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Leaders Commit To Improving Education Experience For Children In Military Families

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Groton — Gen. James T. Hill, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, said he once heard about an art exhibit at an elementary school in Haiti, an island country where the affluent tend to live on the highlands and the poorer people live in the low-lying cities.

One child drew a picture of people laughing and playing in the sun on a plateau, but a bank of clouds filled the middle of the picture and at the bottom the people were drowning. The child had given it a caption: "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

"If we don't, as a people, look out for those people at the bottom of the mountain, then we will never be the nation that I think we should be," Hill told about 300 people at a roundtable discussion at the Mystic Marriott organized by the Military Child Education Coalition. "MCEC is looking at the people on the bottom of the mountain."

The coalition was formed to help children in military families cope with the effects of frequent moves. It has lobbied on a variety of issues such as facilitating the transfer of academic credits between districts and allowing late-reporting students to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities.

Hill noted that about 13 percent of children in Army families have special educational needs. That translates into an enormous number as there are some 485,000 active-duty soldiers. His own son, who is now 24 and college-educated, had special educational needs as well.

"We could deal with that, and we did," Hill said. "But those are hard issues to deal with, they are not simple for four-star general Hill, they are not easy for PFC Hill, and they are not easy for Mrs. Hill."

But the numbers mean, on average, every platoon sergeant has one or two soldiers who are coping with a special needs child at home, and if they are worried about a son or daughter in school, they're not giving everything they can to the Army, so it becomes a force readiness issue.

Adm. Walter F. Doran, commander of the Navy's Pacific Fleet, said recruiting and retention has improved markedly in recent years, "but we had better not take that for granted." And one of the ways to keep the numbers high, he said, is for the services to

support MCEC, because initiatives that make things easier for sailors make it easier for sailors to stay in the service.

“We recruit sailors, we recruit Marines, but we retain families,” Doran noted. “The Navy has come late to this, but it is truly a readiness issue, and we will lean on it, and lean hard.”

Hill and other speakers at the conference, which concluded Friday, stressed that organizations — whether it's the military, a school district or a large corporation — have rules that are set up to cover the average case. But every system must have a way to deal with individuals.

For instance, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, every state must come up with a way to document that children are making educational progress.

The problem is that each state has come up with its own set of standards, and there are significant differences, said Lauren Resnick, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

“It actually may be making it harder for the highly mobile child,” Resnick said.

Cathy Franks, the wife of the general who led allied military forces in the Iraq war, noted that their only child endured three moves in the fourth grade alone, enrolling in three schools in two states and one foreign country.

If she had been required to take one of the standardized state tests at the end of a year where she bounced around so much, she probably would not have done well, Franks said.

Mobility also creates problems meeting high school graduation requirements, she noted. A military child who moves from Oklahoma to Georgia would have to re-take a state history course. Only Washington and Hawaii give credit for state history courses taken in another state by a transferring student.

Coalition Executive Director Mary Keller put all the panelists on the spot with her final question to the roundtable: What will you do in the next year so you can report some kind of progress at the 2004 conference?

Hill said he would continue to push major commanders around the country to improve conditions for military dependents at the local level. He praised Florida Gov. Jeb Bush for his twice-a-year meetings with military officials in that state, where they discuss problems.

This year, he said, one of the military officials observed that the state has a voucher program that allows a special needs child to attend any school in the state, to allow them to pick one better suited to their needs, but a family has to establish residency for two years, while most military families are transferred after two to three years. Bush immediately asked the legislature for a waiver to the time limit for military families.

“It got almost through all the committees,” Hill said. “It didn't make it, but it's going to make it next year.”

Doran agreed to take the same approach, to promote more initiatives such as a Navy program in Kitsap County, Wash., where the Navy has a partnership with local schools that allows sailors to mentor and tutor individual students.

In addition, he said he would push more bases to work with local school districts to get them to sign a formal Memorandum of Agreement that supports the work of the MCEC. Locally, Groton and Ledyard have already signed the agreement. “The Pacific Fleet will stay with this, support it — we're in it for the long haul,” Doran said.

Resnick said students benefit greatly when the parents are active participants in the educational process, but many parents don't take the time.

“There can't be a place in America that's better at requiring things than the military,” she joked. Perhaps the way to address the issue is to require that military parents attend parent-teacher conferences and other briefings as part of their job — and the non-military spouse would probably get involved as well. ■