Impact of Geographic Mobility on Military Children's Access to Special Education Services


**SUMMARY:** Focus groups and interviews were conducted with military families who have dependents with disabilities enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) as well as the providers serving them. Results provide summaries of challenges that families face and resources available to them during Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves that often entail changes to the availability or implementation of special education services.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Many parents experienced concerns and frustrations with quality of services, unmet expectations, and conflict with destination/gaining schools.
- Parents reported uncertainty regarding details of future place of residence and lack of preparation by destination/gaining schools as barriers to smooth PCS transitions.
- School Liaison Program and EFMP were identified by participants as valuable and useful (although sometimes inconsistent) in facilitating changes between school systems.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS**

Programs could:

- Special Education staff and teachers could assist families with the transfer of records and services between schools
- Schools with military students could provide training for their faculty and staff regarding the academic portfolios and PCS experiences of military families
- Administrators within schools could actively partner with staff to better inform families of the various ways in which special education services are provided so that difference in services is less frequently perceived as a deficit

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES**

Policies could:

- Support developing a function to proactively identify families who will be undergoing PCS, to provide the destination/gaining school with assessment and Individualized Education Plan documents in advance to ease transition
- Consider changes to policies regarding PCS transfers to give preference to enrolled families for on-base housing, and therefore more consistent access to desired special education programs available only to those military families that live on base
- Individual education plan protocols could be updated to integrate anticipated PCS concerns into every student plan
METHODS

- Participants included eligible EFMP enrollees living on base or near installations in three U.S. states. They were selected by convenience sampling after responding to invitations.
- Data were collected during 27 focus groups (2-11 people each) and 10 individual interviews.
- Qualitative data were gathered from caregivers (family members of disabled children) and service providers, and data related to access to education for this study.

PARTICIPANTS

- Caregiver group consisted of 39 parents of 60 children with disabilities, all enrolled in EFMP and mostly spouses of service members.
- Service provider group consisted of 62 experienced professionals, who had experience working with people with disabilities and the military community.
- No information on race or ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or military rank was provided for the participants.

LIMITATIONS

- The single service branch was undergoing a transformation of its EFMP at the time of the study, an atypical situation that may have influenced results.
- Single, time-limited contact with participants did not allow for long-term findings or follow-up.
- This study identified common and shared experiences, but did not examine dissenting perspectives or consider differences in service due to type of identified disability or condition.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future research might include additional branches of the military to assess potential variation.
- Additional research might expand this inquiry to a random sample of military families, including perspectives of families other than those on or near large installations.
- Explore whether the type of identified disability (emotional/behavioral, chronic health condition, etc.) affects the PCS experiences of families.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

- Design: ★★★
- Methods: ★★★
- Limitations: ★★★

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit: https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-works