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Olsen: Local Relationship Between Military And Schools A 'National Model'

Coast Guard Seeks A Place In The Coalition For Military Children

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Published on 7/27/2003

Groton — When Coast Guard Rear Adm. Robert C. Olsen Jr. said he didn't understand the reason for a national discussion of the needs of military children, the people attending the Military Child Education Coalition conference seemed a little puzzled.

But Olsen, the superintendent of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, drew increasing waves of laughter as he explained that his career, which bounced him all over the country, including Alaska, involved a series of "flawless moves."

"We get our orders, and it's always a convenient time," he said. The movers would arrive right on time, and the kids would always stay out of the way as the household was packed and unpacked, he said.

His children's credits always transferred smoothly between schools, and educators always welcomed their children warmly, he said, the audience roaring by this time, "particularly in New York City, where both of my children went to high school."

In a more serious tone, however, Olsen described how Florida educators reacted when he sought to have his daughter placed in a more advanced math class during a tour in that state. She said she knew everything the class was covering, and the teacher agreed she did not need the course.

"You know what they said to me? 'You military people always think your kids are so great, and so smart, that they need special treatment,'" Olsen said. "She wasted a whole year in the wrong math class."

Olsen concluded his speech by observing that while it has been primarily the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines working with the Coalition until now, he will make it his mission to get the Coast Guard more involved in its work.

Olsen said when he was stationed at the Academy from 1992-96, first as commandant of cadets and later as assistant superintendent, said during that period some towns in southeastern Connecticut were not particularly friendly to military families.

But since he returned two years ago he has noticed a marked change, Olsen said. One senior chief petty officer said his 14-year-old daughter was received so warmly by her school following a transfer, she volunteered to serve as a transition assistance counselor to help other students coming into the school. A lieutenant commander transferring from Virginia with a special-needs student in the first grade said he “received superb assistance” at his school.

Another officer was building a house in Ledyard, but living in Groton while it was finished. When the house was not finished by the start of the school year, he received permission to enroll his child in Ledyard rather than have to move between schools a few weeks later.

“These may not seem like big issues, but to me it reflects major changes that have taken place around here, because of this organization,” Olsen said.

“Now, the relationship between the military and the local schools is a national model,” Olsen said.

He singled out Groton Superintendent of Schools James Mitchell for his work as a member of the Coalition's board of directors to change the conditions, calling him “a champion of all schoolchildren, (and) an advocate for the military child ... he gets things done.”

Olsen thanked the coalition for working to accomplish important changes at a national level, and doing it by working within the system, as an advocate for children.

“This coalition does not gripe, although it would be easy to do that,” Olsen said. “It does not lobby at the expense of other groups, and it is not adversarial. I am sure you will continue to grow at a rapid rate, because of your strategies and successes.”

“What you're doing is phenomenal,” Olsen said. “I hope we can get the Coast Guard more involved in what you do ... I'm going to take that on as one of my issues in the next year.” ■