

Module 10: Building and Maintaining Relationships

Lesson One: Hierarchies and Channels of Communication

Lesson Two: Relationship Building

Module Overview: Welcome to Module 10: Building and Maintaining Relationships. This module will offer information and practical examples to help School Liaisons create sound and productive relationships with key stakeholders. These include community groups, parents, and school officials that can influence the academic success of a military-connected child. Relationship building is a key feature of any School Liaison's day-to-day duties and is of critical importance to ensure military families are supported.

Learning Objectives: Through this module, School Liaisons will be able to:

- Explain typical state agency, district, and school-level hierarchies.
- Identify important school, district, community, and installation stakeholders that are key to meeting the goals of the School Liaison
- Identify ways to contact and communicate effectively with different family, school, community, and command stakeholders.
- Identify strategies that inform key school and community stakeholder groups about the unique needs of military-connected children.
- Determine and implement strategies for supporting and/or strengthening programs such as Partners in Education (PIE), Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and Adopt-a-School.
- Work on identifying and strengthening installation-school Local Action Plans and Memoranda of Understanding.
- Develop action plans for schools and build community understanding about meeting the needs of military-connected students.
- Identify and explain best practice examples from various installations and School Liaisons about relationship building with the local school and community.

Lesson One: Hierarchies and Channels of Communication

Lesson Overview: At any given time, School Liaisons may be introducing a military family to the principal of a local school, learning about the special needs of a student from a classroom teacher, or participating in a district-level education committee focused on local school policies. By understanding the structures of the education system in terms of accountability at state and local levels, School Liaisons can better formulate plans to advance the causes and concerns of military families within their communities.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this lesson the learner will be able to:

- Explain typical state agency, district, and school-level hierarchies.

Education Authority & Oversight

In the current system of education, states are given the authority to structure how they legislate and oversee the delivery of education for their children. (More information about the U.S. education system can be found in Module 4: The U.S. Public Education System.)

As a result, there are variations from state to state about how much control each level—state, district, and school—has over education policies and oversight. Obtaining a clear understanding of the landscape of authority and oversight in education is important to School Liaisons who may need to navigate the local chain of command to ensure military families are accessing appropriate resources for their children.

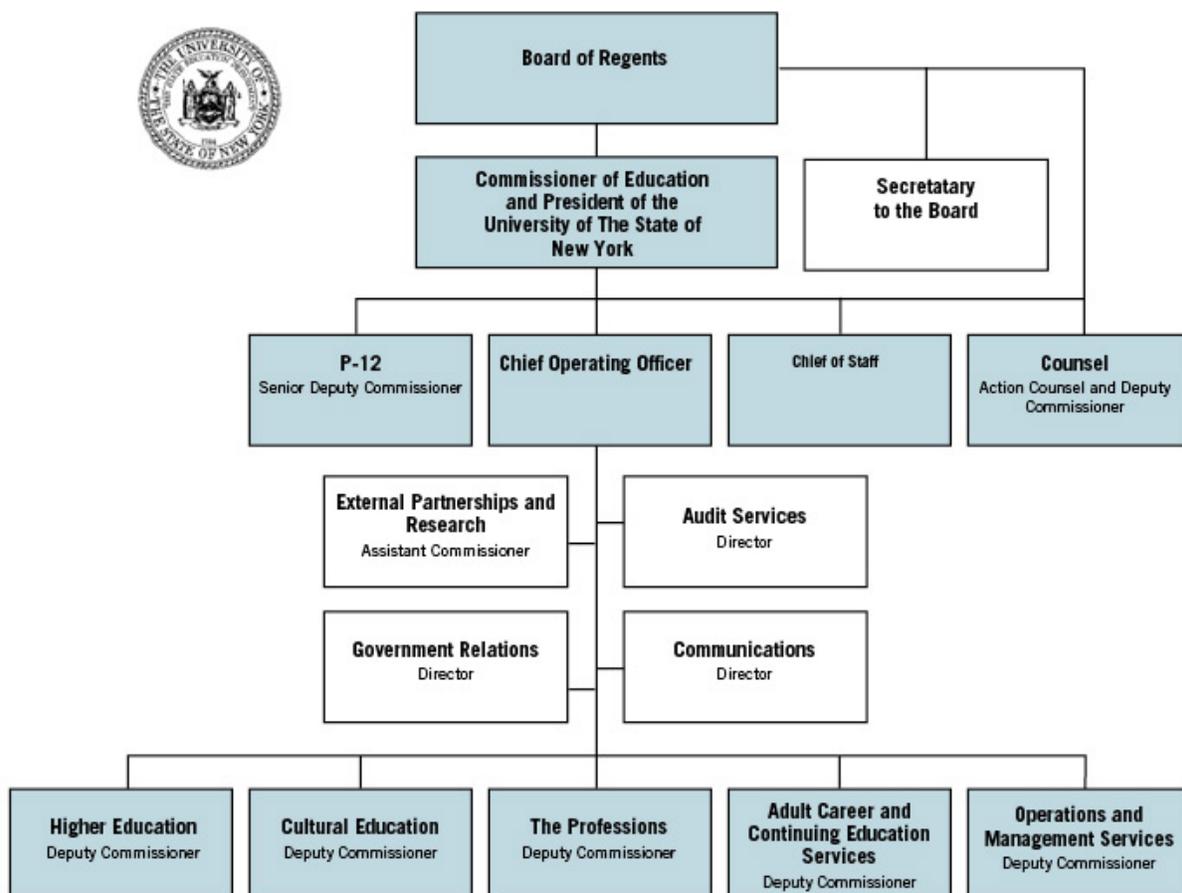
The state board of education, which can be elected or appointed, has oversight authority over the state education agency in most states. These boards generally have authority over curriculum standards, graduation requirements, testing, teacher licensure, and the development of rules and regulations for the administration of state programs. Local school boards have authority over schools and are responsible for the oversight and day-to-day operation of schools, including the appointment or election of superintendents. In many cases, local schools also have governing boards, or school improvement councils. In some large cities, mayors have control over the education system, and the school district is an agency of the city government. Local laws determine the authority of these boards. The key for School Liaisons is to understand existing local education structures and find ways to secure support for military families and the schools that serve them. School Liaisons may choose to participate in policymaking groups and various committees, representing the interests of military-connected children.

State Agency Organization

State education agencies (SEAs), sometimes referred to as departments of education, generally have authority over student and teacher standards. SEAs implement most state-level policy initiatives and programs as well as manage the implementation of Federal programs such as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Some SEAs also oversee other programs such as adult education, early childhood education, professional licensure, and higher education within the state. School Liaisons should understand these areas of authority in order to know who to contact and where to go for appropriate services and resources for military-connected families.

The following organizational chart, from New York State, shows the lines of authority within a state education agency.

New York State Education Department Organizational Chart



District-level Organization

At the district level, there are many departments to be understood. Generally, the departments include broad areas such as the following:

Instruction

This category includes academic instruction and curriculum.

Labor Relations

The collective bargaining of teachers to determine things such as wage scales, working hours, training, health and safety, etc. is required by a number of states. In states that do not have these requirements, many districts still have collective bargaining agreements with unions (the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association are the two largest teachers unions). In most cases, districts negotiate contracts with unions and oversee their implementation, while individual schools generally do not. Although charter schools in most states are exempt from collective bargaining mandates, teachers in some charter schools have elected and are represented by a union that collectively bargains with the school leadership. (In some cases, labor relations may also be a state-level function.)

Legal

This department represents districts in lawsuits and ensures that districts comply with applicable Federal and state laws.

Human Capital

Commonly referred to as human resources, this area supports the hiring, firing, and professional development of teachers and school administrators.

Finance

This department manages the budget of the district, including overseeing revenues from government and private sources and setting guidelines for expenditures.

Special Education

This department oversees the education of students with disabilities to ensure that the district complies with IDEA.

Security

Some districts contract with local police and/or have their own security systems, but broad policies about the function of school security are overseen by districts.

Transportation

This department plans, provides, and maintains busing and other special transportation for students.

Food Services

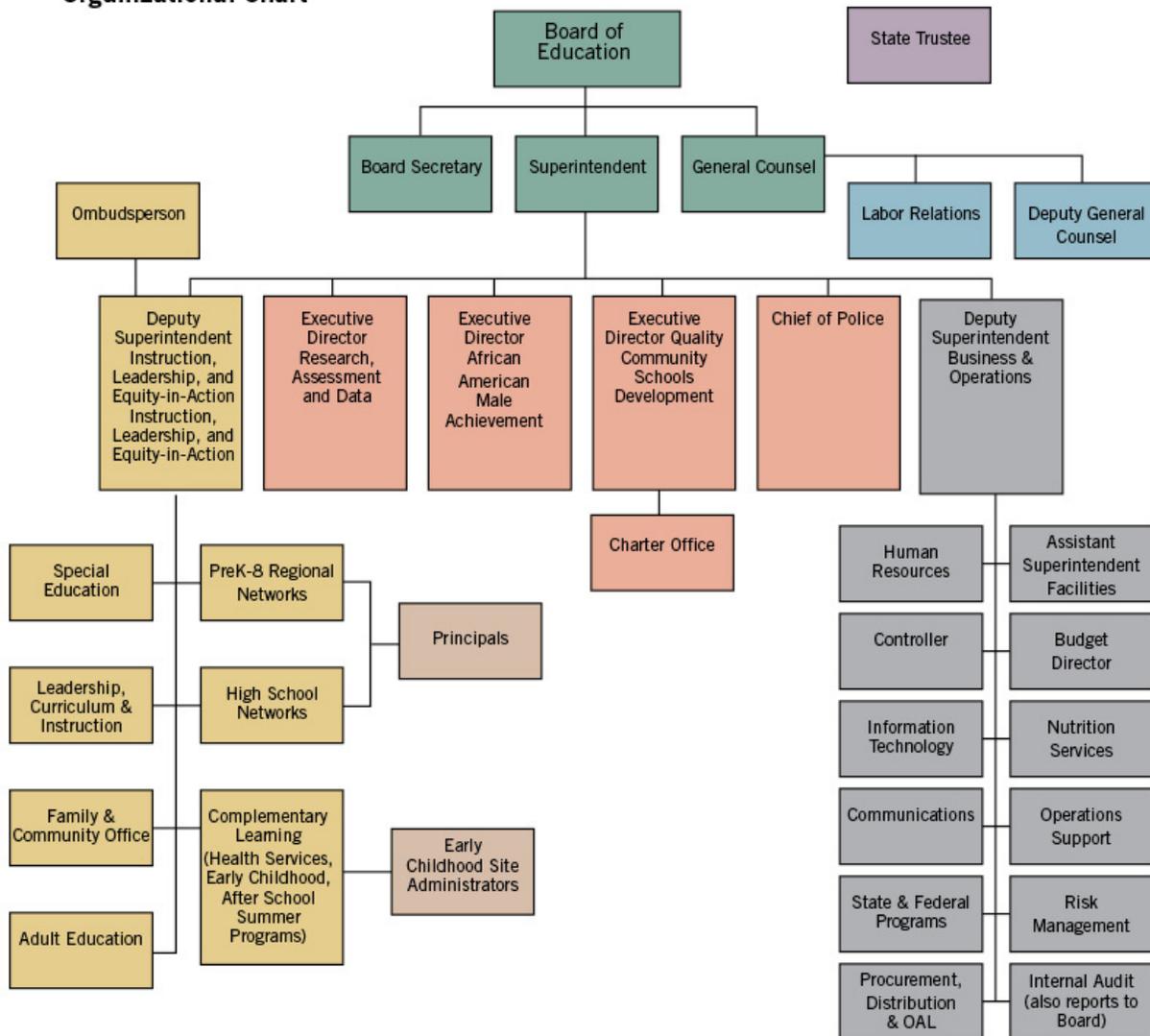
This department is responsible for overseeing the provision of school meals and ensuring that the district complies with the National School Lunch Program.

Facilities

The physical plant and school operations are generally centralized at the district level, but each school manages its own facilities and custodial staff. (There is a move by some school systems, such as the District of Columbia, for example, to outsource this function to make modernization and maintenance more efficient).

The following organizational chart, from the Oakland (CA) Unified School District, shows a typical set of functional areas within a local education agency (LEA), referring to school districts, school divisions, and counties, and the lines of authority within them.

Oakland Unified School District Organizational Chart



School-Level Organization

School districts are comprised of individual school sites whose internal authority is organized in many different ways. However, generally the following key players will have important roles:

Principal

This category includes the responsibility for academic instruction and curriculum.

Vice Principal or Assistant Principal

Usually found only in larger primary schools, the assistant principal supports the principal with the management of the school.

Special Education Coordinator

Responsible for coordination and oversight of provisions for students with special educational needs.

Human Capital

Commonly referred to as human resources, this area supports the hiring, firing, and professional development of teachers and school administrators.

Subject Leaders and Curriculum Coordinators

Responsible for the leadership and management of a particular curriculum subject. Classroom teachers may be expected to accept responsibility for an area of the curriculum as part of their normal professional duties.

Classroom Teachers

Plan, prepare, and deliver lessons to meet the needs of all students, setting and marking work, and recording pupil development as necessary. Lead teachers often work in partnership with teaching assistants or paraprofessionals.

Lesson One Summary

Key Points:

- In the current U.S. public education system, states are given the authority to structure how they legislate and oversee the delivery of education.
- There are many variations from state to state in how much control a state, district, or school has over education policies and oversight.
- State boards of education generally have authority over curriculum standards, graduation requirements, testing, teacher licensure, and rules and regulations for the administration of state programs.
- Local school boards have authority over schools and oversee their day-to-day operation, including the appointment or election of superintendents.
- State Education Agencies (SEAs) are sometimes referred to as state departments of education and generally have authority over student and teacher standards.
- School districts generally have many important departments that School Liaisons need to be aware of.
- School districts are made up of individual school sites whose internal authority can be organized in many different ways.

Looking Forward: Next, learn about important stakeholders that are key to the work of the School Liaison and how to effectively build relationships with them.

Lesson Two: Relationship Building

Lesson Overview: Effective communication and relationship building is key to the work of the School Liaison in ensuring the needs of military-connected students are met. This lesson provides School Liaisons with an understanding of the critical stakeholders and provides targeted strategies and suggested actions for building effective relationships.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completing this lesson, School Liaisons will be able to:

- Identify important school, district, community, and installation stakeholders that are key to meeting the goals of the School Liaison
- Identify ways in which to communicate effectively and productively with different audiences such as school officials, parents, and community representatives.
- Identify ways in which to inform key school and community stakeholder groups about the unique needs of military-connected children.
- Determine and implement strategies for supporting and/or strengthening programs such as Partners in Education (PIE), Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Adopt-a-School.
- Work on identifying and strengthening installation-school Local Action Plans and Memoranda of Understanding.
- Develop action plans for schools and build community understanding about meeting the needs of military-connected students.
- Identify and explain best-practice examples from various installations and various School Liaisons on relationship building with local school and community.

Why Communication Is Important

School Liaisons and military families have shared goals—the nurturing, education, and development of the child. As the bridge between military families and the community, School Liaisons play a key role in helping stakeholders understand the challenges and opportunities military-connected children face, including

- the effects of starting at a new school, in a new community;
- the effects of deployment on children and families; and
- the difficulty in negotiating a new environment and the potential impact it can have on academic success.

Therefore, School Liaisons should use the following strategies to effectively communicate and build relationships with stakeholders:

- Communicate appropriate, quality information.
- Share information – “Information Is Power.”
- Contribute to informed decision making.
- Create awareness about the role of the School Liaison.
- Improve the School Liaison–stakeholder relationship.
- Establish credibility as a “quality information” provider.

Identifying Key Stakeholders

Building on a foundational understanding of military-connected students' unique needs, School Liaisons should identify key stakeholders that have the most potential to help achieve the shared goals around supporting military-connected children. School Liaisons should consider developing relationships with the following organizations and individuals as part of their network building and advocacy:

Teachers

Local teachers have the best on-the-ground understanding about what is happening in their schools and oftentimes offer key support and develop significant relationships with military-connected students.

School Leaders

School leaders, such as principals or deans, can also be influential partners in supporting military-connected children. School Liaisons may find that school leaders can solve problems at the school level without going the extra step of changing the larger policies themselves.

District Administrators

District-level administrators, particularly superintendents, often have an important presence in the local community. Building a relationship with the superintendent and other district-level administrators who have authority over budgetary decisions, as well as teacher-related regulations and implementation, can also lead to knowing education supporters from other sectors of the local community.

Local School Board Members

The local school board is an important platform for sharing and obtaining knowledge. School boards create policy and generally have public comment periods where important policies, issues, and resources are discussed. School Liaisons can utilize this forum to raise concerns or share information about the needs of military-connected students.

County-Level Policymakers

Some education funding or policy decisions (for merged city-county districts or rural districts) may be in the hands of a county commission, council, or board of supervisors. These officials generally exercise significant legislative and executive power and budgetary authority. It's best to target public comment periods and outreach to individual council members, commissioners, supervisors, and county executives.

City-Level Policymakers

Mayors and city council members can often serve as strong voices in education discourse, especially if a district is just for a particular city or town. Research and determine which individuals with a history of addressing education in the local community to target for relationship-building efforts.

Local Teachers' Union

Unions are membership organizations, so they are understandably focused first on representing work in which their membership is engaged. But some unions may be willing to work in partnership with School

Liaisons, parents, and other advocates on increasing the visibility of military-child issues. It is most effective to target the leadership of a local union, who are often perceived as the “voice of teachers” in a community.

Community Organizations

Organizations such as a local United Way (<http://apps.liveunited.org/myuw>), Parent Teacher Association (<http://www.pta.org>), YMCA (<http://www.ymca.net>), State Community Education Association (CEA), churches, and other faith-based centers can be key partners in supporting military-connected children and families. These organizations are often conveners of school officials, government, business, and other community stakeholders that can help mobilize and utilize community resources to support military-connected children.

Additionally, School Liaisons should develop relationships with installation based support, including the following:

Senior Enlisted Command Leader (Command Master Chief, SGTMAJ, Command SGTMAJ, Command Chief Master Sergeant)

The senior enlisted leader for the installation has the pulse of military personnel stationed aboard the installation.

Relocation Assistance Program

This program is designed to make the moving process run as effortlessly as possible for the military member and his/her family (consider partnering with the housing office as well on incoming families).

Deployment Specialist

They provide individual augmented support information for the military member, family, command, and employers.

Family Support Centers

These offer pre-deployment programs to ensure that families are ready for deployment and also during deployment assistance.

Ombudsman, Key Volunteer, Key Spouse, and Family Readiness Officers

These are personnel appointed by the commanding officer to serve as an information link between command leadership and military families. Volunteers are trained to disseminate information both up and down the chain of command, including command climate issues, local quality of life (QOL) improvement opportunities, and “good deals” around the community. They also provide resource referrals when needed. They are instrumental in resolving family issues before the issues require extensive command attention. These programs are shaped largely by the commanding officer’s perceived needs of his/her command.

Joint Family Service Assistance Program (JFSAP)

JFSAP supports National Guard and Reserve families who are geographically dispersed throughout the states. Each state has at least one JFSAP office to coordinate support for Guard and Reserve families.

Working to increase communication and build alliances and partnerships across stakeholders, decision makers, and influential individuals will not happen all at once. Determining the local politics and players can be complicated, and building relationships and familiarity takes time. New School Liaisons should create a customized plan to orient themselves to their local districts and stakeholders, identify key issues and opportunities, and create a database of contacts.

Strategies for Building Relationships

Tools and considerations for relationship building vary depending on the organization or individual on the receiving end. Participation in local school, district, and community events and forums is one way for School Liaisons to meet new stakeholders and potential advocates for military-connected children.

Here are some considerations for School Liaisons to weigh prior to seeking contact:

- What is the role or potential role of the individual or organization in supporting military-connected children and their families?
- What specifically can or would a School Liaison like to gain from developing a relationship with the individual or organization (e.g., access to knowledge or resources, shared network, delivery of information, assistance in communicating a message to others, support for a specific issue or particular military-connected child)?
- What specifically can a School Liaison offer to the individual or organization? (e.g., access to knowledge or resources, shared network, delivery of information, assistance in communicating a message to others, support for a specific issue or particular military-connected child).
- What is the most appropriate way to contact the individual or organization?
- What are some concrete next steps to establish a relationship with the individual or organization?

Building rapport and searching for common ground are important ways to set a relationship on a path to long-term sustainability. School Liaisons will find that different approaches will be more or less effective with different people and organizations. It is best to experiment and determine what works best. Here are some ways that School Liaisons can effectively reach out to key stakeholders:

Phone Calls

Sketch a brief introduction that includes a stated purpose for the call and a short description of the role of a School Liaison.

Meetings

Clearly establish a purpose, duration, and expected number of attendees prior to the meeting. Some high level officials may prefer that School Liaisons meet with a staff member or assistant first.

E-mails and Letters

Include a thoughtful introduction describing the purpose of making contact and conclude with a clear plan for follow up. Attach relevant resources if applicable.

Community Publications and Local Media

Letters to the editor and media coverage are interesting ways of reaching a broader local audience. Consider school and neighborhood newsletters, community center publications, local newspapers and media. School Liaisons can work with installation public affairs staff to identify and reach out to journalists that are known to write about education issues to raise awareness about military-connected child services and ongoing family-district-community partnerships that support it. A good way to do this

is to conduct a simple Web search for education articles, note the author's name, and call the publication asking for the best way to contact that person.

Effective Communication Tips for Relationship Building

Communicating with military families, schools, districts, communities, and military installations requires that School Liaisons have the ability to tailor their message and establish relationships across many kinds and types of individuals and organizations.

Here are some tips for School Liaisons communicating across a wide array of audiences:

- If possible, approach communication with a solid understanding of what will be accomplished.
- Have a method or system to track communication with stakeholders.
- Listen closely.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Be clear and patient with explanations.
- Offer additional resources as appropriate.
- Avoid assumptions.
- Use examples when possible.
- Keep communication professional.

There are many reasons why communicating with different types of people can be challenging. Some general obstacles to effective communication School Liaisons should consider based on their audience include

- poor use of language or inappropriate language for the target audience;
- legal issues/obstacles;
- confidentiality agreements;
- commercial sensitivities;
- reluctance to communicate or share;
- cultural differences;
- lack of time;
- information overload or too much useless information; and
- lack of empathy or understanding around the issue.

Effective Communication With Community and School Representatives

As a key member of the community, School Liaisons need to develop strong ties with local community and school representatives. There are two basic goals to that end:

- Mobilize and utilize community resources to reduce the impact of the mobile military lifestyle on children.
- Implement community-based support services that assist children with adapting to a military lifestyle and achieving academic success.

Some examples of ways to engage community and school stakeholders include the following:

- Work within the local structures of oversight to ensure that the most knowledgeable and influential person or coalition of people addresses an issue.
- Create and share communications tools that are engaging and readily accessible via handouts and posts to the school and/or installation Web site(s). These can help to facilitate better understanding of the School Liaison's role and the needs of military-connected children.
- Participate in key community groups to create dialogue on education-related issues. For example, School Liaisons might join an advisory committee of community members that is in place to support the strategic plan of a school deemed in need of improvement.
- Provide regular and timely information to school officials about new families entering an area.
- Convene school and community mental health advocates to raise awareness and discuss ways to mitigate the impacts of a mobile military lifestyle on children.
- Invite community and school leaders onto the installation to help build understanding and dissolve misconceptions they may have.

Effective Communication With Military Parents

Parents are the primary group with which strong relationships must be created. They are often very busy, planning for a major life change, and they may have more than one child to consider. Their primary need is to find a trusted advisor—such as the School Liaison. Parents need information about local schools and available resources delivered in relevant and accessible ways. They especially need literature and resources to help them talk to their children and manage the psychological and emotional impact(s) that a transition might have. Some strategies to provide parents with the timely and relevant information they need are

- posting this information on the installation's Web site, in a bulleted format,
- becoming familiar with the overall needs of installation families by keeping track of the general age groups of children, numbers of children with special needs, or any other common trends, which can help School Liaisons tailor information and resources for groups of families;
- forming groups among parents that help to provide additional information and feedback (online groups can be created to facilitate participation from local Reserve and National Guard units); and
- convening parents and families for support group and/or information sessions centered on difficult transition topics.

Partnership Building Programs—Special Partnership Programs

Sample programs that support the relationship development between installations, schools, and families include the following:

Partners-in-Education (PIE)

PIE is a program that links students with community partners, primarily local businesses that help provide knowledge and skills needed for future success. Some examples of PIE activities, as described by the Waynesville (MO) Schools, include, “...*tutoring students in academic content areas, mentoring students in at-risk or special populations such as those with a deployed parent/guardian, establishing extracurricular clubs and activities, providing personnel to assist with school/program special events, conducting professional inquiry events such as career day, health and dental fairs, career exploration and guidance.*” School Liaisons should contact their local school district or chamber of commerce to find out whether a partnership agreement exists and the nature of activities taking place. There may be opportunities to enhance current activities or include the installation in a more substantive way.

Parent Teacher Association (PTA)

The PTA is a national nonprofit organization with state and local affiliates that advocates for education and children and provides relevant resources for families and communities. Its membership is made up of parents, teachers, staff and community members who offer their time to volunteer in schools. Every person who joins a local PTA automatically becomes a member of both the state and national PTAs and most school boards ensure local PTA representation. The Fort Rucker PTA provides a great example of an installation-school-family partnership: <http://www.am.dodea.edu/rucker/CO/PTA/pta.htm>. The National PTA offers a search tool for School Liaisons to find state and local PTA information, as well as tips for how to maximize membership. School Liaisons can encourage military parents to join the local PTA and to volunteer in their children’s school.

Adopt-a-School Programs

This is a program designed to provide military personnel with an opportunity to provide community service to a school in need. This type of activity exists in all service branches, but is more commonly employed by the Army and Navy. The program utilizes the vast amounts of human resources and talents of military personnel to strengthen the resources and activities offered by local schools. Activities offered through the program can range from volunteering in a local clean-up day at one school to coordinating a response to the maintenance needs of a school by local businesses and installation service members. Military personnel are able to receive leave time to participate in an Adopt-a-School Program near their installation. School Liaisons can find out more about local activities through their installation commander.

Defining and Strengthening Local Installation–School Relationships

In partnership with installations, some local schools develop a Local Action Plan (LAP) or a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). In most cases where LAPs or MOUs are in place, the state or district has designated a liaison. This person can be a key resource to School Liaisons in their work, and where present, should factor into a communication and relationship-building strategy.

LAPs and MOUs define local issues and delineate responsibilities that the installation-school partnership will address, such as transfer of records, calendars and schedules, and meeting the social and emotional needs of military-connected children. LAPs and MOUs also include local agreements about such matters as transportation or resource exchanges. School Liaisons can contact local installation commanders to determine the nature of a LAP or MOU with neighboring schools. Obtaining and analyzing these will help the School Liaisons explain to families the framework for collaboration between the installation and local schools. For example, Fort Bragg / Pope AFB and local Cumberland County Schools in North Carolina have drawn up a useful LAP that includes specific strategies to ease the transitioning of military-connected children. It can be found here:

<http://info.fldoe.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-2611/05-053a2.pdf>

More examples of installation-school LAPs and MOUs can be found in the Resources section of this module.

Effective Practices from the Field

The following examples of effective practice by School Liaisons were gathered through one-on-one interviews. More information about these and other examples of relationship-building strategies can also be found in the Resources section of this module.

Getting to Know Education and Community Stakeholders

When asked about relationship building, a School Liaison with the Air Force said that she “spends a lot of time in meetings with local education leaders and in civic groups, like Rotary, to build relationships with community members.” This approach enhances the visibility of the School Liaison and builds his or her understanding of the key decision makers on education in the community.

Educating Community and Education Stakeholders About the Needs of Military-Connected Students

A Navy School Liaison explained that she has held lunches and other events for administrators at bases to help in relationship building within the community. When community members have a deep understanding of the unique needs of military-connected children, they are better able to respond to these children’s needs and possibly adapt their resources to meet the needs.

Knowing What Resources Exist in the Community

A Marine Corps School Liaison emphasized the importance of “keeping in touch with all the resources that would be helpful in the community and what the ways to access are.” Community resources can augment what is provided military families by the military. Local schools, community colleges, neighborhood associations, community centers, libraries, places of worship, and grocery stores are often key locations for information about what types of resources are available. Resources may include advocacy groups, support groups, trainings, recreational events, and more.

Lesson Two Summary

Key Points:

- As the bridge between military families and the local community and schools, School Liaisons play a key role in helping stakeholders understand the challenges and opportunities military-connected children face.
- As part of their network building and advocacy, School Liaisons should consider developing relationships with stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, district administrators, local school board members, county and city-level policymakers, local teachers unions, and community organizations, among others.
- Participation in local school, district, and community events and forums is one way for School Liaisons to meet new stakeholders and important advocates for military-connected children.
- School Liaisons are reminded that determining local politics and players can be complicated, and building familiarity and relationships takes time.
- Building rapport and searching for common ground are important ways that School Liaisons can set new relationships on a path to long-term sustainability.
- Communicating with military families, schools, districts, communities, and military installations requires that School Liaisons have the ability to tailor their message and establish relationships across many kinds and types of individuals and organizations.
- School Liaisons need to develop strong ties with local community and school representatives in order to mobilize and utilize collective resources and implement community-based support for military-connected children.
- Parents are the primary group with whom School Liaisons need to cultivate strong relationships.
- School Liaisons can contact installation commanders to determine the nature of Local Action Plans (LAPs) or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) that may exist between installations and local schools.

Looking Forward: Next, assess your learning from this lesson.

Module Summary

Module Overview: This module offers information and practical examples to help School Liaisons create sound and productive relationships with key stakeholders. These include community groups, parents, and school officials that can influence the academic success of a military-connected child. Relationship building is a key feature of any School Liaison's day-to-day duties and is of critical importance to ensure military families are supported.

Key Points:

- In the current U.S. public education system, states are given the authority to structure how they legislate and oversee the delivery of education.
- There are many variations from state to state in how much control a state, district, or school has over education policies and oversight.
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Looking Forward: The Tools and Resources section of the modules contains a library of helpful information, interactive features, and tools. School Liaisons are encouraged to return to these modules and to the tools and resources provided as needed to support their work.