



**TOOLKIT**

***FOR COMMAND TEAMS AND SPOUSES***



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### *A+ Toolkit* *for Command Teams and Spouses*

Improving Readiness and Quality of Life by Enhancing K-12 Education

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## Message from Gen and Mrs. Brown

Ensuring Airmen and Guardians have access to quality public education for their children is essential to maintaining readiness and quality of life. Service members and spouses volunteer for the military life, but our children are drafted into it. They reap many rewards as a result, but also face numerous challenges: changing schools an average of six to nine times, leaving their friends every few years, and regularly navigating new communities, just to name a few.

We must do everything possible to address these concerns, so Airmen and Guardians can focus on their missions. Doing so will also help us retain our most valuable resource: personnel and their families. This is why the Department of the Air Force now considers the quality of public education when making strategic basing decisions. Our country was built and prospered on the foundational pillars of education and defense. We need to ensure both are strong to overcome the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Success will require command teams to identify their people's concerns about local public education and to address them head-on. Progress will take time, transcending changes of command. It will also require collaboration with stakeholders at the local and state levels. Most of all, this will require leadership. This *Toolkit* provides a flexible approach, numerous resources, and examples from across the services to help you accelerate this change.



## Comments from Lt Gen and Mrs. Hecker

Air University is pleased to provide the *A+ Toolkit* to command teams and spouses seeking to enhance the quality of public education at their installations. This publication began as a local initiative, but has grown to reflect the Total and Joint Force.

Every installation starts this journey in a different place, but the *Toolkit* can be employed whether local schools are a concern or a strength. Every installation and command also has distinct challenges and strengths, yet the *Toolkit* highlights a number of proven techniques from across the armed forces.

Please help ensure future editions of the *A+ Toolkit* capture innovations and successes by providing the authors your feedback and new examples. Together, we can improve readiness and quality of life by enhancing the quality of public education for military-connected children.



We are glad you picked up the *A+ Toolkit*. We developed this publication to support Command Teams – commanders, senior enlisted leaders, and spouses – who want (or need) to enhance public education options for their personnel. It provides an approach, resources, and examples to help you address the most common K-12 challenges affecting military installations.

Pressures for access to high-quality public education are rising in the services. Initiatives like *Support of Military Families* and individual states’ annual “school report cards” highlight strengths as well as weaknesses. In addition, today’s Airmen, Guardians, and their spouses are the most educated in our country’s history. They place great emphasis on their children’s education. The proliferation of social media has further complicated things, allowing individuals to share their experiences with vast audiences in real-time.

Military parents work hard to help their children navigate educational challenges that result from frequent transitions. Command teams have a different but equally difficult task: addressing systemic barriers to quality K-12 education for all military-connected students in their organizations. This includes the children of active duty Airmen, Guardians, and members of the joint force. It may also involve the children of Reserve, National Guard, and civilian employees. School liaisons and other force support professionals are valuable resources for our families and command teams. All of these groups must work together to change educational policies and improve the quality of local schools.

This *Toolkit* focuses on public schools, which educate 81% of military-connected children. Public education systems are diverse, including traditional, virtual, charter, magnet, vocational, DoDEA, and other types of schools. Furthermore, governance of public education is decentralized, ensuring schools reflect the needs and preferences of local residents. The military, as part of the community, can be both a beneficiary and a catalyst of change. This is a slow process though, often measured in decades, not assignments.

Finally, relationships are essential to strengthen public education. On base, we are most effective when we work as a team and leverage our diversity. Off base, we must establish trust, build coalitions, and identify common priorities. Finally, collaborating with military and civilian stakeholders requires effective communication. This entails aligning messages and priorities, listening, and negotiation.

We hope the *A+ Toolkit* helps you succeed with these challenging yet essential tasks.

– Dr. Brian R. Selmeski and  
Lt Col Christina D. Karvwnaris

## Approach

The heart of the *A+ Toolkit* is the change model, which provides a guide or framework. The model has three phases: **1. Identify Issues**, **2. Initial Efforts**, and **3. Gain/Sustain Momentum**. The approach is flexible though. A command team may choose to start in any phase, depending on strengths they can draw on, the challenges they face, their vision, and leadership style.

Each of the three phases has four elements. In the **Identify Issues** phase, these consist of *military* and *civilian resources* and *data*. In the **Initial Efforts** and **Gain/Sustain Momentum** phases, they are actions: *analysis*, *relationships*, *planning*, and *implementation*. While all are essential to improving public K-12 education, again a command team can start with any of the elements.

The approach is not linear. Phases and elements form a series of feedback loops. Progress from one will inform the others. Lastly, leaders may engage in several phases or elements simultaneously.

## Resources

Command teams cannot enhance public K-12 education alone. It is essential to work closely with local school districts and boards of education. In addition, they can draw on many other organizations and initiatives.

The military has an array of experts and programs that can help. Numerous nonprofits also support military children and families. Likewise, some corporations have foundations or offices dedicated to enhancing education. Finally, state and local organizations and officials can provide critical assistance.

Many of these resources are included in the pages that follow and are listed at the back of the *Toolkit*.

## Examples

Finally, the *A+ Toolkit* provides examples of success you can adopt or adapt. Short descriptions are included to illustrate each element of the change model. These are followed by four longer case studies to provide greater detail. The examples are drawn from the Air Force and Space Force, as well as Army, Navy, joint, and National Guard installations. While some of these initiatives were military-led, local school districts took the lead in others. All of them highlight the importance of relationships and communication to enhancing public K-12 education.

## APPROACH

- A guide to enhancing public educational options that can be tailored to the situation
- Three Phases, each consisting of four Elements
- Can start in any Phase, based on circumstances
- May be engaged in multiple Phases at once
- All Elements are essential for success
- Not a linear approach ...  
Phases and Elements form feedback loops
- Enhancing public education is a never-ending process

EXPANDED  
ANALYSES

DEEPEN  
RELATIONSHIPS

PURSUE  
'REACH GOALS'

LONGER-TERM  
PLANNING

## 3. GAIN/SUSTAIN MOMENTUM

## 1. IDENTIFY ISSUES

DOD  
RESOURCES

FEDERAL & STATE  
RESOURCES

INSTALLATION  
DATA

READINESS  
DATA

INITIAL  
ANALYSES

ESTABLISH  
RELATIONSHIPS

PURSUE  
'QUICK WINS'

INITIAL  
PLANNING

## 2. INITIAL EFFORTS

DOD  
RESOURCES

- Defense-State Liaison Office
  - Key issues (e.g., *Advance Enrollment*)
  - State profiles
  - Regional Liaison Officers
- Air Force Support of Military Families Initiative
  - Annual reports
  - Information sheets

FEDERAL & STATE  
RESOURCES

- Federal Impact Aid requests & allocations
- States' district & school annual "report cards"
- State use of the *Military Student Identifier*
- State intervention in local schools
- District/school accreditation results

READINESS  
DATA

- Retention rates
- Assignment declination rates
- Unaccompanied personnel rates
- Voluntary/early reassignment rates
- UMD fill rates

COMMAND  
DATA

- School Liaison Office surveys, trend data & reports
- MAJCOM/NAF priorities & directives
- Spouse groups' unsolicited comments
- Airmen/Guardian's unsolicited comments
- Focus groups of personnel & spouses
- Surveys of personnel & spouses
- Local/regional media coverage
- Community feedback
- Military OneSource

**Eglin AFB, FL** – Collaborated with the Defense-State Liaison Office (DSLO) in 2020 to correct a 2019 *Advance Enrollment* policy for military-connected children in Florida, which unintentionally excluded thousands of students a year.<sup>1</sup>

**Eielson AFB, AK** – Installation officials used the *Support of Military Families* 2019 results to advocate for pre-kindergarten at Fairbanks North Star Borough School District and worked with DSLO to create a state *Purple Star Schools Program*.<sup>2</sup>

**Tyndall AFB, FL** – In the wake of Hurricane Michael, Bay District Schools used the *Support of Military Families* 2019 results to advocate for the expansion of a K-5 public school on federal government property to include grades 6-8.<sup>3</sup>

**FT Gordon, GA** – Columbia County Public Schools used *Military Student Identifier* data to pinpoint which schools required additional support services.<sup>4</sup>

**JB Pearl Harbor–Hickam, HI** – The Hawai'i State Department of Education established a robust *Federal Impact Aid* effort. In School Year 2018-19, the Central Administrative District identified 8,541 military-connected students and received more than \$42.7 million.<sup>5</sup>

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – The Commander, Air University voiced his concern to community leaders in 2018 that the state of education in Montgomery was affecting his ability to attract qualified faculty members and driving Airmen to live apart from their families.<sup>6</sup>

**Pentagon, VA** – CSAF21 emphasized the influence of public education on readiness at a conference in 2019, stating, "The number one quality of life issue for Airmen with children is the quality of schools. They'll say 'Hey, Chief, you can deploy me, you can send me to tough locations...we're in! But once you start affecting the quality of our children's education, that's when we're going to make difficult decisions'."<sup>7</sup>

**Barksdale AFB, LA** – The Commander, AF Global Strike Command held a K-12 summit in 2018 to enhance readiness by highlighting the issues' importance to commanders, share lessons across the MAJCOM, and conduct training.<sup>8</sup>

**Buckley SFB, CO** – Guardians and their spouses expressed frustration about obstacles to enrolling their children in quality public schools to the Wing Commander's spouse. The Command Team then made addressing these issues one of their top priorities.<sup>9</sup>



INITIAL  
ANALYSES

- **Key external stakeholders**
  - Boards of Education
  - District Superintendents
  - School Principals & Counselors
  - Non-profit organizations
- **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Challenges (SWOC)**
- **Time, Impact & Control (TIC)**

ESTABLISHING  
RELATIONSHIPS

- **Decide on a structure & leadership**
- **Build the team:**
  - School Liaison Office
  - Child Development Center & Youth Programs
  - Airman & Family Readiness Center
  - Exceptional Family Member Program
  - Relocation Office
  - Personnel & Spouses
- **Outreach to key external stakeholders:**
  - Attend public meetings & make office calls
  - Host a summit of key stakeholders

INITIAL  
PLANNING

- **Brainstorm**
- **Consult with stakeholders**
- **Identify 'quick wins' (within 1-year)**
- **Prioritize & sequence efforts**
- **Improve internal communications**
- **Publish & circulate plans**

PURSUING  
'QUICK WINS'

- **Off-the-shelf training:**
  - AASA – Supporting the Military Child
  - DoDEA – Special Education
  - MCEC – National Training Seminar
  - MIC3 – Military Interstate Children's Compact
  - NAFIS – Federal Impact Aid
- **Flexible enrollment policies**
- **Resolve concerns about athletic eligibility**
- **Leverage on-base schools**

**NAS Fallon, NV** – Churchill County School District leveraged *Military Student Identifier* data to secure a state grant that provided laptops to 5-8th grade students.<sup>10</sup>

**Wight-Patterson AFB, OH** – Ohio's Military Interstate Children's Compact Commissioner determined that military-connected students would benefit from additional support services. He established the country's first *Purple Star School Program* in 2017 to recognize military-friendly schools. The program has since spread across the country.<sup>11</sup>

**FT Sill, OK** – Installation leaders coordinated 500 hours a month of volunteer activities in the Lawton Public School District, contributing to expanded STEM offerings, increased test scores, and higher Advanced Placement course pass rates.<sup>12</sup>

**MacDill AFB, FL** – Established the *MacDill Council for Education Excellence* in 2014 with participation of the Hillsborough County School District, parents, and community members. The group meets quarterly to foster dialog and resolve concerns at the lowest possible level.<sup>13</sup>

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – The Commander, Air University chartered the installation-wide *Public K-12 Education Working Group* to identify, recommend, and implement ways to improve public school options for military-connected children.<sup>14</sup>

**MacDill AFB, FL** – The *MacDill Council for Education Excellence* published an *Education Strategy* identifying shared priorities and fostering a collaborative relationship between the installation and Hillsborough County School District.<sup>15</sup>

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – The *Public K-12 Education Working Group* drafted a comprehensive *Local Schools Plan* in 2020 to build on initial efforts to expand access to quality public educational options.<sup>16</sup>

**FT Rucker, AL** – Worked with the state's High School Athletic Association to establish an *overlapping school zone* so students living on base would retain immediate eligibility to play varsity sports.<sup>17</sup>

**Keesler AFB, MS** – Worked with elected officials in 2013 to grant on-base residents flexible enrollment, which permits their children to attend any school within 30-miles of the installation.<sup>18</sup>

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – Local Boards of Education authorized flexible/out-of-district enrollment policies that permit military-connected students to attend some of their higher performing schools on a space-available basis.<sup>19</sup>

## EXPANDED ANALYSES

## DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS

## LONGER-TERM PLANNING

## PURSUING 'REACH GOALS'

- **Additional external stakeholders**
  - Local elected officials
  - State-level officials
  - Other non-profit organizations
  - Other military installations
- **Revised SWOC**
- **Long-term TIC**
- **Establish a military educational council**
- **Expand the team:**
  - Community members
  - Chambers of Commerce
  - Medical Treatment Facility
- **Regular interactions with key stakeholders** (e.g., Base tours & airshows)
- **Train-the-trainer at local schools**
- **Expanded brainstorming**
- **Deeper consultation with stakeholders**
- **Identify 'reach goals' (2 to 5-years)**
- **Extend planning horizon**
- **Communications plan:**
  - Internal: social media, AF News, etc.
  - External: local and national media
- **Expand STEM programs**
- **Modify athletic eligibility**
- **Increase support to special education**
- **Implement a Purple Star Schools Program**
- **Grow Social/Emotional Learning (SEL) programs**
- **Increase enrollment eligibility for on-base schools**
- **Leverage other types of schools (e.g., virtual)**
- **Seek external educational grants (e.g., DoDEA)**
- **Promote citizenship/youth programs (e.g., JROTC & CAP)**
- **Pursue State legislation**

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – The *Public K-12 Education Working Group* undertook an installation-wide survey on satisfaction with local schools in 2020 to identify personnel's priorities and guide future efforts.<sup>20</sup>

**NAS Pensacola, FL** – The Commander partnered with a local college and foundation to propose a new charter school for military-connected students in grades 10-12. The school will host a technology innovation center and provide students an opportunity to earn college credits.<sup>21</sup>

**McGhee-Tyson ANGB, TN** – Installation, school, state, and community leaders researched the specific educational needs of military-connected children, which led to the creation of *AIM High, TN* that now benefit 40,000 students state-wide.<sup>22</sup>

**Whiteman AFB, MO** – The Superintendent of Knob Noster Public Schools introduced robotics classes in elementary and middle schools with large numbers of military-connected students, leading to a partnership with the 509BW to fabricate a switch cover now installed on all B-2s.<sup>23</sup>

**Maxwell AFB, AL** – The *Public K-12 Education Working Group* obtained command approval of a five-year *Strategic Plan* in 2021 to ensure unity of effort in support of the command's long-term goals and objectives.<sup>24</sup>

**NB Coronado, CA** – The Coronado Unified School District adopted a long-term vision to supporting military-connected students, securing four grants between 2009 and 2017 that totaled \$5.3M.<sup>25</sup>

**JB Lewis-McChord, WA** – Yelm Community Schools implemented universal social-emotional health screening and support systems to address the diverse needs of military-connected elementary and middle school students.<sup>26</sup>

**Offutt AFB, NE** – Bellevue Public Schools obtained funding for *Project Career Launch*, which aims to raise students' reading literacy and expand the district's Health Sciences program to increase the number of students earning dual credit.<sup>27</sup>

**Shaw AFB, SC** – Richland School District Two launched the *Whole Child Initiative* that uses research-based instructional strategies to increase the math proficiency of 1,245 military-connected students attending fifteen schools.<sup>28</sup>

**Sheppard AFB, TX** – The Wichita Falls Independent School District received a grant to implement programs promoting academic success and physical wellness in two elementary schools with high concentrations of military-connected students.<sup>29</sup>

During my husband's command of the 21st Operations Group (2017-19) at Peterson AFB, I spoke with many military members and spouses about the challenges they experienced enrolling their children in high-quality local schools. Although Colorado offered "school choice," the timelines did not align with assignment cycles and districts required a local address.



*The author and stakeholders of HB21-1217 at the bill signing.  
Source: State of Colorado.*

Early on, we arranged a meeting with leaders of the school districts that serve the Buckley community. As a result, I realized change was possible...and not just at the local level. I began to speak with everyone I could about the need for state legislation to ease the educational transition for military students. In fall 2019, State Representative Bockenfield offered his support and invited me to help write such a law.

For more than eighteen months, we consulted, negotiated, and collaborated with stakeholders. The result was House Bill 21-1217: *Military Family Open Enrollment in Public Schools*. It stated that military families coming to Colorado be allowed to register electronically based on orders and use the base School Liaison Office's address if necessary. It also proposed automatic re-enrollment in future years and sibling preference.

In spring 2021, the State House and Senate passed the bill unanimously. Finally, on May 28, Governor Polis signed it into law, giving military families a more equitable playing field in Colorado's public schools.



*Colorado Governor Polis signs military legislation.  
Source: US Space Force.*

– Mrs. Alicia K. Pepper, Spouse of the former 460th Space Wing Commander

For years, MacDill AFB and Hillsborough County Public Schools held periodic town halls to address military parents' concerns, as is done at many installations. However, these meetings were not scheduled or structured to provide timely solutions, so they often left all parties frustrated. In 2014, the installation vice commander suggested establishing a formal body with select leaders from the base and school district. He recommended they meet regularly and follow a standing agenda to foster greater predictability and collaboration.



*Colonel Pananon addresses the Hillsborough County Public School Board. Source: US Air Force.*

From this idea, the *MacDill Council for Educational Excellence* was born. It is chaired by the installation Vice Commander and includes key military leaders, representatives from the Hillsborough County Public Schools Central Office, community members, school principals, and parents. The body meets quarterly, first in closed session to address administrative and policy issues, then in open session, when parents or other interested parties present their concerns.

In 2015, installation and district leadership signed the *MacDill AFB Education Strategy*, institutionalizing the council and establishing shared objectives. The strategy also empowers the council to recommend solutions directly to military and educational decision makers.

The results have been impressive, including: modifying the district's school choice policy to better accommodate military-connected students, extending application and acceptance to the International Baccalaureate program for transferring students, establishing an expedited review process for new students with Individual Education Programs, accepting gifted designation from other states to ensure continuity of education, and revising the grade point average policy to avoid penalizing military-connected students.

After seven years, stakeholders still see the benefits of recurrent council meetings to resolve new concerns, foster open communication, deepen relationships, and ensure continuity.



*Colonel Briere leads the MacDill Council for Educational Excellence. Source: US Air Force.*

– Ms. Kim Sukach, Military Liaison, Hillsborough County Public Schools



“Innovate...Partner...Reduce Costs...Move Fast...Solve Problems!” The Global Strike Command commander issued these directions to all his wing commanders in 2018. So, when a safety issue was identified with the B-2 Bomber, the commander of the 509th Bomb Wing called a team of unlikely heroes: the Stealth Panther Robotics students of Knob Noster High School.



Stealth Panther Robotics students 3-D printing the part.  
Source: US Air Force.

Seventy-two hours after receiving the mission from the wing commander, this team of super-smart, creative teenagers delivered a 3-D printed switch cover that eliminated the safety issue. The part is now installed on the entire B-2 fleet, protecting \$50 billion in Air Force assets...for \$1.25 each. Just as important, this partnership inspired an entire team of students who will serve as tomorrow’s STEM innovators and leaders.

This extraordinary story illustrates the power

of relationships, particularly for military students. Knob Noster Public Schools have emerged as a national model for school-installation partnership. Since 2015, district and base leaders have built strong relationships that contributed to rapid improvements in educational programing and student outcomes. The comprehensive improvement strategy landed Whiteman AFB as #1 for public education in the Air Force’s *Support of Military Families* 2019 report.

District leaders use the B-2 switch cover and other success stories to sustain support for providing high-quality education to military-connected children. Installation leaders highlight how this sort of partnership can produce innovation, reduce costs, accelerate change, and solve problems. In other words, accomplish the mission!

Public education is both a quality of life and a readiness issue that touches all of our service members and their families. That responsibility remains front of mind every day for the Knob Noster Public Schools team.

– Dr. Jerrod H. Wheeler, Superintendent  
Knob Noster Public Schools



Brigadier General Nichols displays the switch cover.  
Source: US Air Force.

In 2018, Montgomery Public Schools’ accrediting body found the District lacking in 19 of 31 standards. Soon, the Air University commander began speaking candidly with community leaders about how public education was hindering his ability to attract the best faculty and students. That fall, he formed an installation-wide working group to “identify, recommend, and implement ways to improve educational options.”



General and Mrs. Goldfein meet with the River Region team. Source: US Air Force.

the summer, the working group achieved ‘Quick Wins,’ including flexible enrollment policies, expanded varsity athletic eligibility, and reopening the magnet application process. Starting that fall, they trained hundreds of teachers and counselors on the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunities for Military Children*.

In 2020, the new commander directed a comprehensive survey to identify personnel’s concerns and priorities. The results were codified in a one-year plan with four goals: 1. Expand eligibility for the on-base school. 2. Improve communication. 3. Strengthen relations with key stakeholders. 4. Increase quality off-base educational options. The community also worked to address issues: In March, Montgomery Public Schools regained full accreditation and that fall, residents voted to increase funding for public education.

In 2021, the Office of the Secretary of Defense chose Maxwell AFB as the first site of a congressionally authorized pilot program. This will permit active duty personnel living off base to enroll their children in the on-base Department of Defense school. The commander has also worked with Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth and the Military Stability Commission to identify how the Alabama legislature can help. Finally, the working group published a five-year strategic plan to ensure unity of purpose and continuity of effort for years to come.



Lieutenant General Hecker speaks with Alabama Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth. Source: US Air Force.

– Dr. Brian R. Selmeski, Chair of the  
Public K-12 Education Working Group

Department of Defense

- Airman & Family Readiness Center
- Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA)
- Department of the Air Force Child Development Center & Youth Programs
- Department of the Air Force School Liaison Office (SLO)
- Department of the Air Force Support of Military Families (SoMF)
- Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)
- Military & Family Life Counseling Program (MFLC)
- Military One Source

Citizenship & Youth Development Programs

- Civil Air Patrol
- DoD Starbase
- Junior ROTC: Air Force, Army, Marine Corps & Navy

Nonprofits Supporting Military Children & Families

- Air Force Association (AFA)
- Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA)
- Collaborative for Student Success
- Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)
- Military Families for High Standards
- Military Impacted Schools Association (MISA)
- Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3)
- Military Officer Association of America (MOAA)
- National Association of Federally Impacted Schools (NAFIS)
- National Military Family Association (NMFA)
- Pennsylvania State University Clearing House for Military Readiness
- Purple Star Schools Program
- School Superintendents Association (AASA): Supporting the Military Child

Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM)

- Cyber Patriot Program
- DoD STEM Education Consortium (DSEC)
- Lobaki Foundation (robotics)
- NASA Marshall Space Flight Center
- National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI)
- Science Olympiad

Social/Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Anchored4Life
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- Parent2Parent
- Student2Student
- Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence: Ruler Schools

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## ***Here We Go***

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