

# North Carolina's Reserve Component-connected Children: Are Our Schools Prepared to Meet Their Needs?

Margaret C. Wilmoth, Ratchanok Phonyiam, Wenxin Bian

**Children who have a parent serving in one of the military Reserve Components have access to fewer support services than their active-duty counterparts. They also have unique circumstances that need recognition by school administrators, nurses, and counselors. This paper suggests ways the state of North Carolina can improve support provided to these children and their parents.**

## Introduction

North Carolina prides itself on being “military-friendly” because of numerous large active-duty installations across the state [1]. Military families and the communities in which they live receive a great deal of consideration and attention from federal and state policymakers and businesses [1]. Often overlooked are the robust numbers of Reserve Component (RC) Service Members who live permanently in the state in “civilian-centric” communities, including nearly 7,000 Service Members across the state, as well as the North Carolina National Guard of ~11,000 Soldiers, and others who serve in the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force Reserve elements and reside in North Carolina [1]. Quality of life for the military family—active, Reserve, and Guard—is heavily linked to the well-being of their children and the educational systems they attend [1]. The school environment is important in the lives of all children, but uniquely so for those who are military connected, in part because of the stability provided during parental deployment [2, 3]. Schools surrounding active-duty installations are well prepared to support active-military-connected children and receive federal dollars to provide this support [1]. Unfortunately, North Carolina's RC-connected children are likely to miss out on military-centric support resources, such as counseling services, partially because of policymakers' lack of awareness of the existence of RC-connected children in schools [4]. RC-connected children and families typically live in civilian-centric cities and towns that have no affiliation with a military installation. The school staff in these civilian-centric communities are typically not as well-attuned to military culture. This paper will highlight several areas for policy improvements that would help ensure that North Carolina's RC-connected chil-

dren have the same access to knowledgeable school staff and programs as their active-duty-connected counterparts.

## Background

Much of what is known about the impact of deployment on children is based on the perspective of active component (AC) children [5–8], which has informed school-based support structures, including those established through federal legislation. The Military Student Identifier (MSI) was a component of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed by Congress in 2015, which stipulates voluntary reporting by military families to schools that their child has a connection to the military [9, 10]. The law also mandates reporting on the academic performance of these highly mobile children to military advocates [9]. This voluntary reporting of military affiliation by the parent also empowers school districts to apply for federal Impact Aid, which is then funneled back to schools with high concentrations of military-affiliated children. This Impact Aid is designed to cover the lost property taxes that would otherwise fund local schools, since federal property is exempt from taxes [10]. As originally passed, ESSA did not include families from the RC. The language was modified in the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, Section 576, to include RC families [11], however, RC reporting via the MSI does not influence Impact Aid to local school districts. The law mandates reporting by schools on the presence of military-affiliated children, both active duty and RC, and on their academic performance. However, the reporting of a military affiliation by parents remains voluntary, and the law does not mandate specific educational programming for school administrators, school nurses, or school counselors to prepare them to care for military-connected children.

In North Carolina, each Local Education Agency (LEA) has the option to configure MSI status in its electronic documentation system to alert teachers and other staff when children have been identified as military connected,

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Address correspondence to Dr. Peggy Wilmoth, UNC School of Nursing (wilmothp@email.unc.edu).

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although how this is accomplished differs across the state (personal communication, Douglas Taggart, Interagency Coordinator, North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans, March 12, 2021). The Purple Star Schools program, as followed by North Carolina, is a component of the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3) and recognizes schools that demonstrate military-friendly practices and commitment to military children and families [12]. The Council of State Governments (CSG), in cooperation with the United States Department of Defense, created the MIC3 to address some of the educational challenges faced by children of active-duty military families due to frequent moves [13]. In North Carolina, the advisory committee for the MIC3 is primarily composed of six individuals, including one representative from an active component military installation and one superintendent from a district with a high concentration of active component military-connected children [14]. The statute does not specify a representative from the RC, although one staff member from the North Carolina National Guard typically attends as an observer. The current structure of representation on the North Carolina State Council of the MIC3 leaves open the possibility that the needs of RC-connected children and family, secondary to parental deployment or prolonged training, may be missed or ignored.

The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) partners with MIC3 to assist schools in responding to the educational and social-emotional challenges that military-connected children face as they transition to a new school [15]. While one would assume that the Purple Star program would include RC-connected children, given that very few of these children move and change schools on a regular basis due to a parent's military job, they are less likely to be identified as military-connected unless a parent provides this information. This heightens the possibility that their military connection and special needs due to parental deployment or prolonged training may be missed or ignored.

A recent unpublished survey of school nurses in North Carolina found that there was awareness of the presence of the MSI in the state's electronic documentation system, PowerSchool, and that this system alerts them to the special needs of children (Wilmoth MC, Bian W, Phyoniam R. NC School Nurses and Readiness to Care for Military Reserve Component Kids. Presentation at: North Carolina Nurses Association, Sept. 14-15, 2023, Winston-Salem). There was also awareness of differences between active duty and Reserve Component military duty by study respondents. However, little was known by participants about how deployment impacted RC-connected children or what types of resources were locally available that could support this special group of children. For example, there was no knowledge of available peer-support programs for RC-connected children. Respondents perceived that these types of programs would be led by a Military Liaison. However, it should be noted that a Military Liaison is only available in 5 of the

100 counties in North Carolina, all of which surround active-duty installations [16]. The lack of these experts in school districts across the state limits the ability of school staff in civilian-centric schools to obtain expert consultation about RC-connected children. While not unique to North Carolina, reliance on the Military Liaison by school nurses and other staff to inform them of military-connected children's needs highlights an opportunity to better prepare school staff, including nurses, to care for these children no matter where they reside in any state [17]. The last statewide training event for school nurses in North Carolina that focused on military children took place in 2016. It is not known if other school staff received educational programming about military culture, the military child, and their unique needs. This type of training needs to occur on a more regular basis and be broadly targeted to all school staff. MCEC does have a continuing education course on the National Guard/RC family that could easily be utilized by North Carolina education officials [15].

Finally, there is another group of military-connected children who have not yet been identified through federal or state legislation and who also have unique needs: the children of our Veterans. These children are not identified in any database within K-12 schools, yet some may be assisting with caregiving or living with a Veteran with severe physical and/or mental health challenges. There are VA support services for caregivers but no programs that target school-aged children [18].

## Policy Recommendations

The assumption underlying this paper is that North Carolina policymakers are equally concerned about the well-being of RC-connected children who are permanent residents of the state as they are about children whose parents serve on active duty at one of the major military installations and are transitory state residents. First, we recommend a revision to the membership of the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission in the state by adding a permanent member to represent the RC on the advisory committee. This new RC representative should rotate between a Title 10 and Title 32 Service Member. Second, the state should consider providing funding in those school districts that reach a defined threshold of RC children and train staff in meeting the needs of military-connected families in these districts, mirroring the federal Impact Aid received by some school districts. Third, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and Department of Health and Human Services can partner to provide regular educational training for school administrators, school nurses, and school counselors on caring for and educating all of the military-connected children living in the state. Finally, since North Carolina prides itself on being Veteran-friendly, the state could identify ways to ensure children of Veterans receive special support within our schools. These proposed policy changes are not relatively costly, are easy to imple-

ment, and will continue to allow North Carolina to expand its reputation as a military-friendly state. **NCMJ**

**Margaret C. Wilmoth, PhD, MSS, RN, FAAN, Major General, US Army (ret)** Professor, School of Nursing and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Adjunct Professor, Uniformed Services University of the United States, Bethesda, Maryland.

**Ratchanok Phonyiam, MSN, RN** PhD Candidate, School of Nursing, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Ramathibodi School of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand.

**Wenxin Bian, BSN** PhD Student, School of Nursing, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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