

## Education group seeks ways to help guard, reserve children

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**ATLANTA (June 29, 2005)** -- More than 550 people from around the world are gathered here for the three-day Military Child Education Coalition's 7th annual conference that starts today.

This year's conference theme is "Making Connections for Children."

Educators, administrators and military and civilian leaders are discussing issues and concerns surrounding continued deployments, increased use of the National Guard and Reserve, potential base closures and realignments, and restructuring of U.S. forces in Europe and the Pacific as they pertain to the education of children in military families.

MCEC is a nonprofit organization that partners with the Department of Defense Education Activity, military installations worldwide and civilian education officials nationwide to address transition and other educational issues related to the military-connected child whose parents and guardians are on active duty or in the Guard or Reserve. MCEC seeks to include all military installations, their supporting schools, concerned organizations and caring individuals, according to MCEC officials.

"Each year these conferences get bigger, better and more powerful in terms of the significance they have in the lives of people trying to impact kids," said retired Army Gen. Thomas Schwartz, MCEC chairman. "We're making a difference in the lives of our kids, and we're getting better at doing it. I see it each year.

"We always say, 'Make a connection for military children,' and that's the theme this year," said Schwartz, who supported the early efforts to start MCEC. Under his command, Fort Hood, Texas, was the first military installation to join the organization.

"And the connections are better," he said. "More people have come. We have 550 people in attendance this year. That's are biggest conference yet. So we're growing in terms of numbers and quality. The output is better, so I think we're touching our kids better this year."

Schwartz said he's excited about adding sessions about the National Guard and Reserve to the slate of topics to discuss. "You look at what's happening in the world today and we're one Army," said Schwartz. "We're one military, so to speak, because all of the services have reached out to the Guard and Reserve.

"They've stepped up to the plate," Schwartz said of the reserve component. "We look at them differently. We understand their contribution differently. We've asked a lot from them and we have to get more involved with them. We're doing that here at this conference."

Schwartz said the Guard and Reserve are teaching MCEC, and MCEC is teaching the Guard and Reserve. "We're going out touching the communities of America in a better way and making our Guard and Reserve children able to understand what's going on in their lives and making a difference for them," the general said.

MCEC works to ease the challenges facing the high-mobility students who move around in the military, Schwartz said. It's an organization that "cares about them, focuses on their problems and challenges, and tries to make a difference by making it better for them," he said.

Schwartz said he is "passionate" about MCEC's "S2S" - Student to Student - program that features high school students from Fort Sam Houston, Harker Heights and El Paso, Texas; Clinton, Md.; Jacksonville, N.C.; and Kingsland, Ga.

"You've got to talk to these kids and have them tell you about the difference they're making in bringing new kids in and sending kids out of their school," he noted. "S2S is about teaching our young kids how to receive these high-mobility kids and how to say goodbye to them.

"We've turned them on to this," the retired general continued. "The best way to touch kids coming in and going out is to teach our young kids to do it with them. These kids are enthusiastic. They're excited about what they're doing. They're excited about learning, but more importantly, they're excited about passing it on."

Schwartz said several counselors told him that they want S2S at their schools. "They said, 'We want S2S because it's making a difference and we want more of it,'" he said. "The proof of the pudding is the kids themselves - they love it!"

S2S is a student-led, school-managed program that confronts the challenges of transition and provides relevant training that gives students the best possible transition experience, according to MCEC officials. A team of volunteer students, supervised by a school counselor, teacher or other school staff person, trains inbound and outbound transitioning students on three key transition subject areas: academics, relationships with other students, faculty and staff; and finding the way, learning about the campus, community and local culture.

Schwartz said for parents, the challenge of moving kids is probably one of the major things they do in life. "They care for and love their children," he noted. "When we say goodbye to soldiers when they're going off to war, nine out of 10 of them tell me, 'Sir, take care of my family. Take care of my kids. Take care of my wife.' That's what they care about. That's what they leave behind and say, 'Hey, sir, help me!'

"MCEC does that," Schwartz emphasized. "MCEC takes care of the families. MCEC takes care of the children. And mom or dad left behind

are dealing with the kids and all the challenges associated with it, and they say, 'Who can help me?'"

Schwartz said the DoD school system does an excellent job educating military children and providing the quality of life in the schools, the teachers and the best education system in the world.

MCEC was searching for ways to complement what DoDEA does, Schwartz said. "They stepped in and said, 'Here's how you can help us.' Out of that developed a great partnership."

Schwartz said MCEC chose to hold this year's conference in Georgia because Kathy Cox, the Georgia state superintendent of education, is determined to make a difference with transitioning kids.

"They have the fifth largest set of military transitioning children in our nation," he noted. "And they're enthusiastic about addressing the challenges associated with these kids. Georgia is going to experience about 7,000 new kids being transferred into Fort Benning, about 3,000 new kids into the naval base. They've asked MCEC to come in and help.

"This is because of base closures and the transformation of the Army," Schwartz said. "The Army is changing within itself, and it's relocating soldiers, getting bigger at different installations, so a lot of those numbers are BRAC as well as transformation."