

Military OneSource Podcast — How School Liaisons Can Help With Special Education

Episode transcript

Intro:

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. The school liaison program provides support for all education-related matters for military-connected students. That's pre-K through 12th grade. School liaisons are available on all military installations and offer transition assistance to military-connected students and families. They help with school selection, credit transfer, youth sponsorship referrals and more. School liaisons also assist with referrals to the Defense Department's Exceptional Family Member Program, and they help families navigate their school's special education department and other local resources.

So, joining us today to talk about that, Sergeant Major Steven Minyard and Tracy Minyard. It is great to have the both of you with us. Sergeant Major Minyard is the senior enlisted advisor to the assistant secretary of defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Sergeant Major, Tracy, it is great to have you both with us today.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Thank you so very much, Bruce. We're really excited about being here today.

Tracy Minyard:

Thank you for having us.

Bruce Moody:

It's a real pleasure to have you both on the podcast to get into this, but before we do, let's just begin with some introductions. Sergeant major, tell us a little bit about yourself and then we'll hear from Tracy.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Sure. So as the senior enlisted advisor here to the assistant secretary of defense, Manpower and Reserve Affairs, or ASD M&RA, I've been in the job for about four months. I'm a Texas native, originally from Fort Worth, graduate of Texas Christian University there. TCU Horned Frog.

Prior to the position that I'm in now, I was the command paralegal for the U.S. Army Reserve Command. I was an operations sergeant major at the Army Reserve Legal Command and did a couple of other legal type jobs. I come from the JAG world before I came up here to

DOD. And have been living in D.C. in this current position at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling since February of 2023.

Now, M&RA. We are a strange organization. We have a massive portfolio. So, within M&RA, we have purview over all civilian personnel policy, military personnel policies that includes things like COLA, BAH, the separation policies, and transition and recruitment policies across the Department of Defense. We also have the deputy assistant secretary of defense for reserve integration. So that's integrating the reserve components into everything that DOD does.

And then the Military Community and Family Policy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Ms.) Patty Baron. Her real purview is really just anything that makes the all-volunteer total force model of DOD viable. So, everything from MWR policy to policies of child development centers to policies within the Office of Special Needs, the EFMP program. So, a whole host of different programs and policy oversight that really just improve and make the military community a community that it is. And community meaning service members and their family members as well. The extended kind of DOD ecosystem all under MC&FP. And with that, I'll turn it over to Tracy.

Tracy Minyard:

Hi, I'm Tracy Minyard. I'm Steve's wife. And I homeschool our children, except for our littlest does go to public school to meet his needs. And let's see, I was a Navy girl, but I mostly ended up growing up in Maryland and then moved to Texas to become a teacher and met Steve and became an army wife, which I didn't ever expect, but I love it. We moved around the country with our beautiful children, and I'm grateful to be here.

Bruce Moody:

We're grateful to have you both here. Thank you for your service in so many ways, but you've done so much. You've continued to do a lot. In the course of your service, how many moves would you say that you've made?

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

I think between, with the two of us with children, eight. I think it is?

Tracy Minyard:

Seven with kids.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Yeah, seven with kids.

Tracy Minyard:

Eight, not counting that. And then you moved before you met me.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Yeah. Yeah. So, nine total. Seven with our full fire team with us.

Bruce Moody:

So, I'd really like to hear about your family if you would.

Tracy Minyard:

We have four amazing children. We're blessed to be their parents through adoption. They all have some sort of medical need, some minor and some more serious. We have always homeschooled the oldest three. Our youngest, our fourth, has intellectual disability along with hearing loss. And at a young age, we made the decision that his needs would be better met being in the public school. Honestly, he wouldn't communicate with people outside our family and communication is his greatest need. So, putting him in school where it pushed him to speak to other people, and we were able to get more support for his hearing loss, has been a huge blessing.

And we have seen, oh, huge growth. Sorry. We have seen a tremendous growth in his communication ability, particularly after he started at DoDEA school where they really met his hearing loss needs well. And then they helped prepare him for this move for his hearing needs to continue to be met.

Bruce Moody:

So, tell us about the first time that you worked with a school liaison.

Tracy Minyard:

Right. Well, of course when you have a child with multiple special needs and you are transitioning them from a very safe environment with an absolute, truly dream team of people, including his own interpreter who was like a member of the family. When you're taking them out of a place where they feel so safe and moving them to a new environment and you're not sure what that's going to look like, that's terrifying. And then you're navigating all the other things that go along with the PCS.

So, calling the school liaison, I just remember afterwards taking just a big breath out because he answered so many of my questions. He helped connect me with, there was a representative who worked with the special education department in D.C., and so I was able to talk to them, and they made the right connections for us. Knowing all the information we knew, and because we went to the right place, we actually minimized a possible additional transition for Kai where they said he might've had to go to his neighborhood school to be assessed before and then they would've moved him to a different school where his needs could have been met.

Because of the help of the school liaison officer getting to the right contact people, and then in addition to that, the very clear communication, IEP and support coming out of our DoDEA school at Fort Liberty, we were able to minimize that. And the D.C. public schools were able to put him directly into a school where the first day he got there, he already had an interpreter. And we went for a visit first and then they were able to get him in a school, walking in the first day where they were still getting to know him, but they already had the critical supports in place that he needed.

Another big transition was, of course this is going to happen anytime you move a child with special needs, is that they have an IEP. But what the services look like in one state or school or school district might not be what's available in the new school. What he was getting at DoDEA, they don't do in DCPS. So, they called his old school and just asked his teacher there, the dream team captain, if they could meet with her about it. And she showed up, and his entire team showed up to that call — his interpreter, his OT, his speech therapist.

So just, I almost cried. Their support. And they talked to the new school. That they all took the time from their busy day to do that, to help him transition, meant so much.

It was hard to leave the dream team. But we were so wonderfully cared for by the school liaison officer and helping us into this transition that we couldn't have done without him. I can imagine that we probably would've ended up transitioning him twice. Also, the way he works with routine, and I'm sure many people I know with children with special needs, change is hard. Transitions are hard. So, every step we can take to minimize that impact on our military children is tremendously important. They already serve in their own way and make many sacrifices supporting their wonderful service member.

Bruce Moody:

You mentioned something that really stuck with me, and that's the importance of day one. There's obviously a lot of preparation, a lot of planning that goes into being ready on day one. So how does that work? Are you working with your local school liaison and your next school liaison before you PCS? How does that transition of support work?

Tracy Minyard:

I think it's communicating with the school in advance as much as possible to let them know this move is coming and to let them know that all the special education paperwork needs to be up to date and ready to go as current as possible. And like I said, we had a wonderful team that did that, and they actually sat and really went over that IEP with a fine tooth comb. Because previously where we had lived, Kai had been denied any sign language support beyond an hour a week, which is almost nothing. And we saw such a growth in his communication skills once he had that support. So that was a big concern of mine. And his school was like, "We're going to help. It's going to be okay."

And so, getting that ready and then calling the new school liaison officer when you know where you're going. But I also could see the wisdom in calling your current school liaison officer, because they also might have a connection. But once you know where you're going, reaching out to that school liaison officer, asking for the lay of the land and the insider information. Many of us are in Facebook groups and you could get information there, but that's a lot of different people's opinions. But this is a professional person who's working with the school all the time, and it feels like going straight to the horse's mouth to get the information.

Bruce Moody:

Talk more about that if you could. You mentioned just how important is it to use a school liaison. And when I say that, when you look at the needs of the military life, the demands of military life and what that requires, and then on top of that you've got a family member with special needs. When you look at that environment, just how critical to you is it to engage with a school liaison?

Tracy Minyard:

Oh, very critical, because you have to think we are doing so much. Especially when you're special needs parents, you have some different responsibilities that you're taking care of. First of all, we could take all the help we can get. But I can remember the moment when I hung up with Mr. Hay, just being able to take a really deep breath, realizing I didn't have to

figure all of this out by myself, that he is there to help me navigate. He's like a guide. So, it's much better to go on a new adventure with someone who's already done it and who can help you. So, save yourself some stress. I would advise people about to move, particularly with their special needs child, save yourself a little stress, save yourself some time and just go right to the school liaison because they're waiting to help you. They have all the information you need.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Yeah, I'd add, too, from the service member perspective, you're getting ready to move. There may be uncertainty as to even you're waiting on getting orders, or some other type of administrative little gear that needs to turn before you're moved. You're intellectually getting ready for your new job. And if you're spending any moment of the day thinking about something that you shouldn't, then you're wasting your time. And the school liaison really just took that burden off. And as a service member, you're also concerned about just getting that smooth landing so you can jump into that new mission and go out there and rock and roll and not having to worry about the types of services that are going to be available and navigating the legal and regulatory environment of wherever we were going to, because it was different from Fort Liberty to D.C. And then also throwing in the mix where we could potentially land in Virginia or Maryland as well.

Mr. Hay took that burden just right off. And it's all right. I've got a myriad of other things that I got to take care of, but this is one of them that I don't, because the liaison has got it and he's running with it, and he's well-armed us ready for this move. And at the end of the day to help Kai land a nice soft landing into the services, or even more that he had, because as Tracy had mentioned before we came into Fort Liberty, we hadn't utilized the school liaison that was there until very late in the process. And getting that earlier, it just made so much more difference in making the move so much better than what it was. And better than our other PCSs too. I think this one, a midyear move in February? Not easy. This one was pretty easy.

Bruce Moody:

So, what would be the first step for a family looking to connect with a school liaison?

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

So, the first place that a service member or a family member should go would be straight to Military OneSource. They've got a section there, the MilitaryINSTALLATIONS, where if they know where they're going, they can look into the military installation, the particular installation. And usually within there, there'll be a link, a button or contact information, for the school liaison. And once they get into there, into the page within Military OneSource, clicked into there, went straight to the school liaison page and that had Mr. Hay's phone number, his direct email that he was extraordinarily responsive to once we pinged him from there.

And most of those pages have a lot of additional information that'll get you prepped for the discussion with the school liaison. But as Tracy had mentioned too, nothing close to what the school liaison can then provide — like contacts to individuals that are embedded within the school district that you were going into and contact information for folks that can help you navigate if you're looking at doing homeschooling or anything like that. And again, a lot

of that stuff is buried if you're trying to go to a public webpage, but the school liaison will bring it all in one place. And kind of your first stop there is Military OneSource to get to it.

Bruce Moody:

So, we have links in the program notes to Military OneSource, also to MilitaryINSTALLATIONS. It really is so easy, because you can simply call the Military OneSource call center and they can set you up to chat or go over this over the phone and just answer your initial questions and get you set up in the right directions.

I'm just so pleased to have had this conversation, and the only thing that would make me happier is to know that you both would like to come back to the podcast.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Absolutely. No, this has been awesome, Bruce. And I think, for those that are listening on the other side, we are sitting in our car together with a medical appointment, of all things, just up the street from the Pentagon. So, I really appreciate the ability for us to be able to do that and just hosting and for us to be able to talk about this amazing program.

Tracy Minyard:

This has been a great opportunity. Thanks so much. I'd be glad to come back.

Bruce Moody:

Sgt. Mjr. Steven and Tracy Minyard, thank you to the both of you for being with us today. We really appreciate it.

Tracy Minyard:

Thanks so much for having us.

Sgt. Maj. Minyard:

Thank you. Thanks for having us. This has been awesome.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. Same here. Same here.

Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department and we want to hear from you. So, there is a link in the program notes. You can send us comments, questions or an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.