

Military OneSource Podcast – What Does a School Liaison Really Do for Military Families?

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

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. We're going to talk about school liaisons today. One of the challenges of being a military family is moving your kids from school to school, and school liaisons can help with that, but they do so much more and we're going to get into all of that. So, please, stick around.

Now, before we get started, a quick note to say, thank you for listening to today's conversation. In every episode of this podcast, what we do is we cover the topics that help military families navigate military life. So, if you're listening, thank you. But we also encourage you to subscribe to this podcast and that we hope that you share it with somebody else, some military family who might benefit from today's conversation. Lastly, we want to hear from you. We have a link in today's program notes. We always welcome you to use that link. Send us your questions, your comments, maybe a suggestion for a future episode.

Alright, business is done. Okay, let's get back to school liaison. Our guest today is Dr. Venetia Waters, and she's joining us from MacDill Air Force Base. And Venetia, welcome to the podcast.

Venetia D. Waters:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm thankful to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Well, it goes both ways. We're very happy to have this opportunity to talk to you. So, you're a school liaison, you're at MacDill Air Force Base, but the experience that you probably have is similar to what people are experiencing regardless of the service that

they're in, regardless of where they're stationed. So, what is a typical day like for you, as a school liaison?

Venetia D. Waters:

Well, that's a good question. I want to take you on a little journey to describe what we do. Always thinking about the "why" of what I do. I'm always thinking about retention, recruitment and readiness, but when you set a typical day, school liaisons, we don't have a typical day at all. Things are always changing, and one of the things that I like to do is I like to think about, I'm like a point guard in a basketball game. And so, my day can be whether I'm dealing with special education navigation or I may come in and I may have to do some transitional support, whether I'm helping our families navigate their education options or meeting with homeschool families or deployment, those types of things. Even the workshops, I'm constantly doing workshop or meeting with the principals or school administrators, school board meetings. So, there's no typical day for a school liaison. We are just over the place, but we thoroughly enjoy what we do. So, that is really what we do. As I said before, it's like being a point guard, if you can understand basketball.

Bruce Moody:

Well, my basketball knowledge — we'll fill a thimble with it. How about that? But I get the idea. I get the idea that you're in the middle, and you're talking to a lot of people and you're getting out information, and you're helping people plan and stuff. So, let's maybe pull an example out of military life and that would be moving, moving schools. What would be some common misunderstandings that families have about moving schools? How do you clear this up?

Venetia D. Waters:

Okay. So, a myth about our school transition is that most people think that school liaisons, all we do is deal with moving from state to state, but we do so much more than that. We deal with maybe you're moving off base or you're moving on base. Most people think we only deal with schools that are on the base, but that's just not true of me at all because I deal with seven school districts, and I have like 658 schools in those seven school districts that I'm dealing with. So being able to move from not only state to state, but maybe they're moving from school district to school district. Not only that, maybe they're dealing with deployment.

Or another thing I guess I wanted to say, is we also think about transition when they're moving from maybe pre-K to kindergarten or from elementary school to middle school or middle school to high school. So, most people just think of it as being from state to state, but with school liaisons, we deal with it with just a whole plethora of things when

it comes to transition. So that is a big myth, just moving from state to state or school to school.

Bruce Moody:

And I'm already getting the idea of why we have you on the podcast because it is way more than I envisioned. So how do you do this? I should have written down the number of schools. It's huge. How do you make that tie? How do you work with these local schools and military leadership to make sure the families get the support that they need?

Venetia D. Waters:

Okay. So, remember I told you a little bit about it being basketball?

Bruce Moody:

Oh, we're back on the court? Okay.

Venetia D. Waters:

Yeah, we're back on the court. And the reason why I do that is because I like to share this with families. I like to share it with families because they can really understand what we do as school liaisons. So, at a basketball game, they have something what they call a point guard, and so the point guard, they're able to pivot. So that means they're able to give the ball to different players on the team. So, my job is to make sure that I'm working with the wing commander, giving him types of things. I'm working with our military families. I also am working with the local school districts or something that they need. And then we also have what we call our stakeholders. So, whether we have our community stakeholders, whether I'm dealing with their internally or externally.

So, I'll give you an example of what an internal stakeholder would be. I work very closely with our EFMP families, family support center here, and we are dealing with children with special needs. For instance, yesterday we did an education workshop where we had the school district come in and actually do that workshop where the school district is one of my partners. So, when I'm pivoting, I'm pivoting talking to the school district or I'm pivoting talking to an internal partner, which would be our EFMP. So, at that time, I have to be able to be an active listener, see what that family needs, and be able to pivot that. Or if it's legislation, if I'm learning something about legislation, I'm therefore pivoting to get that legislation out to our wing commander. His thing here at MacDill is people, partnership and air power. So, people are very important to him. Our families are very important to him.

So, while I'm working with all these different stakeholders, I'm pivoting. I'm sending them to him; I'm going to different workshops. Maybe a family needs grants or scholarships or whether we are talking about the navigation of homeschools or those types of things. So, I'm always trying to make sure I'm actively listening to what our families need, and then I'm pivoting. Giving them what they need for that time to get them where they go. So as a school liaison, we are just not stuck. That's what makes us so, being in a great place to be, I should say. That's the way I look at it. I've been a spouse, with four children going through the same area, moving. So, whether we were dealing with private schools or public schools or parochial schools, we even moved to overseas and DoDEA schools and then going to an international school. So, I have all that experience and when a family comes to me, I'm able to listen to them and then I'm thinking in my mind, where do I need to pivot? Does that make sense to you?

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, it does. It does. So, in the middle of this, we've got a small child. Moving is tough. Emotionally tough on a small child. What is the role of a school liaison? So, when a military child is having a tough time emotionally during a move, how do you step in to help? What is a school liaison able to do?

Venetia D. Waters:

Well, I'll tell you something that I'm privileged to have. If I have been contacted about one of our students having a challenge in moving, I have 14 military family life counselors in 19 different schools. And so, if a child needs to be seen, we do have those military family life counselors that are trained and ready to be able to meet them where they are, be able to get on their level and actually give them the tools that they need to work through those transitions. So, whether it's emotional or whether it's psychological, those MFLCs are there to help our children. So, if I'm meeting with that family, that's another partner that I'm working with, our MFLCs.

Bruce Moody:

Can you talk to us about a time when a child had a really tough transition?

Venetia D. Waters:

Oh, absolutely. Well, I'm going to tell you a story. This is so good. I had a guy, and I'm just going to call him Mark. Mark moved here about two years ago and he was an Army family, and so, he wasn't used to being on an Air Force base. He was in 11th grade. He had been a football star where he had been previously. He moved here, and he did not want to be here. Well, every summer, I partner with our child and youth person, and I

host a middle and teen resiliency symposium. And what I do is I get all of the new students that are coming into MacDill, that are military connected, and we have a day, and we do resiliency skills. We're teaching them all the different types of resiliency skills. I have the MFLCs come, and they do a session. We host it in the Child and Youth Center because they have all these great types of games and things like that.

I also invite a group called Student to Student and Anchored for Life. These are students that are placed into schools and they're able to do that. But the ones that I bring back are the ones that were new the year before. And they come in and we just do a whole day of training, a whole day of getting to meet different people. We give them lunch, and we do bowling. My goal is when they leave to give them those skills that they're able to be successful. Mark was very, very upset. I remember when he came in, he didn't want to be there. He let me know he didn't like being there. He left all his friends. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't be on the football team any longer. And so, afterwards, I sat and talked with Mark, and I said, "If there was any one thing you could do, tell me what you wanted to do." And he said, "Dr. Waters, I would love to be on the football team."

And so, what I did was I contacted the coach after I found out where he was going to school and asked the coach could he have a tryout? I know it was after tryouts, but our MIC3 give them that opportunity to be able to try out. He tried out. The day he tried out, there were three other people that were working out as well, other military children. He made the team. I didn't see him any longer.

Well, he came back and he said to me, he said, "Do you remember me?" And I was like, "No, I kind of remember your face." He says, "I was one of those kids that came here. I didn't want to be here." He said, "My dad was in the Army. I didn't like doing this." He said, "And you allowed me to go and try out for the football team." He said, "I made the football team." He said, "Not only that, the school that I went to had Anchored for Life. I joined Anchored for Life." And then he said, "The funny thing is the MFLAC that was there was my MFLAC at that school." And so, he started getting really into that school.

But then this is what he told me. He said when he got ready to apply for college, his essay was about being a military kid with resiliency, and he said, "Dr. Waters. I took those skills that I learned that day at that resiliency symposium. I used them. I became successful. I got accepted to college." He said, "And now I'm off to college." He said, "My dad is retiring." He came back and he said, "I just want to say thank you." So, it's things like that that just made my heart feel good. I was excited. So, he got over his challenges by doing what he needed to do, and now, he's going off to college. So that kid will always stand out to me.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. So, Venetia, this is a really interesting conversation and I'm just thrilled by the level of energy that you bring to what you do. You cover so many different topics

relating to military families. Can you speak briefly about the support you provide when a family has a child with special education needs?

Venetia D. Waters:

Oh, absolutely. That's a great question. I'll tell you something that has been really good for us at MacDill. When I get what we call the GAINS roster, on that GAINS roster, I sent out a long email very, very long, but I created a process that we worked very well with the district where it says, if your child has an IEP, an Individualized Education Plan, there is a person that is in the district that they can send that IEP to. That person will get that IEP and then they will be able to give it to the ESC department. The ESC department will then be able to call our military family, and that helps with that transition. We're trying to eliminate those barriers for our special needs students. Then once they arrive, we're talking with them. We're making sure that they're where they're supposed to be. We're offering these different types, as I said earlier, educational classes with them.

If they start having some educational challenges, we're working directly with the district to make sure we have them. I'll give you a prime example. One particular family we did have, whose mom was getting ready to deploy and the child did special needs. I told you a little earlier about pivoting. We worked very closely with schools. Well, this particular school district was very small. It had less than 1% of our military students, so they weren't really quite up on the different legislations and laws for our military families. And so, I had to work directly with the principal. Mom was going away to deploy, and she was leaving her special needs' child with an IEP, with a relative. That relative worked with the school. The school wasn't quite understanding how to really work with that special needs' child. And so, I had the opportunity to work with the principal and then he wasn't quite understanding some things, and I had the opportunity then to say, "Let's look at the MIC3," the interstate compact.

We started looking at the interstate compact and then he needed a little bit more information and I told you about working with our partners, that had me to call the MIC commissioner, who was able to give him even more instructions, I guess, on how to really deal with our special need child. Not only were we dealing with deployment, but we were dealing with that child having an IEP. I can honestly say, that helps. Our purpose was to navigate solutions. So, once we finished with all the education and all the things we needed to do, mom was able to deploy. The child was able to get the services that they need; mom came back; child was happy. That's what it's about.

We are always trying to look at how do we get to our service members being able to do what I told you originally, have that readiness. That was good for mom to be able to deploy, knowing that the school, myself and everyone that was working with that special needs' child was getting what they need. That's what it's all about. So not only what we're working with them, but I was also working with the EFMP, hey, are you making sure we're sending those resources that they need to that relative that was taking care of that child? So those children with special needs, they're close to my heart.

Bruce Moody:

We have a whole podcast and we'll put a link in the program notes, but a whole separate podcast that is specifically for military families with special needs. And we should talk offline about having you on that podcast. I think it would be really interesting because you just seem to be at the center, the center of all of these idea generations looking at a situation and saying, "Okay, let's bring in these people or these ideas and let's see if we can do this, that." I wonder if we can talk about maybe some creative ideas or programs that you see that are really helping military kids feel welcome when they're at a new school?

Venetia D. Waters:

Yes, I think that would be great. Like I said, we do have Student to Student that's in those schools. We do have Anchored for life. But not only that, as school liaisons, we are always trying to make sure our students are not having those transitional barriers. And as I said, I was a spouse, so I totally understand transition. I was sharing with my husband today, my oldest son, before he went to college, went to eight schools, and so I homeschooled, so I understand that. We left from a home school. We moved and I did a parochial school. We left from a parochial school. We then went to a public school. When we moved, we left from a public school, and when my husband got orders, he went to Japan. We then went to a DoDEA school. We left from DoDEA and then we went to Germany. We went to an international school.

And so, I always put myself in that situation. What would I like? Although I didn't have a special needs child, what would a special needs child parent need? And that's where I came up with the idea and it was a district that allowed me to do it, to say, send that IEP in advance. That's where I come from. That's why I guess I'm so excited about what I do because I love the idea of being able to pivot, being able to work with the commander, being able to work with our stakeholders, whether they're internally or externally, being able to work with the school district.

As a school liaison, we have to be able to pivot. We have to be able to do what is needed at that time, and I think that's what makes us like your one stop shop. You are one of our partners, a Military OneSource. I often have Andrea come in every year talk about the great things that Military OneSource offers because we may have a new family that is coming to the base or coming to the military that doesn't know a lot. So we are trying to make sure that not only are we educating, but we are using that partnership of everything that we need to make our military student successful.

Bruce Moody:

Part of that success, it seems, it comes when families speak up and say, “Hey, I need help.” So how do you help families speak up to help get what their child needs?

Venetia D. Waters:

Well, one of the things that we do, the first things that we always have is a newcomers briefing, and that is when I’m talking to our military members and I’m telling them about all the different services that we have. But one of the things that I tell them is that I won’t know how to help you unless you tell me what is needed. I put the ownership back on them. It’s very important for them to know that I’m available for them. They may not feel comfortable going directly to the school. They may not feel comfortable going to outside people. I am there to advocate for them, but I can’t advocate when I don’t know.

And so, I give them that assurance to know, we are on the same team, but that team looks like, like I said, I’m that person that’s in the middle. I’m there for the wing commander. I’m there for them. I’m there with the educators, but I’m a neutral party. I just need to make sure that they feel comfortable enough to be able to come, listen, as I’m a great active listener. And then after I listen to them, how do we get to the “why?” How do we get to being successful? That’s what I do.

Bruce Moody:

So, since you have a view of the entire education environment, and it’s not just schools and it’s not just teachers and it’s not just parents, it’s a whole community. So, what are some of the ways that the whole community can support military families?

Venetia D. Waters:

Well, I’ll tell you one of the things that we do here at MacDill. We have something, what we call the MacDill Council for Educational Excellence, and it’s a great partnership. You remember I said a little earlier how our commander is into people and partnership and air power? Partnership, we partner with the schools. And so, one of the things that we do is that we have a meeting every quarter, and then that first part of the meeting, the first hour is when the leadership of MacDill meets with the leadership of the school district, and that would include the superintendent or the person that he sends, and one of those is a school board member. We’re dealing with any of those types of educational challenges that has been brought to us.

The second hour is when families get to come, even our community leaders get to come, and they may bring maybe things that we didn’t think of. I’ll give you a prime example. The district was getting ready to do a redistricting, and it was really bringing

up a lot of anxiety among our members. We met and came to the conclusion that what we can do is, we can have them redistrict, but our active-duty members, they was grandfathered in that they did not have to move until they got ready to go to a totally different school. That came out of that meeting.

So, when we are doing something, partnership is so important. We're working with the school. We also had the local leaders that were there. That second hour is pivotal for all of us to be able to work together, and this is something because I facilitate that meeting. One of the things that I say to all of them, everybody, "We all have different numerators, but we all have the same common denominator, which is our military connected kids." It is true that we are definitely keeping our focus on the children. We are keeping our student mindset for them and being able to do what we need to do, and I think that's what makes this job a wonderful job. And I know I sound excited about doing it, but really, Bruce, I really am. It's a great job to have.

Bruce Moody:

You sound excited because you are excited. It's definitely coming through.

Venetia D. Waters:

You think so?

Bruce Moody:

I think so. I think so.

Venetia D. Waters:

Yeah. We are student focused. We really are. School liaisons, we are student focused and we're partnership driven. That is true. We have to stay focused on the student and I think everybody is like that. The parents, the teachers, the policy makers, our commanders, our internal, external stakeholders, everybody has the same common denominator, which is our military student.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. This work of yours, it must shape your life, your personal view on life in general. What has this work done for you?

Venetia D. Waters:

Being a military spouse, being able to move, I just love serving families. And so, I think when I get up in the morning, I'm looking at what can I do that would be a blessing to someone else? And with the school liaison program, it's like your one-stop shop location. I really want it to be that one stop that when they come to me, I may not have all the answers, but I do know enough in the system to be able to help them. And so, that's what gets me up every day. I want to make sure that I'm always concentrated on the "why" for our military members, whether it's retention, whether it's recruitment, or whether it's readiness. I want our military members to know that if they're deployed or if they're just serving, the readiness factor is there, and it's because of the school liaison. We are there to make sure that we're doing what we need to do to take care of those military connected children.

Bruce Moody:

Well, I would like to say thank you so much for sharing your energy and your enthusiasm and really, information about what school liaisons can offer, but thank you so much for joining us today.

Venetia D. Waters:

You are welcome. Thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

Our pleasure. Dr. Venetia Waters is a school liaison at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida. And we want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always love to hear from you. Use the link in the program notes to send us a question or a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast to include YouTube. We're on YouTube as well. Just search for Military OneSource 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.