, they are not only looking for new schools; they’re also looking for programs in the community that interest their children and meet their needs. WelConnect allows families to find programs and contact providers even before they arrive in their new community.

First-time users of WelConnect will be guided through a tutorial explaining all of the features of the app. The app development team also created a companion website that provides tutorial videos to familiarize users with the app’s various components.

Functions of WelConnect

While WelConnect is still a new product, it operates in a way with which mobile device users are now familiar.

User Account and Profile: Each user has a private account with a personal password. The user provides information on their child’s district and school. They can also select “tags,” meaning the resources they are most likely to use and include in their profile. There are more than 60 potential tags, including tutoring, substance abuse prevention, and stress management. Passwords are required to edit the profile.

Featured Resources: Specific district, school, community and military resources and programs are displayed based on the information in the user’s profile. The description includes contact information and a map location.

Resource Search: Users can use tags or a free search to find the names of resources and then find its location and information about services provided.

Favorite Resources: Users can also select certain providers and programs as “favorites” and easily add or remove resources from their favorite list.
Administrative Portal: An important part of the app is an administrative portal where district and school personnel can add and update information on programs and services in the resource database.

Help and Support: The app development team also created a separate WelConnect website to explain the purpose of the app. The site also provides links to a series of short YouTube videos that walk users through all the steps of signing up, creating a profile, saving favorites and other features.

6. Search Tutorial

A scene from a tutorial video on the search function.

Early Implementation

The original goal of Welcoming Practices was to have the app available after the first year of the grant. The development process, however, took twice that long because of a variety of bugs that needed to be fixed and software updates that were released. But adapting to those issues has given the team valuable experience needed for maintaining the app and providing ongoing updates to improve it. Chapter 12 of the Technical Evaluation includes extensive details on the app development process, including the steps that the app development team went through on a weekly basis to get the initial version released.

The first phase of implementation includes gathering feedback from districts and the multiple audiences about how the app is working, how it meets their needs, and how it doesn’t. We also
want to hear about missing resources or programs that no longer exist so we can keep information up to date. Compiling the database of resources that powers the app was not a one-time process. Programs and points of contact frequently change, so for the app to be successful, our team will encourage districts, providers and users to keep their information updated and alert us to any changes.

Planning for 2.0

Even though the app was recently completed, the team is already planning for future updates. The team working on the development of the app has also created a system for completing the updates. The primary addition in the future will be a feature that allows users to leave comments on community resources and programs. The idea is that this feedback will be useful to others moving into the area.

The app was also designed with the hope that it would serve as a model for other districts serving military-connected students or those that just want to improve transition experiences for families. In addition to the work in the Consortium, the Welcoming Practices research team has also been a partner in the Los Angeles Unified School District’s (LAUSD) recent and expanding effort to increase services for military- and veteran-connected students (Read more about these developments in the Beyond the Consortium section on page 31).

As parents, educators, community providers and others in the Consortium begin to use the app, there is the potential that LAUSD could be the first district outside of the San Diego area to use it. Whether it’s WelConnect or another app, we think every school district should have ways to establish a rapport with incoming families, answer their questions and help them find out what is available for their children.
The Voices of Parents

To inform the project and help the Consortium districts better understand families’ needs related to transition, the Welcoming Practices researchers have been surveying parents on topics such as the registration and enrollment process, whether their children felt welcome in their new school, and whether the school provided any transition support.

This feedback is important to consider when implementing strategies intended to better serve families. Responses were collected from over 3,700 parents in the Consortium districts. Parents were asked to rate certain aspects of the registration process using a five-point scale with one meaning “strongly agree” and five meaning “strongly disagree.” In addition to gathering general feedback on the registration process, the evaluation is also comparing the responses of military- and nonmilitary-connected parents. Table 1 below shows that in general, military parents are slightly less satisfied with how registration and enrollment was handled by the district—particularly on the question of whether staff members considered their family’s specific needs.

Table 1: Parents’ Perceptions of the Registration Process by Military-Connectedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non Military</th>
<th></th>
<th>Military</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The registration process was clearly explained to me</td>
<td>3.77**</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions related to the registration process were answered in a timely manner</td>
<td>3.95**</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The district/school expressed an interest in understanding and meeting my family’s needs throughout the registration process</td>
<td>3.70***</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My interactions with the district/school throughout the registration process were positive overall</td>
<td>3.85**</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school records and documents were received and processed in a timely manner</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001, in t-tests for independent samples
The survey also asked parents for their views on whether they and their children felt welcome in the school and whether specific steps were taken to help the family settle in to the new school. Table 2 shows again that there are differences in how military- and nonmilitary-parents respond to statements about feeling welcome.

**Table 2: Military and Non-Military Families Assessments of Whether the School is Welcoming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Non Military Mean</th>
<th>Non Military SD</th>
<th>Military Mean</th>
<th>Military SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt welcomed by the school</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school made us feel like we were part of the school community</td>
<td>3.91**</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped me connect to other families</td>
<td>3.34***</td>
<td>(1.11)</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped connecting me to services and resources in the community</td>
<td>3.23**</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child felt welcomed by the school</td>
<td>4.10**</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>(.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school made special efforts to accommodate the needs of my child</td>
<td>3.68**</td>
<td>(1.06)</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>(1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He school made my child feel like he/she were part of the school community</td>
<td>3.97**</td>
<td>(.98)</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped my child connect with other students</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>(1.04)</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school helped my child succeed in school</td>
<td>3.95**</td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.78***</td>
<td>(.88)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01  *** p < .001

In addition to conducting the survey, the Welcoming Practices evaluators also asked parents some open-ended questions in order to gather more details on their perceptions of whether schools feel welcoming. Over 1,000 parents provided their input. The questions were:

- What has the school done to make your child feel welcome in school?
- What has the school done to make you, as a parent, feel welcome?
- What did you like or not like in regard to what the school did to make you and/or your child feel welcome?

Respondents listed some specific efforts the Consortium schools took to make their children feel welcome.
• “We were welcomed with a tour around the school.”
• “They had the vice principal in front directing traffic and people around to help get kids to their classrooms in case they didn't know where it was.”
• “The school social worker ensured that they were integrated by including them in groups with other children within their age group.”
• “The week before school began, TVCS had an ice cream social on campus for the kids to meet their new teacher and other classmates. This was incredibly helpful since my daughter was new to the school.”

Responding to the second question, parents said the practices that made them feel welcome included having their emails quickly answered, being asked to volunteer, a “take your parent to school day,” and a Sunday night “all call.” But some also said they felt like they couldn’t find answers to their questions and that the front office staff members at their children’s schools were not very friendly or helpful. One parent wrote: “Some office personnel were standoffish. Like questions from parents bothered them.”

A detailed analysis of the responses showed that the parents’ answers fell into three thematic areas: interactions with school administrators and staff; ongoing support for students and families, and welcoming and supporting students from diverse backgrounds. The last category included the comments from many military-connected parents—some of whom felt school staff members were out of touch with issues such as deployment and others who felt the schools were very supportive and understanding.

One parent said, “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.”

Additional Comments and Suggestions

The Welcoming Practices evaluation team also asked for any additional comments the parents wanted to make. Some of the responses focused on specific situations in which a parent felt someone had discriminated against their child or not met his or her needs. For example, one said that a child had been bullied because he comes from a gay/lesbian family and that the school wasn’t doing enough to punish the bullies or hold their parents accountable. Another said his or her children were being stereotyped as bullies because they are bigger and taller than most students their age. “We believe that our kids were judged based on their looks the minute we walked on the school grounds,” the parent wrote. And another said that his or her daughter was not being sufficiently challenged academically.

Others provided more general suggestions on welcoming and enrollment procedures, such as:

“The school hosted a dance where families came and it was held in the evening. It was hosted by teachers. This is the type of activity that really provides the opportunity to connect with the school and community.”

-TVUSD parent
- “It would be nice to receive a welcome package with details on lunch costs, the lunch account program, staff info, general school policies, etc.”
- “To have a special program to support kids coming from other countries/cultures to adapt the new school, language, friends, educational system, etc.”
- “Provide a yearly calendar of ALL meetings so working parents can request time off from work to attend if possible/needed.”

Responses from parents on the survey also varied widely by district. These results were shared with district leaders so they can gain a better understanding of what parents like and don’t like. More details on the survey and the open-ended questions are available in the Technical Evaluation in Chapter 6.

Listening to parents’ and students’ concerns and learning about their transition experiences is an ongoing process for schools and districts. This is one reason why Welcoming Practices is supporting programs in which staff members or volunteers are specifically focused on welcoming new students and families. More information is provided on these efforts in the next two sections, Transition Centers and Students Welcoming Students, And Parents Welcoming Parents.

**Principals’ Views**

The research team also wanted to gather input from Consortium principals regarding the registration process. They found that in some ways, the systems used don’t meet their needs either. Of the 102 principals responding, less than half said they were satisfied with the current system. They like giving parents the opportunity to register online, but some felt the process could be streamlined even more. “It’s an inconvenience and detracts from the welcoming process,” one principal said.

They were also asked to share some of the practices that they felt were contributing to a more welcoming environment. These included coffee with the principal, a junior ambassador program and clubs focused on social skills. One principal also shared that it’s important to treat parents and students as individuals.

“The more one-on-one personalized attention we can give families, the better we are able to effectively place students and support them,” the principal said. “The registration and enrollment process, if we’re able to personalize, has the opportunity for huge dividends for students.”
Welcome Centers

The Welcoming Practices Consortium has encouraged the development of transition or welcome centers, either at the district or school level, to acclimate incoming families to their new schools, assist them with the registration process and introduce them to key staff members and other families.

Not all of the Consortium districts have a centralized welcome center, but all of them have implemented procedures to support transitioning families. One district has a centralized welcome center and another has a school-based welcome center. These two models are demonstrating different practices and routines for how to welcome new families that can inspire other districts and schools—both in the Consortium and beyond the region as well.

This section provides more details about how these centers function and how they are accomplishing the goals of Welcoming Practices.

Fallbrook Union High School District

FUHSD has created a welcome center inside Fallbrook High School, located near the guest parking lot and close to the school’s career center and counseling office. When families enter the school for the first time, counselors inform the parent liaison that a new student is registering. This allows the liaison to be prepared to greet new families and provide them the information they need.

New students come through the welcome center on their first day to get a tour. They also receive a welcome package that includes a school planner, a school t-shirt, pens, pencils, a thumb drive, and additional school information forms. Webb can also assist families with logging into the parent and student portals, and she assists families that might need help from community organizations for household items or have questions about services for students with special needs.

The creation of the center has also led to other programs to support military-connected students, including a Military Support Club that meets once a month, and the development of an online pre-enrollment form so the school liaison officer at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton can inform the district about incoming military families. In her role, the parent liaison is also informing school administrators and counselors about the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, intended to eliminate barriers for military students when they change schools.

In partnership with Camp Pendleton, Fallbrook High has also started offering LINKS, which stands for Lifestyles, Insights, Networking, Knowledge and Skills. Previously, the workshops were only available on the base, but now they are offered at the school. LINKS for Teachers provides educators a better understanding of military-connected students’ lives. They learn about the culture of the Marines, military separations and deployments, other stressful
circumstances and the variety of resources available to military families.

LINKS for Teens is open to students in both active duty and veteran families and helps them learn how to handle the challenges of growing up as a military-connected child. They get a chance to meet peers from military families and learn how to find support when they need it.

The *Welcoming Practices* evaluation team also conducted an evaluation of the Fallbrook High center, which included observing the parent liaison give new students an overview of how the center can be helpful. At the center, new students also meet a student assistant who gives them a tour of the school and answers their questions. Students are also told they can hang out in the center during breaks in the school day if they feel like they don’t have a place to go. Moving forward, the school might want to increase the number of bilingual students who serve as assistants in order to better communicate with English language learners and their parents.

**Temecula Valley Unified School District (TVUSD)**

Changes have taken place in the district’s Welcome Center since it first opened in 2014. Initially, the staff in the registration office would send families who still needed to complete forms over to the center, which has computers for visitors, to finish the process. But that just added an extra step for parents, who still had to return to the registration office to submit everything. So now officials have flipped the process to make it more convenient for incoming families.

“The Welcome Center is the first stop in enrollment,” explains Diana Damon-White, the director of special programs for TVUSD. “It allows us to catch parents that don’t have their information prior to meeting with the enrollment techs.” The staff can help make copies, send and receive faxes and answer questions about district procedures. These services help avoid situations in which parents get to the registration office without the documents they need.

The center, led by a family engagement specialist, also provides welcome packets for military families and information on other resources in the community. The center was featured in an *issue* of the *Welcoming Practices* newsletter.

The *Welcoming Practices* evaluation team also gathered feedback to learn how parents feel about the TVUSD Welcome Center in order to learn any lessons that might help other districts and schools. Observations showed that the staff members are friendly and chat with parents to help them feel comfortable. One staff member took the time to console a parent who was upset because of a missing form. Parents were also informed that they could use the center’s computers to complete forms.
Table 3: Percentages of Parents Feedback on the Welcoming Center (n = 52 – 76)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>2.00</th>
<th>3.00</th>
<th>4.00</th>
<th>5.00</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was the physical space comfortable?</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it easily accessible?</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the staff helpful and informative?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there enough resources and information available?</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive informative and useful responses to your questions about the school?</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you satisfied with your overall experience at the welcoming center?</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the process of enrolling your child in school easier?</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide enough information and referrals to resources and services in the community that you may need?</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was close enough to your place of residence or your child’s school?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help connect you with other families or school volunteers?</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Displayed above in Table 3, the results of a brief “customer satisfaction” survey showed that most parents had positive things to say about the center. More than 80 percent said it was accessible and comfortable and that the staff was friendly. A majority of respondents also said that the enrollment process was easy and that they found answers to their questions. The responses were split on whether the center was instrumental in helping parents meet other families or volunteers, but this might be due to who was working in the center at the time or whether this was important to those parents. It’s also clear that some parents felt it was inconvenient for them to register at the center rather than going to their local school.

Conclusion

The Consortium districts are demonstrating that the creation of a welcome center can also lead to other positive activities to support incoming families. Staff members who focus on transition are able to serve as a bridge between the families and the variety of district, school and community programs available for students and their parents. More details on the centers are presented in Chapter 4 of the Technical Evaluation.
Students Welcoming Students, And Parents Welcoming Parents

The WelConnect app will help incoming families connect with school district personnel and find services they need before they arrive in a new district. But an equally important part of the welcoming process for schools is to have knowledgeable and friendly people ready to show newcomers around and assist them through the transition process.

The Welcoming Practices districts are implementing two on-the-ground programs—one for students and one for parents.

Student-to-Student

A signature program of MCEC, Student-to-Student (S2S) 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. In S2S, student leaders are trained to inform newly enrolled 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 help to organize fun events and follow up with new students during the school year. They often serve as a bridge between incoming students and counselors or other school staff members that can provide more specific information about classes or school programs.

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.

- 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 the 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.
All five Consortium districts are participating in at least one version of S2S. After the first year of implementation, the Welcoming Practices evaluators recommended that “booster” training sessions for students be offered to help build a strong foundation for future sustainability of the program. Since ongoing booster sessions from MCEC won’t be feasible once the grant expires, one potential solution would be for district- and school-level staff to be trained on how to organize S2S groups in the school.

Table 4 on the next page shows the results of the evaluators’ survey of booster session participants. Students say they feel more confident in their ability to familiarize newcomers with the culture of the school, but feel less prepared to advise new students on grading scales and academic courses. As shown in Chapter 2 of the Technical Evaluation, the students also expressed confidence that they are prepared to organize and run an S2S or JS2S program in their schools, which includes activities such as creating a club action plan, distributing information about the club and setting goals.
Table 4: Trainees’ Feedback on Booster Session (N-24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.0</th>
<th>2.0</th>
<th>3.0</th>
<th>4.0</th>
<th>5.0</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>After this training, I feel I can</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>effectively provide guidance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>on:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture (customs, celebrations, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedules and scheduling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting around campus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to make connections</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local culture (expressions, community highlights, hangouts, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School policies and procedures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to deal with peer pressure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to be accepted by peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different courses in the school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading scales/GPA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reports from staff members overseeing S2S in the Consortium schools show that these programs are now well implemented, but that they each have their own unique features and activities. Below are some highlights from each district.

**Bonsall Unified School District**

At Sullivan Middle School, JS2S meet twice a month to discuss future events, recruiting new students and other aspects of their group. Plans are also under way for a Bonsall High School S2S group.
Chula Vista Elementary School District

Salt Creek Elementary, which has ES2S, hosted a “meet and greet” for military families and was planning to hold a resource fair. At McMillen Elementary, a parent support group meets twice a month and a list of all military students’ names was distributed to teachers. There are also plans to create a welcome video to familiarize new students with the school. Veterans Elementary hosts a well-attended Veteran’s Day parade every year, and student ambassadors at Wolf Canyon have been trained to help new students on their first day of school. Also at Wolf Canyon Elementary, counseling services are being offered to students identified as needing support. Finally, Heritage Elementary is restarting a Military Pride Club, and students are planning on creating a video to explain school rules to new students.

Fallbrook Union High School District

During the first year of Welcoming Practices, the district decided to continue focusing on its Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) program instead of adding S2S. While the district still has SSA, Fallbrook High School has now also added a Helping Hands Club, its version of S2S. The purpose of the group, according to parent liaison Nicole Webb, is to “create a positive atmosphere for incoming students, ease the transition for incoming and out-going students,” and help create connections between FUHSD students. The club meets once a week where students have snacks and play games.

Oceanside Unified School District

JS2S members at Stuart Mesa Elementary created a welcome video, and hey hold a weekly “meet and greet.” Members of the Marine Corps Combat Logistics Battalion 5 attended one gathering to eat lunch and play games with the students. JS2S students at North Terrace Elementary have turned a classroom into a welcome center, created a video for their website, organized fundraisers for their club and prepared backpacks and t-shirts for new students. JS2S members at Santa Margarita have elected officers and presented at a school assembly. They hold weekly meetings where they play games and eat lunch together.

Temecula Valley Unified School District

S2S members at Temecula Valley High School have participated in several community events and set up a Twitter account to keep student informed. Great Oaks High School has a Peer Leaders Uniting Students group which runs assemblies and visits elementary and middle schools. They also give tours to new students, eat lunch with them and follow up with them to make sure the transition is going well. At Abby Reinke Elementary, a clerk notifies the ES2S
team if a military family moves in or out, a welcoming PowerPoint has been created for new students, a student welcome team was established and a map showing where military families are deployed was put up in the hallway. At Vail Elementary, initial steps to create an ES2S program have been taken.

**Parent-to-Parent**

To recap efforts in the Consortium districts to support parents, the grant supported the implementation of Parent-to-Parent (PtoP), an outreach program created by MCEC in which parent trainers present workshops designed to empower both military and civilian parents to support their children. The sessions focused on topics such as kindergarten readiness, transition, test-taking skills, staying on track in school and preparing for post-secondary success. The PtoP concept supports research showing that when military parents—particularly mothers—feel positive about a move, the experience can be less stressful for their children.

For *Welcoming Practices*, four parent trainers were hired as part of the San Diego team working with the Consortium districts. During the first year, they worked to connect with existing parent organization efforts and make sure parents knew that the free workshops were available. The typical PtoP model, in which workshops are usually held in community locations, such as libraries or restaurants, was modified for the Consortium so that these gatherings would primarily be held in schools. The hope was that these workshops would eventually be sustained in districts as a way to welcome new parents and increase parent engagement.

During the second year, the parent trainers held a total of 20 workshops in the Bonsall, Chula Vista and Temecula districts. Parents who did attend the sessions provided positive feedback about the workshops, rating them a four or five on a five-point scale. The few suggestions included having more Spanish speakers, increasing attendance and having longer sessions. Evaluation team observers said that the ideas shared and the group discussions were successful, but that parents might also have benefited from having more time to interact and become a resource for each other, which is in keeping with the goals of *Welcoming Practices*.

The sessions focused on a wide range of topics, but because the workshops did not reach nearly as many parents as Consortium leaders had hoped, the program is being discontinued. A few of the workshops drew around 20 participants, but the majority of them drew less than 10 parents. The program was not successfully integrated into other parent involvement activities in the schools. At this point, some of the Consortium districts are working with MCEC to seek outside funding to continue PtoP as a community-based model.

With the completion of WelConnect, it’s also important that future efforts in which parent and student leaders are welcoming new families include the use of the app to demonstrate how it can be an important tool in the transition process.
A display on different types of parents at a PtoP workshop
California Healthy Kids Survey

One of the major components of the Building Capacity grant, which preceded Welcoming Practices, was the administration of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and the comparison between military-connected students’ responses and those from nonmilitary-connected students. In Welcoming Practices, the researchers are continuing to monitor the CHKS results and work with Consortium districts to understand and learn from the data to inform practices and meet students’ needs.

Background on CHKS

The collection, analysis and use of data were part of the foundation of the Building Capacity project. The Consortium partnered with the California Department of Education (CDE) to use the CHKS, a risk and resilience survey given to students in 5th, 7th, 9th and 11th grades. The survey gathers feedback from students on issues such as school connectedness, safety, violence and victimization, substance use and physical and mental health. The CHKS is part of the California School Climate, Healthy and Learning Survey, which also includes surveys for school staff, and for the first time in 2011, parents. The surveys are administered by WestEd, a San Francisco-based research organization.

The Building Capacity Consortium wanted to learn how the school experiences of military-connected children differ from those of their nonmilitary-connected peers and use the information to identify and direct resources or programs toward the greatest needs. The researchers also wanted to learn how the perceptions of military parents compare to those of nonmilitary parents, and to explore how teachers and other school staff members view military-connected students.

In its original version, CHKS did not compare these two groups, so the USC researchers worked with WestEd and CDE to create two military-connected school survey modules—one for elementary schools and a separate one used at the middle and high school levels. Military modules were also created for the staff and parent surveys. The optional surveys were integrated into the CHKS, are available to the entire state of California, and have served as a model for other states and countries implementing monitoring systems.

Comparison of Results Over Time

Rather than only present the 2015 CHKS data, we have instead provided a summary of the three waves of data collected since the USC team began working with the Consortium districts in 2010. The only difference is that three of the original Building Capacity districts are not in the Welcoming Practices Consortium. Here we focus on areas where there has been a positive trend since 2011 as well as areas where outcomes seem to have gotten worse over time.

At the elementary level, students generally feel positive about going to school. Since 2011, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of military-connected students saying that
they feel close to people at their school and are happy to be there. Among both groups of students, there has also been a steady, but small increase in students saying that teachers treat students fairly and that teachers and other adults care about them.

The data also show clear improvements over time in the percentage of both military and nonmilitary students saying that they have perpetrated violence by hitting or pushing other students or victimized other students by spreading mean rumors against them. The overall percentage of students reporting that they were victimized is relatively low. However, while there was a decrease for both groups between 2011 and 2013, there was a noticeable increase in 2015 in the percentage of students reporting that they had been victimized, with levels reaching even higher than 2011.

The data also show a positive trend each year in the percentage of 5th graders reporting that they have ever smoked a cigarette or had a drink of beer, wine or other alcohol. But a discouraging note is that there has been a consistent drop in both military- and nonmilitary-connected students saying that their parents help them with their homework.

In middle and high school, there has been a drop since 2011 in the percentage of nonmilitary-connected students saying they are happy to be at their school and that they feel like they are part of their school. But there has been a slight increase in the percentage of military-connected students answering yes to these questions. The percentage of military-connected students saying that they feel safe in their school has also increased over time. But there has been a decline among both groups in the percentage of students saying that someone notices when they’re not there.

Since 2011, there has been a positive trend in the percentage of students saying that they have a voice in deciding things like class rules and activities. The data also show that the districts’ efforts to address and prevent substance use issues have been effective. Since 2011, there has been a decline in the percentage of both military- and nonmilitary-connected students saying that they have smoked a cigarette, used smokeless tobacco, had a drink of alcohol, used marijuana, and used inhalants. The percentage of students in both groups saying they have ever been very drunk or sick after drinking alcohol or have been high from using drugs has also declined since 2011. Responding to the questions asking students about their most recent substance use, there have also been declines, but those have been more consistently among nonmilitary-connected students than those who are military-connected.

Another encouraging trend over the three waves of data is the overall drop in both groups of students reporting that they have been victimized over the past year. And while there has been a decline in the percentage of both groups reporting that they have either brought, seen, or been threatened with a weapon in the past 12 months, the decline among military-connected students has been less consistent. But on the negative side, the results show that about a fifth of nonmilitary-connected students and close to a third of military-connected students report having thoughts of suicide. These rates have increased slightly since 2011. In addition, more than 30 percent of nonmilitary-connected students and almost 37 percent of military-
connected students reported in 2015 that they felt so sad or hopeless—almost every day for two weeks—that they stopped doing some usual activities. While the rate among nonmilitary-connected students has been consistent, responses from students on the 2015 CHKS survey show an increase in the rate of military-connected students reporting feeling depressed.

Table 5 below uses colors to represent trends in the major areas covered by the survey—school climate, teacher support and well-being. Blue represents consistent responses over time, green indicates improvement and red represents a negative trend. The data clearly shows decreases in victimization and weapon involvement, but also decreases in students' well-being.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate victimization</td>
<td>1.89 1.81</td>
<td>1.69 1.78</td>
<td>1.64 1.79</td>
<td>2.31 1.94</td>
<td>2.09 1.91</td>
<td>1.92 1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe violence</td>
<td>.61 .86</td>
<td>.48 .79</td>
<td>.41 .74</td>
<td>.73 .95</td>
<td>.54 .83</td>
<td>.46 .79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>.19 .58</td>
<td>.17 .54</td>
<td>.15 .50</td>
<td>.32 .76</td>
<td>.22 .61</td>
<td>.22 .63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>3.53 .83</td>
<td>3.52 .85</td>
<td>3.53 .85</td>
<td>3.39 .85</td>
<td>3.47 .87</td>
<td>3.47 .90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult support</td>
<td>2.95 .76</td>
<td>2.94 .77</td>
<td>2.92 .80</td>
<td>2.90 .78</td>
<td>2.91 .77</td>
<td>2.86 .81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>2.20 .83</td>
<td>2.21 .84</td>
<td>2.20 .86</td>
<td>2.20 .83</td>
<td>2.23 .81</td>
<td>2.21 .84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>3.44 .92</td>
<td>3.39 .93</td>
<td>3.33 .97</td>
<td>3.39 .96</td>
<td>3.37 .95</td>
<td>3.23 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>2.26 .87</td>
<td>2.30 .91</td>
<td>2.33 .94</td>
<td>2.33 .91</td>
<td>2.35 .88</td>
<td>2.41 .92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal strength</td>
<td>2.67 .77</td>
<td>2.70 .80</td>
<td>2.70 .79</td>
<td>2.86 .80</td>
<td>2.91 .79</td>
<td>2.82 .76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>3.09 .82</td>
<td>3.11 .82</td>
<td>3.14 .83</td>
<td>3.06 .82</td>
<td>3.14 .78</td>
<td>3.06 .79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Differences were considered noticeable if they were larger than .1 of the SD

Conclusion

In spite of the concerning trend in students’ reporting mental health difficulties, the overall findings suggest that risky behaviors related to violence and substance use have declined significantly since 2011 in elementary, middle and high school. But a conclusion made at the end of the Building Capacity project bears repeating. The researchers expected that improvements in school climate would lead to decreases in negative outcomes. Instead, those outcomes have improved, but students’ reports on school climate—such as whether someone cares, tells them they do a good job, and listens when they have something to say—haven’t changed that much over time. With the emphasis in Welcoming Practices on helping students form connections to others at school, the researchers will continue to watch whether the school climate indicators improve.
**Surveys of Parents and School Staff Members**

In addition to gathering responses from students through the CHKS, the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey system, administered by WestEd for the California Department of Education, also includes surveys for parents and teachers. Throughout *Building Capacity*, and now in *Welcoming Practices*, the USC team has emphasized the importance of considering feedback from everyone who is part of the school community and comparing it across schools, districts and the state. Ongoing review of these parents’ and staff members’ responses help schools better understand areas of concern.

*California School Parent Survey*

Parents in the Consortium districts are generally positive about their children’s schools. They feel that their children have ample opportunities to participate in classroom activities and that school is a safe place for their child. Parents are less likely to agree, however, that schools have adequate counseling services or are able to address students’ specific needs, talents or interests.

Over the three waves of data, parents’ perceptions of their schools improved between 2011 and 2013, but then dropped slightly in 2015. In most cases, however, their responses were still more positive in 2015, compared with 2011. The *Welcoming Practices* team also continues to monitor military parents’ perceptions of their children’s schools. **Table 6** shows, for example, that military parents are less satisfied with their sense of connection to other families than they are with other aspects of the schools their children attend. Further details on the parent survey are available in Chapter 9 of the Technical Evaluation.

**Table 6**: Frequencies and Percentages of Military Parents Reporting Satisfied or Very Satisfied by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a military parent, how satisfied with:</th>
<th>2011 N</th>
<th>2011 %</th>
<th>2013 N</th>
<th>2013 %</th>
<th>2015 N</th>
<th>2015 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect school staff show military families</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>79.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational supports military provided to school</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of connection to other parents</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding teachers show you as military parent</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness of school administration to your concerns as military parent</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How transition to this school was handled by school or district</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How teachers treat child in school</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General education quality in this school</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduced in 2011, the parent survey is still relatively new in the state, and the number of parents in the Consortium districts responding has not increased over time. These low response rates interfere with districts’ ability to gain a more complete picture of how parents feel about their children’s schools. One solution might be for the Consortium to conduct the survey so they can gather feedback that is more representative of the parents in their districts.

*California School Climate Survey*

Responses from teachers and other school staff members show agreement with parents in one key area—the lack of counseling services in schools to meet the individual needs of students. Also, similar to parents, educators say there are limited resources to address the needs of students with disabilities. In general, however, Consortium educators say their schools provide a supportive and inviting learning environment for students. Since 2011, there have been increases in the percentage of educators saying that schools try to make instruction relevant to students and are setting high standards for student performance. These increases may be a reflection of schools’ implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which have created a greater emphasis on higher-order thinking, students showing their work and using evidence in their writing.

Over the three survey administrations, there have been increases in educators reporting that their schools support them and create good working environments in which adults want students to do their best. Educators views on areas of concern—such as drug and alcohol use, bullying and fighting in their schools—were mixed. In 2015, racial/ethnic conflicts among students were seen as the most severe, while weapon possession was seen as an insignificant issue. Over time, there was also an increase in staff members saying that discipline problems are not handled effectively.

As shown in Table 7, we also see increases in educators saying they need professional development in areas such as helping students meet academic standards, creating a positive school environment, and meeting student’s social, emotional and developmental needs.
Table 7: Percentages of Staff Expressing Needs for More Professional Development, Training, and Mentorship by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting academic standards</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidenced-based methods of instruction</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive behavioral support/classroom management</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with diverse racial, ethnic, cultural groups</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally relevant pedagogy for the school's students</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving English language learners</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the achievement gap</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving special education (IEP) students</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting the social, emotional, developmental needs of youth</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a positive school environment</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On questions relating to serving military-connected students, more staff members report that these students have particular strengths and are supported by peers and teachers. This could be a reflection of the specific efforts in Consortium schools related to improving experiences and outcomes for military-connected students. Educators also reported less need for training to meet these students’ needs, which is also a sign that the training opportunities and resources made available to the districts since the beginning of Building Capacity have had positive results. Additional details on staff members’ responses are available in Chapter 10 of the Technical Evaluation.
Developing a New Guidebook

*Building Capacity*, which preceded the *Welcoming Practices* initiative, included the creation, publishing and dissemination of four guidebooks designed to help educators and parents support military-connected students attending public schools.

The books were well received by schools and military family organizations and were listed as best-sellers by Teachers College Press, which published the books along with MCEC. The books have been purchased by both military- and nonmilitary-connected schools and districts across the country and used in MCEC training workshops. Thousands were also ordered by the LAUSD, which is working to create more awareness of military-connected students and increase services for this population.

Following the success of those books, the team began writing a new guide focusing on implementing welcoming practices in schools. Featuring programs and ideas from across the country, the guide will highlight strategies for supporting students through transition--from their first introduction to kindergarten to changing schools during the challenging middle and high school years.

The guide will also include the voices of parents and students regarding their experiences with school registration procedures and being new in a school community. While the guide will be informed by practices that focus on military-connected students, the focus will be broader and ideally useful for any school that wants to provide more support for students changing schools.

The new guide will include, for example, sections on research related to student mobility, using technology to smooth the transition process, the role of school staff members, and different ways to follow up with students to make sure the transition is going well.

Release of the guide is expected in 2016.
Beyond the Consortium

Beginning with the Building Capacity grant, and now with Welcoming Practices, the USC team and the Consortium districts have always hoped to improve the way all schools serve military children and families, not just those in the southern California area.

The Consortium has been encouraged by how the ideas and strategies for supporting military families have spread across the country. This section provides updates on some of those developments.

Los Angeles

As mentioned in the Developing the WelConnect Mobile App section, it’s possible that LAUSD could be the first district outside of the Consortium to pick up the use of the app. This past school year, the district became the first large metropolitan district in the country to ask families on student enrollment cards if their children are military- or veteran-connected. The information will be used to provide services in schools with large numbers of students from active duty or veteran families.

The decision by LAUSD to add the question on the enrollment cards was the result of a strong partnership involving the Building Capacity/Welcoming Practices team, the office of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, and the Los Angeles Veterans Collaborative. This accomplishment sets an example for school districts in other major cities across the country.

LAUSD’s social workers, psychologists, counselors, and administrators have also been using the Building Capacity guidebooks to learn more about the issues facing military- and veteran-connected students in public schools. LAUSD staff members have also received training in a resilience-building program called FOCUS created by researchers at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) that has been used effectively with military students and families across the nation. These training opportunities were the result of collaboration between the USC team and the FOCUS team at UCLA.

State of California

These partners, and many others, were also nearly successful in seeing California add a military student identifier for the entire state. SB 369, a bill to add a military identifier to the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, passed both the state Senate and the Assembly, which is the furthest the proposal has ever gotten in the state and is still a major achievement. Gov. Jerry Brown, however, vetoed the bill. As this report is being written, advocates are focusing on overriding the governor’s veto in the legislature. There’s also the possibility that the language of the bill could be amended to include not just students in active duty families, but also those with a veteran parent or a parent in the National Guard or the Reserves.
National Work

In addition to advocating for a military student identifier in California, these partners are also monitoring and working toward progress in this area at the national level. Working with MCEC, the USC team has been advocating for a military identifier to be included as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Such a provision passed in both the U.S. Senate and the House this past summer. A final reconciliation bill has not yet been approved, but this is still a major milestone. Members of our team have also been collaborating with White House staff to organize a conference in Washington D.C. that would bring together researchers, practitioners, military personnel, and teacher educators to discuss best practices for serving military-connected students in public schools.

International Work

For the past couple years, the USC research team and the evaluation team at Bar Ilan University in Israel have been supporting the development of a school monitoring model in Chile. Leading the work in Chile are Veronica Lopez and Paula Ascorra from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaiso and Mariana Bilbau from University of Chile in Santiago.

The monitoring system was developed in Israel and is similar in many ways to the CHKS. So far, the model has been implemented in Valparaiso, a large city in Chile, and the team has also been invited to create a system for all low-income schools in Chile, which would encompass a total of roughly 100,000 students. The Chilean researchers are also interested in participating in an international study of children’s well-being and are working with us on developing an instrument that would allow for international comparisons. Studies are being conducted to compare student outcomes in Israel, the U.S. and Chile. Joint research papers are also in progress.
Conclusion

With the release of the WelConnect app, the vision of creating a full spectrum of support services for transitioning families is getting closer to reality.

The app allows military-connected students and parents, as well as other families going through the process of changing schools, to locate the programs and services they need. And then the welcome centers, welcoming programs and other on-the-ground services are there to provide in-person support.

Much work remains in terms of getting schools, families and community providers to use the app and show others how it can benefit them. Demonstrating the app’s potential is another important role for the frontline staff members, volunteers and students who are implementing welcoming programs in the schools.

Over the past year, the Consortium has learned a lot about how to make schools more welcoming and about the many different ways school communities can provide support to students and parents that are transitioning between schools. We plan to continue to capture these lessons so that more schools can create welcoming environments.