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Military OneSource Podcast

Episode title: Postsecondary Readiness: Equitable Access and Opportunities for Military-Connected Students

Transcript by [Rev.com](#)

Intro Voiceover ([00:06](#)):

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [MilitaryOneSource.mil](#).

Bruce Moody ([00:26](#)):

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Military families, they move a lot. So, if they're military parents, that means their kids are changing schools a lot. With all of that change, to help with that, we have the school liaison. That's our topic for the day. It's actually a topic of a whole series of podcasts. You can go back and find two previous episodes on this topic with my guests who are joining us today, Kristen Acquah and Meredith Ayala. Welcome to the both of you. Kristen Acquah, let's just start with you. Tell us a little bit about you, and then we'll welcome Meredith.

Kristen Acquah ([01:01](#)):

Thanks, Bruce. Yes, I'm Kristen Acquah. I am a school liaison at Headquarters Marine Corps, formerly a school liaison with the Army.

Bruce Moody ([01:11](#)):

Excellent. Meredith, over to you.

Meredith Ayala ([01:14](#)):

Yes. No, thank you so much, Bruce. My name's Meredith Ayala, and I'm currently a family partnership specialist in the school division in Virginia. Prior to that, I worked as a school counselor for a number of years, and I'm military-connected in a number of ways.

Bruce Moody ([01:28](#)):

All right. We use that phrase, military-connected, has some legalese attached to it. So let's just begin with the definition when we talk about, well, who are these military-connected students.

Kristen Acquah ([01:42](#)):

Sure. So that I don't get in trouble...

Bruce Moody ([01:46](#)):

Go for it.

Kristen Acquah ([01:47](#)):

... [inaudible 00:01:47] is defined. A military-connected child is someone who has a parent or a guardian caregiver that is serving in the United Armed Services, which fall under active, Reserve, National Guard, or a parent who has recently left the military and has either been discharged or veteran status. But you'll learn the term "military-connected" is used very loosely, but just for so I don't get in trouble, it's that definition specifically.

Bruce Moody ([02:19](#)):

Okay. All right. The next question is we're going to be focusing on life after high school, which is postsecondary education, but when does the planning for that transition begin for a military-connected youth?

Meredith Ayala ([02:37](#)):

I am so glad that you asked that. Actually, our parents really are our child's first teacher and parents are their experts about their children. So I'm going to go into research for a second. We'll tell you that the most accurate predictor of a student's school achievement is the extent to which a family encourages learning and that family and parent involvement is a predictor of postsecondary success and also meaningful employment. So when you ask, when does that planning begin, I would dare to say birth, maybe even prior. Data really supports there's a connection between kindergarten readiness and postsecondary readiness. All of the experiences, the opportunities, even the challenges that our military-connected students face do help prepare them for that transition to life after high school.

Bruce Moody ([03:33](#)):

When we talk about life after high school, what are we including in the context of this conversation? Because we're talking about postsecondary education. What are we preparing students for?

Meredith Ayala ([03:44](#)):

Yeah, no, that's a good question. We sometimes use postsecondary opportunities, postsecondary education and life after high school interchangeably. What we're really talking about is after you graduate from high school, so whether that's work, whether that's four-year university, two-year, apprenticeship, going into the military. So it's really either further education, jobs or trainings after high school.

Bruce Moody ([04:11](#)):

So it's really whatever comes next?

Meredith Ayala ([04:13](#)):

Yes, and preparing for that, so having as many opportunities to prepare during K through 12 so that when you are in your senior year, you have many paths that you could take.

Bruce Moody ([04:24](#)):

Okay. So by the time you get to senior year, you've moved a lot. How do these multiple transitions affect the experience of military-connected youth in their planning and their access to opportunities?

Meredith Ayala ([04:38](#)):

Yeah, no, I'm so glad that you asked that. One of the ways that we see these multiple transitions affect students' postsecondary planning and access to opportunities is really through what we call our gaps and our overlaps in learning. Every school district does education in a unique way, and sometimes students will be in class and they'll hear references to curricula covered in earlier grades and they must now make up that learning because they weren't in that school district at that time. Other times, they'd hear there are many overlaps in learning with information, so our students may not feel challenged. When we talk about access to rigorous classes, access to opportunities, that really is critical. Our military-connected youth may not have the same access due to when they arrive at the school. Gifted and talented and other services may look different as they transition from school to school as well, as well as specialized programs with deadlines such as career training programs and academy programs.

([05:44](#)):

We also need to be aware that students transitioning may have held leadership positions in JRTC and other student organizations, not to mention as they're transitioning at the high school level, transitioning between AP, IB, dual enrollment can be challenging.

Kristen Acquah ([06:02](#)):

We also want to highlight too, we know our military-connected youth face a lot of challenges in their academic career, but they're also champions in their own journeys. We often see them being more adaptable, resilient and a lot more mature than their peers. Many of them have expressed that because of those frequent transitions that they felt that they were better prepared for life after high school and better prepared for those different career paths than some of their peers.

Bruce Moody ([06:34](#)):

Now, what about when military-connected youth are applying to or transitioning to their chosen path after high school? Can you share your thoughts, your experiences around supporting military-connected youth through the admission processes and their transition to whatever postsecondary opportunities they elect to pursue?

Kristen Acquah ([06:58](#)):

Yes. Within the school liaison office, as we've shared in previous podcasts, the school liaison office is really a hub of resources. With those different partnerships that we have with our education centers and community colleges and universities, we can really navigate or direct or guide families to information as it relates to Yellow Ribbon, the GI bill and FAFSA and scholarship deadlines. All of these different resources are still applicable regardless of which career path they take. Often cases, students can still utilize those funds or financial aid and scholarships. It doesn't just have to be towards a university. It can be towards also vocational school, trade school, and things of that sort, but just being aware of that information is very important. The other thing I want to say is as a school liaison, many of us connect families with the district because there are so many resources within the schools in the district on just those different academic programs.

([08:05](#)):

I've been blessed in the district where there's AP, IB, AVID, STEM, a Governor's School, and immersion programs. This may not be with every school district, but for families that may have experienced this previously or want to get involved with it or felt that their student would benefit the most, it's really

important for them to have access to that. And the other thing is we always encourage our families to start as early as they can to connect with their desired school, with that school counselor, so then there, they can start building their school course classes. So start doing those course selections and then learning specifically, like, the culture of their school district and then the different processes and the guidance that the school district also has.

Meredith Ayala ([08:51](#)):

Yes. I have had families contact me and contact me right now prior to their arrival to discuss not only their children's courses and accommodations, but even their goals and their interests as well. Just this week, I had one parent reach out to me whose child is not going into kindergarten this year, but is going in next year. Then also just recently, I had a family reach out to me with some guidance around high school course advising because they may likely be moving here the following year. As Kristen said, starting out early and developing those lines of communication is key. Many families do have concerns about their child's high school transcript and how it might compare with students who've had the opportunity to reside in one district kindergarten through 12th grade. We continue to encourage all of our stakeholders to look at the educational records through an asset-based lens and a strength-based lens considering what our military-connected youth with all of their life experiences and navigating different curriculum bring to their postsecondary communities.

([10:03](#)):

Kristen and I have been so fortunate to lead workshops at the local and national level where we actually compare transcripts and get folks thinking about that. As students apply for postsecondary opportunities, start early. This includes taking those admissions exams, thinking about those letters of recommendation from teachers at a leaving school, if your family may be PCSing, really celebrating being a military-connected student and make it a part of admissions essays, career statements. You can absolutely address those transcripts, and we encourage students just to continue to highlight the amazing, amazing young adults that they are.

Bruce Moody ([10:43](#)):

So you both work really closely with the students, the parents, all the school liaisons do, but can you share with us what are some of the military-connected youth that you've engaged recently and what are they saying about their experiences with postsecondary readiness for their transition to life after high school?

Meredith Ayala ([11:04](#)):

Thank you so much for asking that. One of the favorite parts of my position is I do get to connect with our military-connected students and graduates. Just recently, we were able to conduct focus groups with current high school students as well as college first-year students and recent college graduates. We asked them these questions, how was the transition or how are you feeling about the transition? They actually all shared pretty related stories. Our high school students and our seniors told us that they really weren't nervous about transitioning because for a military-connected youth, transition is natural. I'll tell you just last week, I met with a fourth grader who had attended six schools and was very proud that they had attended six schools. So I just think of the resiliency of that military-connected kiddo. They have said it has helped them gain perspective, learn how to communicate and interact with anyone, very respectful of different and diverse cultures.

([12:07](#)):

Our first-year college students and our recent graduates echo the same and even told us that they ended up helping their peers with their transition. They continued to tell us just that successfully navigating those gaps and overlaps that we talked about and navigating those transitions, engaging in challenging courses that impact time management made the transition fairly easier or seamless for them.

Kristen Acquah ([12:37](#)):

I agree. Thank you, Meredith. In my experience with the youth who have attended installation youth centers and youth programs, they've shared the similar perspectives as well. Many of them enlisted immediately after high school. Some went on to four-year universities, some on to vocational schools and others just went straight into the workforce. Some, they're on Wall Street, but they've all expressed, due to the exposure as a military-connected student, those experiences. Life at the high school was really easy and really smooth. They really appreciate it, the different youth programs that we offer within our youth centers and our youth programs such as youth sponsorship, youth council, those youth leadership forums and all of the other affiliated programs that we offer within our child and youth programs and our child and youth services facilities. So what I got back from them is that they were further prepared because they had opportunities to be a leader within their community.

([13:42](#)):

They had opportunities to review data and assess it and really develop those critical thinking skills and it really prepared them for their next chapter into adulthood. So again, referring to a statement that I made earlier, it takes a village to support the whole child. I think the collaboration with the installation and the school and the community all gathering together around our military-connected students and providing them with that strong foundation and supporting and building our future leaders is imperative. It really helps them with creating and having a stronger sense of self and a stronger confidence, so when they go out into the world, they already know what to do. They already know what to expect. Even if they don't know what to expect, they know how to manage it and work through it.

Bruce Moody ([14:36](#)):

Kristen Acquah and Meredith Ayala, thank you to the both of you and really thanks to all of those who serve as a school liaison to our military families, to our military parents and our military-connected youth. Thank you for all that you do for our military families.

Meredith Ayala ([14:36](#)):

Thank you.

Kristen Acquah ([14:51](#)):

Thank you.

Bruce Moody ([14:52](#)):

Want to remind everybody that we covered a lot of ground. We did it over three separate episodes and we'll provide links to the other two because this is a set of episodes in which there is a whole lot of information for military parents. So thanks for joining us and want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can click on it, send us a note, a comment, a question or even let us know what you'd like us to talk about in a future episode. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to

your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics that help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.