



Testimony in response to invitation from House Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel for a February 5, 2020 hearing titled, “Exceptional Family Member Program – Are the Services Really Taking Care of Family Members?”

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Dear Representative Speier, Representative Kelly, and members of the Military Personnel Subcommittee,

My name is Dr. Rebecca Porter, and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). MCEC is a globally recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works to ensure inclusive, quality educational opportunities for all military-connected children affected by mobility, transitions, deployments, and family separation. Given our mission as stated above, military-connected parents contact MCEC not infrequently regarding education questions or concerns for their children.

In recent months it has come to our attention that an apparently growing number of military-connected parents of children with special needs feel that the basic education needs of their children are not being adequately or appropriately addressed by the schools they attend or should be attending according to district boundaries. Moreover, their efforts to garner assistance through the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) or the military installation’s School Liaison Officers are largely inconsistent and ineffective. Several families reported to us, and through an informal grassroots survey conducted by a group of concerned EFMP spouses, that the EFMP is broken, clearing them for assignment to locations where nearby schools do not have the resources to meet their children’s education needs.

According to their reports, many families undergo undue emotional and financial stress as a result of attending multiple confrontational and unproductive meetings, fighting with school officials, and attempting to find and secure community resources on their own. In especially contentious situations, parents report spending hundreds – thousands of dollars on advocates and attorneys to assist in accessing the Free and Appropriate Public Education to which their children are entitled by law. The consistent theme from EFMP families is that they have to repeatedly “fight” for basic special education services. What is especially difficult for these families is the fact that, even if they are able to eventually get some modicum of appropriate support for their children with special needs, it might be just as their service member receives orders to move, and the process starts all over again in a new state with a new school district, and new special education processes and resources. The interruption in services and instruction and the prolonged period to reestablish an appropriate individualized education plan take precious time, during which children with special needs often regress and ultimately require even more support. This paradigm compounded over multiple PCS cycles adds up to years of lost learning and development. There is a perception among these families that school systems simply “wait them out,” knowing that a military family is likely to move before any legal action could require them to provide the needed services.



Military families are resourceful and resilient and work to find ways to get their children's special needs met, in spite of what they perceive to be "the system" having failed them. Some families are deciding to remain at a location where they've established qualified individualized services while the service member PCS's to the new duty station. The decision to "geobach" puts additional stress on the family, much as separation from a deployment would, and forces the spouse to manage all of the requisite meetings and appointments, not to mention the needs of other children in the family, without the benefit of the service member being present to assist. Other families are deciding to school their children at home, where they feel they can more adequately control their children's individual instruction, medical appointments, and academic schedule. The spouses in these families take on an incredible burden when they feel the service member has been assigned to a location that clearly cannot meet their needs, and not all spouses have the necessary skillset, education or financial means to accomplish home schooling responsibly.

While we have heard from families that there are some installations where EFMP works well and school systems work proactively to meet the needs of their children, we have heard far more reports of varying standards and poor execution of the EFMP. School Liaison Officers are often not trained or lack the time to adequately assist in accessing the necessary services for children with Special Education needs. Families report feeling, "helpless, alone, and completely forgotten." This repetitive cycle has left EFMP families, "too stressed, too tired, too spent on deployments, and too broke to get resources". Not only does the child with exceptional needs suffer, the entire family suffers emotionally and financially. It is a disservice to the families who sacrifice so much already for their children to be denied special education services and supports to which they are entitled by federal law.

All of us outside of the EFMP family must more clearly understand the breadth and depth of this issue and to that end I would like to make the following four recommendations:

1. That Congress direct the GAO to study and report on the parents', civilian and military, success rates in achieving education for their child with special needs through special education advocates, state complaints, mediation and due process.
2. That Congress direct the Department of Education to collect the relevant data and publically report the number of special education complaints filed by military parents and what the outcomes were.
3. That Congress direct the Department of Defense to provide special education attorneys across all the services to work in collaboration with EFMP liaisons, coordinators and case managers for each EFMP family.
4. That Congress direct the Department of Defense to provide an annual report to Congress on special education challenges facing military children, including due process filings and state complaints for the previous fiscal year, the results of any EFMP or special education surveys, and actions DoD is taking to assist military families with special education issues.

I would like to thank the members of the committee for your interest in this important issue. I look forward to your questions.