

Military OneSource Podcast — School Liaisons and School Districts Partnering Together to Support Military-Connected Youth Postsecondary Planning and Readiness Podcast (School Liaison Episode 2 of 3)

School Liaison Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Military families move a lot, so military parents, that means their kids are changing schools a lot. To help with all of this change is the school liaison. And to talk about that are my guests we have with us today, Kristen Acquah and Meredith Ayala. Kristen, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.

Kristen Acquah:

Oh. Thank you, Bruce. Thank you for having us here. My name is Kristen Acquah. I was a former school liaison with the Army, and now I am at Headquarters Marine Corps in their school liaison program.

Bruce Moody:

Great. And Meredith, how about you?

Meredith Ayala:

Yes, thank you so much. My name is Meredith Ayala, and I'm a family partnership specialist in a local school division. Prior to that, I was a school counselor for many years and also worked at the university setting. Also military connected myself, so thanks for having us.

Bruce Moody:

Great. Great to have you with us. So we're going to focus today on postsecondary education planning. So let's just get right into it. What are the ways in which the school liaison and the school districts can work together to support military families and military connected youth as they plan postsecondary goals?

Kristen Acquah:

So the school liaison program, what we really try to do is just build that support network to provide the best educational experience for our military connected students. Which that might look different at every installation and different with every community. But specifically from our experience, we just really want to promote awareness of those unique educational needs of our military connected students.

And I was very fortunate and lucky to have Meredith Ayala, who is very connected with the military community already, as a partner. I'll say a partner in work. I would say a partner in crime, but a partner in work to supporting our military community in Virginia. So for any school liaison, and most school liaisons are working with school-designated POCs or they find someone who has passion around the work for military connected students. And then like I said, in my lucky self, I had Meredith Ayala in the division level to supporting me in the work that we did around military connected students.

Meredith Ayala:

Yes. You know what? I'll jump in. The school division just really values the collaboration that we have with our school liaison and with our local installations. At our district, we created a military connected youth process action team. And that school liaison, as well as other community stakeholders, are a key member of that team so that we can really identify what the needs are and make sure we're meeting those needs.

So there are multiple ways that we have partnered and some of the examples are around workshops Kristen and I have delivered at the installation, at schools and division-wide. We did do one on supporting military connected youth for our counselors. We also did another workshop about preparing for postsecondary opportunities, at a virtual postsecondary fair. And one of our favorites is doing a PCS challenge for all of our new counselors as well. So there's been many opportunities just to increase, as Kristen said, to increase that stakeholder awareness.

Kristen Acquah:

And to just piggyback off of that, that PCS challenge, for those that are not aware, literally make school counselors PCS. So it was a really great opportunity for them to see how do families ... what happens in a PCS season, how can you have these desired locations and then you get diverted to somewhere else. And then you can get diverted again, and oh, by the way, you can't take any of the things that you'd love to take.

So it was really great and it really showed our new school counselors like, "Oh my goodness, I wouldn't even be able to deal with this." And all the things that are happening prior to them seeing that student on the first day. So we really enjoyed that workshop.

But another example too would be, as we're supporting and building awareness around supporting transitioning families, we provide more, we try to promote more of a smooth transition. So really explaining to those families that are transitioning in, like talking about those deadlines, course registrations, extracurricular activities. And then we collaborate with the families as they're transitioning in and out of the district. So we really want to ensure that the family is feeling supported on both sides, one on the installation side as well as on the school side.

And one way of doing that is really taking that approach of educating the educator through, again, the workshops that Meredith just talked about, the various ones that she just spoke on, as well as facilitating those opportunities to elaborate further into our Exceptional Family Member Program, which is also with the EFMP. So for educators to be aware of the process that an EFMP family also goes through as well.

Meredith Ayala:

And I'll piggyback really quick. We've had opportunities, which I love, to really collaborate around opportunities for family voice through community conversations with our military families, focus groups with our military connected students. That has just been such an amazing collaboration to make sure that we're hearing from our military families and our military connected students.

Bruce Moody:

So that's really great information. Can you give us some examples, though, of when you work together to support military connected youth around planning for life after high school?

Meredith Ayala:

Yes, absolutely. Actually, Bruce, there are so many examples of how we've collaborated around on-time graduation, which we've mentioned previously, comparable services, gifted and talented, extracurricular activities, really supporting the seamless transition of our students across districts and overseas.

Kristen Acquah:

Yeah. So one example in particular that comes to mind, when Meredith and I were connected to a family by our state commissioner, and the family had expressed concerns around their credit transfer and state equivalency testing. So we took pieces of it and then worked, but worked collaboratively together and checked in.

So Meredith worked with the district school counseling to go through with the credits and things of that sort and making sure that they were okay. And then I provided support around the language of the compact and in the spirit of the compact. So then we both collaboratively worked together with the two schools, the current and the previous, as well as their school counseling team, and then the family just to provide the best situational outcomes.

So we always talk in military, as far as working the chain of command situation. So we take that same mindset as we're working with families. And the biggest thing is we really want to resolve things at the lowest level possible. And that's why it's always best that we try to maintain that relationship with the family and the school. And what I say by that is that trust, so that family building that trust in the school that, "Hey, yes, we may have had this hiccup, but we trust that you're going to do the right thing for our student." And that everyone in there felt supported and mattered and their concerns were heard.

Meredith Ayala:

Kristen, I think that's why our collaboration has worked so well, because it does allow us to have that open communication. And then both of us, our goal is the same. We both want to support

that military family, those military connected students, and really build and maintain that relationship and that trust.

Another example that I remember that we worked really closely together is we supported a family of five that transitioned midyear. And we know that those midyear transitions in PCS, there's additional challenges. In this case, these children received both special education services and gifted and talented services, and they had some concerns around the timeline of accessing services.

So this was another case where Kristen leveraged the MIC, as our school liaison, and we connected with our district's procedural support liaisons, as well as our advanced academic program office, really to support the family. Through this case, both Kristen and I ended up facilitating a workshop for our procedural support liaisons in the district on the MIC. And then we also collaborated with the advanced academic program office to review and update their website from a military family lens, so that it would be easier for our military families to navigate.

Kristen Acquah:

Yes. And the feedback that we got from that, especially with the workshop for our procedure support liaisons on the MIC, and then just the updated website because we want to make the transition a lot smoother. So we don't know about these things until we go through it and experience it. But ultimately, the collaboration between the two, we're able to see the impact that is being made for our families. So we're able to see the change. And it's not that it wasn't working, but it may have just been something that just needed to be highlighted and revamped, because education always changes and how we communicate changes, and we learned that even through Covid.

But another example I did want to share too was we always talk about school liaisons supporting and working with families as they're transitioning in and out of the installation. So that's something that's our normal and usual practice. But a lot of families were not aware that we also support when they transition overseas. And Meredith and I supported many families as they were transitioning from and to overseas, which we would connect with either the installation school liaison, DODEA PLCs. And with that collaboration, we were able to really see successful credit transfers, on-time graduation. Everyone was happy, everyone felt supported, and everyone knew what the expectation was. And that, I think, is really big for our military families.

Meredith Ayala:

I feel like we could go on and on. I'll offer one more example. But just that we had a family that was coming in with an elementary school kiddo that was enrolled in a very advanced math in elementary school. And that family was concerned about the access to the advanced rigor in school. And we know that continuing those rigorous courses and that placement is so important as we're looking at preparing for life after high school and post-secondary opportunities.

So again, we were able to work with that family, work with the school, and through Kristen and I working together, leveraging that MIC, again, just to support that family to make sure that that student had access to that rigor. So, many examples of how we've worked together to support our military connected students.

Bruce Moody:

Well, this is terrific. So let's just keep this rolling along. What tools and resources support your work with military connected youth who are preparing for post-secondary opportunities?

Kristen Acquah:

So for a school liaison, what really supported my work was, of course, the state legislation, the MIC, because these are legal documents that I could stand on. And it really supported, in the spirit of the compact, of leveling the playing field and guaranteeing that on-time graduation, those comparable services, enrollment. And then helping with building that awareness around military culture for our families that are just like our civilian families, as well as our educators, and helping them feel confident in how they support our military connected students. Because oftentimes, they would want to do something, but they didn't know if they could. But ultimately, in the spirit of the compact, what is what's best for this child? So what we try to do is look at the whole child, and not just the academic, but how, as a team, we can set them up for success.

Meredith Ayala:

And speaking about the whole child, and I've actually leveraged the MIC in my school counselor role, as well as in my family school partnership role now, around extracurricular activities, such as sports, the arts, leadership organizations. Really informing our faculty that these unique circumstances of our military connected youth and the importance of having the opportunity to join student organizations after deadlines. So not only they can get connected to the school, but they can continue their participation and their leadership and those activities that may continue and connect to postsecondary goals.

So like Kristen, the MIC definitely we use. I also use district and state resources around graduation requirements and transfer guidelines, training our school counselors and our other district personnel, always bringing in that military lens and asking what does this policy or what does this practice mean for our military connected youth?

Kristen Acquah:

Yeah. And that, I think, has been very fruitful and helpful, especially within our partnership, is always looking at it through the military lens. How does it help our military connected youth?

But just some things that we would ask for parents to also be aware of and how to support their child's educational success is being aware of those educational binders. There are several ones that are out there, some are physical, some are electronic, but it really helps to provide that smooth transition for our families. And with those educational binders, you can put in educational documents, such as report cards, transcripts, evidence of work, recommendation letters, immunizations. The list continues to go on and on.

But if a family connects with their school liaison, their installation school liaison, they're very familiar with the educational documentation and the tools and what most schools are looking for, especially if you have a student that's two times gifted and those IEPs or plans, there's so much stuff that goes in as a parent when you're preparing for that transition and you're preparing for that move.

A lot of those things you're like, "Oh, I can get that. I can get an email." But the reality of it is, or you're not recognizing that, "Hey, we don't want this to expire," because we ran into those situations as well. But it kind of takes a backseat because you're just preparing for this big move. Whereas if you have that educational binder, you could add to and update as the time comes. So really working with the installation school or school liaison on that is very helpful. And then the school liaison is really helpful to the educators and sharing that information and those resources that are available out there.

Meredith Ayala:

Yeah, we definitely do that. And we definitely concur with using some sort of educational binder for all of our highly mobile families, just to make it a more seamless transition. I'll add in just in considering planning for post-secondary, there are many digital resources to support that as well. BigFuture is one that's a free comprehensive set of digital resources that help students take that first step for after high school. And many districts like ours have digital resources that they use and just make available to help organize transitions and post-secondary planning.

Bruce Moody:

So you guys have covered a lot of ground, a lot of ground. And interestingly, there's a lot more to go, more than we can fit in one episode. So we're going to come back and we're going to do another episode and we're going to continue this conversation. And what I'd like for you to do is just give us a sense of what we'll be talking about in the next episode.

Meredith Ayala:

No, so excited about the next episode. We're going to talk a little bit about first starting out, who are our military connected students? And then really bring the voice of our students into the discussion and explore what they have been saying to us, as well as how those multiple transitions really affect our military connected students as they're planning for life after high school.

Bruce Moody:

Well, that's a lot, and we got a lot in this episode. And actually, this is the second of a series of three. So, again, a whole lot of information for military parents. Kristen Acquah and Meredith Ayala, so great to have you on the podcast. So thank you to the both of you for joining us today.

Kristen Acquah:

Thank you.

Meredith Ayala:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

Awesome. 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. Click on it, send us a question, a comment or an idea for another episode. And also subscribe to this

podcast wherever you listen to your podcast, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody, thank you very much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.