RESEARCH BRIEF

Military Parents' Perceptions of Public School Support for Their Children

ABSTRACT

"This study examined how military-connected (MC) and nonmilitary parents perceive civilian schools' climate, schools' encouragement of parental involvement, problems in school, their needs in school, and their school satisfaction. The sample comprised 3,914 parents from eight school districts in the San Diego area. The parents completed the core and MC parent modules of the California School Climate Survey for Parents. Approximately 10 percent identified themselves as MC. Military parents provided significantly more negative assessments of schools' climate and encouragement for parental involvement compared with nonmilitary parents in the same schools. Nevertheless, they saw fewer violence problems in schools compared with nonmilitary parents. Military parents' most pressing need was for information on educational resources for military families. Although military parents were satisfied with many aspects of the school, a relatively large proportion expressed dissatisfaction with a sense of connection to other families in the school, the degree of understanding that staff showed them, and the responsiveness of the school administration to their concerns. Educators and social workers may need more training regarding military culture and the needs of military students and families. Programs should be developed to effectively involve military parents in schools and address their needs."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Prior researchers have found several key areas where military-connected (MC) families hold negative perceptions of civilian school climate, school encouragement, needs, and satisfaction within schools. However, few studies have compared how military and civilian parents perceive their children's schools, particularly the school climate. This study compares the perceptions military and civilian families have on school culture, encouragement of students, parental involvement, and availability of resources at civilian public schools in the San Diego, CA area.

- MC families reported lower satisfaction with overall school climate and perceived encouragement from school faculty and staff. MC families were also dissatisfied with the resources available for military-connected children.

- This research highlights several areas where schools and communities can better accommodate the unique needs and circumstances of military-connected families and students. These areas include integrating military culture into school curriculum, training social workers and teachers in military-specific issues, and developing programs designed to address the needs of MC children, such as community integration.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Previous studies demonstrate the importance of schools as a source of support for both military and civilian families. The findings in this study confirm the importance of school support, while also highlighting that military families feel that educators do not understand the complex issues, needs, and desires military connected children sometimes face. School administrators should take practical steps to alleviate the concerns MC parents reported. One of the ways the concerns can be addressed is through the faculty and staff maintaining open communication with MC families. School districts with MC students should conduct in-service training for all faculty and staff to teach their faculty and staff about the complex nature of military culture and how the culture could shape MC families. This training should provide educators with extensive background and context of military culture, and provide educators with the resources and knowledge necessary to adequately assist military parents and their children. In this study, MC parents wanted greater awareness of the educational resources available for their children, higher quality programming and activities suited for their children's needs, and a stronger sense of connection within their school communities. Schools and local communities could address this by designing initiatives focused on some of the unique needs of MC families, like after-school activities and parent programs. MC families should take advantage of the valuable support school communities can provide.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might partner with school districts that have high concentrations of military-connected students to facilitate training programs for teachers and school social workers on the most effective ways to integrate the complex nature of being military connected into classroom and individual discussions. In addition to addressing the needs of MC students, these programs might be an effective way to acclimate non-military connected students to the unique cultural experiences of many MC youth. The DoD and the DoE might jointly conduct evidence-based assessments to determine what kind of programming and curriculum best address the challenges military children sometimes encounter. The DoD and DoE might use these assessments to create a comprehensive set of resources for educators who work with military connected children. Policymakers might consider allocating additional financial resources to civilian schools with large military connected student populations to assist with designing integrative programming that bridges the gap between civilian and military life.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings were drawn from samples within the state of California, specifically the San Diego area. Future studies should collect data from other geographically diverse areas across the U.S. to further understand the needs of MC families. Several factors might affect the experiences of MC families' utilization of civilian public schools. Future researchers should assess these factors, which might include length of time spent at current school, time elapsed since last deployment, and distinct characteristics of the school. Additionally, researchers should identify other military service-related variables that might affect MC families' perceptions of their children's schools. Future researchers should study the types of initiatives that have successfully integrated MC families into school communities through curriculum changes, faculty and staff activities, and community programming. In this study, the researchers found that MC parents' perceptions of school safety were very different from non-MC parents. Berkowitz, Tunac de Pedro, Couture, Benbenishty, and Astor question if MC parents rated the schools as less dangerous than non-MC parents because of a conscious intention to place their children in safer schools. If this is the case, they recommend that future researchers use the data to draw conclusions on how MC parents choose schools for their children, paying special attention to trends.

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