

From Service to Schools: Strengthening Public Education Through Military Leadership

Testimony of Chris G. Neeley, Superintendent, South Carolina Public Charter School District, August 25, 2026

Chairman Walberg, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Chris Neeley, and I'm from Lexington, South Carolina. I serve as Superintendent of the South Carolina Public Charter School District, a statewide public school district serving **more than 31,000 students in 55 public charter schools.**

I am also honored to serve as a Colonel in the United States Army Reserve. Today, however, **I appear solely in my civilian capacity as a public school superintendent.** My references to military service reflect my personal experience and do not represent the views of the Department of the Army, the Department of War, or the United States Government.

For more than two decades, I have had the privilege of serving our country in uniform. And throughout my civilian career, I have had the privilege of serving children and families.

Those are very different missions. But both have taught me the same fundamental lesson:

Leadership matters.

The military understands that leadership matters at every echelon. A platoon leader or platoon sergeant leads closest to where the mission is actually carried out. Company, battalion, and brigade leaders build upon that leadership—setting conditions, developing people, providing resources, and ensuring the organization can accomplish its mission.

Public education works much the same way. The classroom teacher leads closest to our mission—the child. Principals lead our schools. District leaders create the conditions for schools to succeed. And school boards provide the governance, vision, and accountability that guide the entire system.

Leadership at every level matters. When that leadership is strong and aligned, it creates the conditions for great teaching, strong schools, and better opportunities for children.

And America's children need us to get this right.

Our Nation's Report Card continues to show troubling results in reading and mathematics. There are many reasons for those results, but one thing should be clear: **improving outcomes for children requires exceptional people leading our classrooms and schools.**

That brings me to the issue before this Committee: **How do we protect those who serve our country so that public education—and most importantly, our children—can fully benefit from their leadership?**

First, **we must protect those who serve.**

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act—USERRA—provides important federal protections for servicemembers in civilian employment. States should examine complementary protections for military personnel serving throughout public education—including teachers, principals, district administrators, and school board members—so answering our nation's call does not prevent or discourage servicemembers from continuing to serve their communities.

No American should have to choose between serving our children and serving our country.

But protection is only the beginning.

Second, at a time when schools across America are struggling to recruit and retain strong teachers and leaders, we should look to one of our nation's greatest leadership development institutions: **the United States military.**

America has invested enormously in developing men and women who lead diverse teams, solve complex problems, operate under pressure, develop others, accept accountability, and put mission before self.

Why wouldn't we want more of those leaders in our schools?

For veterans, public education can become a natural **next mission.**

Our National Guard and Reserve members represent an extraordinary leadership force already embedded in communities across America. We should **mobilize** that leadership in service to our schools—as teachers, substitute teachers, principals, coaches, mentors, career and technical education instructors, district administrators, superintendents, and school board members.

Active-duty servicemembers can also be part of this effort, when appropriate and consistent with military requirements, they could serve as mentors, STEM and career advisors, guest speakers, coaches, and role models—not simply to tell young people about military careers, but to **invest in them and inspire them.**

South Carolina demonstrates what this kind of flexibility can make possible. Our charter schools have long had the flexibility to employ qualified noncertified teachers, and our state recently expanded that concept through a five-year pilot program allowing participating public schools to employ qualified noncertified teachers. That creates another pathway for qualified veterans, Reservists, and National Guard members to bring their education, technical expertise, professional experience, and proven leadership directly into the classroom.

Congress can encourage states to consider similar innovative pathways while maintaining appropriate standards for those entrusted with our children.

Third, we should create a **Military-Ready Employer designation—or MRE—for public school districts**. In the military, everyone knows what an MRE is. In public education, an MRE could identify school systems that not only understand the obligations of Guard and Reserve service, but intentionally recruit, support, and retain servicemembers and veterans as educators and leaders.

My district, the South Carolina Public Charter School District, is already a **Purple Star District**, a designation recognizing our commitment to supporting military-connected students and their families. We could build upon that successful model by encouraging states to make Military-Ready Employer practices part of the criteria for Purple Star recognition—supporting not only **the children of those who serve, but the servicemembers and veterans who serve our children**.

That would make the Purple Star a commitment to the entire military-connected school community.

We can also establish **Veterans in Education initiatives** to recruit veterans into teaching and educational leadership and encourage states to develop alternative certification and reciprocity pathways that recognize relevant military education, technical expertise, and leadership experience.

Fourth, we can better connect resources that already exist.

In our district, we have strong relationships with the Military Child Education Coalition, the South Carolina National Guard, the South Carolina Department of Veterans' Affairs, and military installations across our state. Those installations also have meaningful partnerships with our schools serving military-connected children.

Servicemembers participate in reading programs and classrooms. They support STEM and career programs and expose students to opportunities in aviation, emerging technologies, and other fields.

We should also encourage veterans, Reservists, and Guardsmen to serve in another place where leadership matters tremendously: **the school boardroom.**

We see the value of that leadership firsthand in our district. The chairman of the board of Polaris Tech Charter School is retired four-star Air Force General Lloyd “Fig” Newton, who was the first African American pilot selected to fly with the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds. General Newton has taken a lifetime of military leadership and service and continues to put it to work for children.

That is exactly the kind of proven leadership we should welcome into school governance across America.

As a superintendent, I have learned that **great schools require great governance.** Veterans understand mission, strategic planning, stewardship, ethical leadership, and accountability. Those skills belong in school governance.

Congress has an opportunity to encourage these connections nationwide—linking military installations, Reserve Centers, National Guard units, state veterans agencies, and public schools. **In military terms, I see that as a force multiplier for public education**—taking leadership and resources that already exist in our communities and connecting them in ways that can have a greater impact on our schools and, most importantly, our children.

In our district, we have a simple philosophy: **Kids First.** And that’s ultimately what this is about—putting aside institutions and systems and asking how we can leverage every leadership resource available to us to create better opportunities and better outcomes for children.

Finally, public education itself can learn from military leadership.

My doctoral research at Clemson University examines how military veterans serving as school administrators apply principles learned through military service, including **Mission Command**, to educational leadership.

Intent. Trust. Shared purpose. Disciplined initiative. Developing leaders. Accountability.

Those aren’t exclusively military concepts.

They are leadership concepts—and they belong in great schools.

So I leave the Committee with three ideas:

- 1. Protect those who serve—so military service never becomes a barrier to serving in public education.**
- 2. Recruit those who have served—and mobilize their leadership for America’s children.**

3. Apply the leadership principles developed in the military—to strengthen educational leadership at every level.

Protect. Recruit. Apply.

This is not about militarizing public education. **It is about taking what we know about developing strong leaders and putting that leadership to work for our children.**

And I want to close by telling you about one young man who reminded me why this matters.

Just a few days ago, I visited Orangeburg High School for Health Professions, a workforce- and career-ready charter high school located in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

Orangeburg sits along South Carolina’s I-95 corridor—a largely rural region running north and south through our state that has struggled for generations with persistent poverty and inadequate educational opportunities.

Years ago, this region became nationally known by a painful name: the “**Corridor of Shame.**”

I don’t call it that.

I call it the Corridor of Opportunity.

At Orangeburg High School for Health Professions, **75 percent of the students are identified as Pupils in Poverty.**

But that statistic doesn’t tell you what those children are capable of. **It doesn’t tell you about the spark inside each one of them—their potential, their purpose, and what they can become when someone sees that spark and helps them believe in it.**

At the end of my visit, a high school senior named **Jovanny Williams** approached me.

He knew that in addition to being his superintendent, I am a Colonel in the United States Army Reserve.

He looked at me and said, “**Superintendent Neeley, I want to join the Army Reserve. Would you be my mentor?**”

I told him, “**Absolutely. I would be honored to be your mentor.**”

Members of the Committee, **that’s what this is about.**

At that moment, **I saw his spark.** I saw a young man who wants to serve, who wants to lead, and who wants to be part of something greater than himself.

That young man doesn't live in a Corridor of Shame.

He lives in a Corridor of Opportunity.

And somewhere in America today, there is another young person like Jovanny Williams who needs a teacher, a substitute teacher, a coach, a mentor, a principal, a district leader, a superintendent, a school board member—or simply an adult in their life—**who sees their spark** and demonstrates what it means to lead, to serve, and to believe in something greater than yourself.

Our veterans, our Guardsmen, our Reservists, and our active-duty servicemembers **can be those people.**

America has already invested in developing these leaders.

Now let's create the opportunities for them to invest in our children—to see their spark, help ignite it, and show them what is possible.

Because when we put great leaders in the lives of children, we don't just change schools, communities, states, or even our nation.

We can change the trajectory of a child's life.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your questions.