



ASSOCIATION OF  
**DEFENSE  
COMMUNITIES**

A PROGRAM OF



**BLUE STAR  
FAMILIES**

# COVID-19

## MILITARY SUPPORT INITIATIVE

**PRESENTED BY**

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### **K-12 EDUCATION WORKING GROUP:**

LESSONS LEARNED, PROMISING PRACTICES  
& RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

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# WELCOME

Hello!

Over the past five months, the COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (CMSI) has focused on the needs of military families and veterans during the coronavirus pandemic. Through research and policy efforts, convenings of key leaders from the corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors, and a series of virtual town halls, Blue Star Families and the Association of Defense Communities responded rapidly to the evolving concerns and needs of this community. This vital work wouldn't have been possible without the help of over 60 nonprofits, corporations and philanthropies, and government partners organized under the White Oak Collaborative.

As a result, a series of working groups convened to address important areas of concern. The Military Child Education Coalition, a key member of the White Oak Collaborative, led the working group on K-12 education. Experts from the field of education, government leaders, corporate partners, and nonprofits came together for a robust conversation to evaluate major challenges in education.

Five key focus areas highlighted during the working group included:

- Access to Learning
- Social and Emotional Well-Being
- Learning Gaps
- Transition
- Individualized Education Program (IEP)/Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Within these areas, the group established a list of key takeaways that will prove useful as military-impacted schools develop reopening plans and start the 2020-2021 academic year during the COVID-19 pandemic. These conclusions include lessons learned, promising practices, and recommendations moving forward.

Additional resources for military-impacted schools and military families can be found at <https://covid19militarysupport.org/>.

Best,



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# INTRODUCTION

Schools play a critical role in our collective ability to operate as a society. As Michael Griffith, Senior Researcher and Policy Analyst at the Learning Policy Institute, put it: “The pandemic and resulting school closures have made clear the essential role schools play in the lives of students, families, and communities. Besides their core role of advancing learning, they have fed millions of children and families, provided computers and connectivity to those without, and—in many cases—enabled childcare for essential workers.”<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 Military Support Initiative (CMSI) has thus endeavored to identify lessons learned, promising practices, and recommendations for policy makers and military/civilian leaders as we seek to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on our approximately 1.2 million school-aged military children.<sup>2</sup>

These key takeaways were developed in partnership with the Military Child Education Coalition, as well as numerous other CMSI White Oak Collaborative partners.

# PARTNERS

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Griffith, “What Will It Take to Stabilize Schools in the Time of COVID-19?,” Learning Policy Institute, May 7, 2020, Accessed on June 12, 2020, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/what-will-it-take-stabilize-schools-time-covid-19>.

<sup>2</sup> “Military Families and Veterans,” U.S. Department of Education, Accessed on June 12, 2020, <https://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families>.

# FINDINGS

## SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

1. Routines and communication are important for students, parents, and schools.
  - a. A routine will help lower anxiety for kids and parents.
  - b. Open, age-appropriate communication between parents and children helps to set expectations, provide an opportunity for challenges to be discussed, and validate a child's feelings.
  - c. Improved communication between parents and teachers can help ensure parents have the resources they need for the new academic environment, and it provides an opportunity for parents to discuss challenges that may be presented by remote learning.
2. Transparency between families and schools can help provide peace of mind for all parties involved.
  - a. Messaging from schools needs to be routine, detailed, easily accessible, and in a consistent format.
3. There's a need to improve the mental and physical health of students.
  - a. Frequent check-ins between schools, teachers, and families can help provide an indication of how the child is doing at key intervals throughout the school year.
  - b. Schools should provide a holistic approach to family well-being in an online setting.
4. It is important for schools and parents to anticipate the stress this school year will bring for students, and plan for it in school outcomes and in the classroom.
5. It is also necessary to provide school staff with permission to introduce flexibility in their personal and professional lives to support whole family mental health.

## SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

1. Parents need to be able to communicate what their students were doing before the transition.
  - a. Have a copy of school records, know what worked and what didn't work at the previous school, and what classes were taken.
2. Schools need to allow for flexibility with regard to enrollment requirements as many families had trouble obtaining transcripts or other documentation prior to their recent Permanent Change of Station (PCS).
  - a. Schools should accept hand-carried items rather than only official transcripts.
3. Schools need to have a support plan for displaced military families or those who are attending multiple schools in the same school year due to a delayed PCS.
4. Schools need to ensure information regarding available resources is consolidated and efficiently communicated to new families.
  - a. Families need a roadmap of where to find resources and who to ask questions.
5. Schools need to provide extracurricular activities when possible in low-risk environments to help ease families into their new school and provide outlets away from screen time.

## ACCESS TO LEARNING

1. Make remote learning work.
  - a. Decision makers need data about their students and staff to better understand the issues faced and prioritize the fixes that will work best for their families.
  - b. School districts and cities need to map “Internet deserts” and prioritize funding/fixes.
    - i. It is important to ensure sufficient Internet speeds are available to allow students to learn remotely.
  - c. Funding needs to be reevaluated.
    - i. Funding priorities include equipment, training, and mobile hotspots.
    - ii. Different funding sources may be needed in different areas depending on need.
2. Teachers and school staff should construct lessons to account for limited access to the Internet and technology.
  - a. Design curriculum for low bandwidth/low tech requirements. “Download and go” options should be considered versus content that needs a continuous Internet connection.
  - b. Design lessons to work from smartphones, which will allow easier access for some students.
  - c. Curate tools and tips for teachers to assist in planning for students with limited technology and Internet access.
  - d. Limit live video class sessions using pre-recorded content, which allows students and families to access as they are able.
3. Offer training to parents on how to navigate distance learning. As parents take on a more active role in teaching their children remotely, it is important to ensure they are empowered and educated on how to help their children learn effectively.
  - a. During enrollment, encourage parents to self-identify that they will have remote learning challenges at home, and share why, so schools can best prepare them.
  - b. Curate tools and tips for parents on how to best support their child’s remote learning. Examples include creating a dedicated workspace for schoolwork within the home and a consistent schedule.
4. Find innovative ways to disseminate information utilizing partnerships to support military families having access to lessons.
  - a. Encourage large Internet companies to provide/continue to provide free services to military families to limit disparities in Internet access.
  - b. Utilize local broadcast stations. School districts can broadcast lessons by grade and subject levels working with local PBS channels.
  - c. Encourage installations to offer locations (libraries, chapels, community centers, CDCs, etc.) with free WiFi access for families to use if they do not have consistent access at home.

## LEARNING GAPS

1. Training and educating parents is one of the keys to successfully navigate today's educational environment.
  - a. Provide parents with information on the resources available within their school, installation, community, and district.
  - b. Ensure what parents are using at home is age and grade appropriate - different modalities for different ages or learning styles.
  - c. Provide parents with training and tools to identify if their child is behind academically or developmentally.
2. Encourage the DoD to prevent mid-year PCSes or PCSes for families with kids at specific grade levels. Emphasize stabilization wherever possible to ensure continuity in education. This is particularly important for high school seniors, students with special needs, students in career training programs, and students in gifted and talented programs.
3. Continuity across all aspects of education, including curriculum and instruction, is crucial to minimize gaps.
4. Explore options for virtual public schools, which would allow students to stay in their home school despite a PCS.

## IEP/EFMP SPECIAL EDUCATION

1. Promising practices from the transition to remote learning fall into three major categories: flexibility, communication, and knowledge.
  - a. Adapt to ensure the continuation of 1:1 instruction by utilizing remote learning options.
  - b. Families value direct communication from the school district/teacher and transparency on their decision-making process as it relates to remote special education instruction.
  - c. Transitions to remote learning were made easier when teachers provided parents with strategies for learning at home.
  - d. Encourage small group virtual chats with parents and teachers so there is communication and a forum for questions throughout the school year.
  - e. Develop a boilerplate for military families who have students with special needs and/or IEPs that they can reference during discussions with their district, school, and teachers. The boilerplate should include information on what questions to ask and who to ask.
2. Schools should allow for a more localized approach to decision making to not limit teachers' options for supporting students with special needs.
  - a. Macro-level decision makers make the best practices possible for implementation.
  - b. Districts that gave their teachers the authority to do 1:1 instruction and personalize education for students with special needs ultimately provided their students with a superior remote learning experience than districts that did not.
  - c. Schools may require training on how to support special education in a virtual environment.

- d. Provide military families the ability to enroll in a school prior to establishing domicile. This will allow families to start the IEP process and communicate resource needs as soon as possible upon arrival at a new duty station.
- 3. Provide qualifying military families with portable IEPs to ensure continuity of education services.
  - a. IEPs should be portable not only across state lines, but also to virtual learning environments. Many states are implementing distance learning plans. Families need very specific language that outlines what virtual learning plans should look like to meet IEP requirements.
  - b. Ask the Department of Education to partner with the Department of Defense/DoDEA to conduct a study on how to make portable IEPs a reality for military families.
    - i. Develop a pilot program to test the findings of the study to establish best practices that can be implemented across the military community.
- 4. Designate a representative within each district who can advocate for military families with a student with special needs and/or IEP. Doing so would assist them in navigating the legal processes and facilitating important conversations with schools.