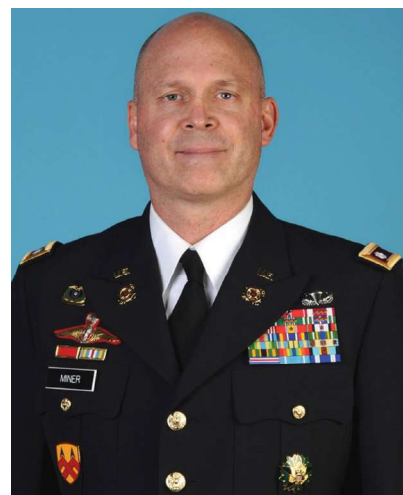




# Intentional Thought & Actions

*Ensuring my daughter was okay during my deployment led to a study to better prepare youth for adulthood*

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**Our families** often, really, suffer much greater disruption and emotional distress than us service members who mobilize in support of operations around the world. As my family prepared for my deployment to Afghanistan, my wife and I realized that the timing would cause me to miss my daughter's entire second grade year.

We decided upon notification of my deployment to take an active role in our daughter's well-being for our year apart. We chose as a family to do whatever we could to make life as normal as possible for her, even though she would be the only student in her school to have a parent absent for the whole year. As an Army Reserve soldier, we lived in a city that did not have a military population and did not have families that had personal connections to military service.

When we brought our daughter to school on that first day in fall and met with her teacher, we scheduled time to explain that I would be deployed all year and asked for her support. We asked that she keep an eye out for changes in behavior and explained some emotions that our daughter may exhibit at different times during the year.

Everyone my wife met was very supportive and understanding, and she was very honest with them. I

believe part of her own success with my absence was her active choice to surround herself with a community of women who supported her and my daughter. They chose to become active in the school through a running club, PTA, Girl Scouts, and other activities when time allowed between hectic schedules. Becoming involved took effort on their part and wasn't easy at first. But, participating in the activities became routine and easier as time went on, and their community – both inside the school and with outside friends – regularly asked for updates and asked how they were doing. They both initiated that communication, and their willingness to be transparent really allowed others to join their journey while I was gone.

In the end, I feel that I didn't really miss much of our daughter's second grade year. I was able to be part of many of her events, and she was able to remain in regular communication with me. I made a conscious effort to be

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a voice she could hear in the morning before school or before going to bed as much as possible. Advances in communication, for most units and locations, really

make regular contact with family members much easier. I was also able to maintain a close relationship with my wife and share life with her as we went through the year.

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## Practices that worked well during our deployment:

- » I emailed periodic letters to the teacher for her to print for my daughter.
- » We kept an emergency phone in my daughter's backpack, and I would maintain contact with the teacher if I wanted to call or if she recommended that I call.
- » I Skyped into the classroom periodically to talk about subjects and events.
- » My wife would Facetime with me during plays, musicals, and Back-to-School night.
- » I planned getaways, retreats, and special events for my wife and daughter within our budget.
- » My son took our daughter to the father-daughter dance, and my father took her to the father-daughter breakfast.
- » My wife scheduled play dates for both her and our daughter.
- » I kept the teacher updated on my situation, and she kept me updated with how my daughter was doing, often detailing her interactions and projects.
- » I sent my wife and daughter small gifts and handwritten letters and also Facetimed with them.
- » I trained in resilience and regularly reviewed the skills with my family.
- » We had a strong faith that kept us positive and gave us strength.
- » I surrounded myself with committed men, and we regularly met to share our experiences.
- » Both my wife and daughter attended scheduled Yellow Ribbon events.

**WE REALIZE THAT OTHER FAMILIES** may not have the same demographics we had during our deployment, but these practices can be replicated with intentional thought and actions.

My relationship with my daughter's school culminated in an agreement with the district superintendent, who I met when I came home and surprised my daughter on her first day of third grade. I just wanted to grab my daughter and go home, but my wife correctly identified that having me surprise her in front of her friends and those parents who could attend brought closure for all who were on this journey with us. All of my daughter's friends recognized me and hugged me like an old friend. It was a really special moment for everyone involved, and I have been thankful ever since for following my wife's advice.

As I redeployed home, I began my second year of a doctorate program at UCLA in education. I had been contemplating how to structure a study on better preparing youth for adulthood. I had read and seen how business leaders, college administrators, and students themselves were realizing more that graduating seniors, regardless of demographics or academic standing, were not ready for the rigors of the real world.

I met with the district superintendent, and we discussed developing a pilot program for seniors at the high school to get real-world experiences. We

focused the study to ensure **skills development, adult mentorship**, and a **self-directed opportunity for accountability**. Major findings included that students often overestimated their skill levels conceptually with little or no practical experience, and students could not believe how much responsibility the opportunity gave them, often changing or confirming post high school pathway choices.

The study and the progression for the students were not easy. The study took a lot of effort from teachers, site mentors, and other involved adults to institutionalize best practices for an effective work-based program. But, **for parents reading this article, there is no doubt in research and from my study findings that our youth need real-world, out of classroom experiences that have responsibility and accountability connected to it.**

Regardless of what pathway your child chooses post high school, connecting conceptual knowledge to practical application will better prepare youth for the rigors of adulthood. Failures, struggles, and stressors are important parts of the journey, and every student in my study was grateful upon reflection for the knowledge and experience gained from the opportunities to struggle and grow.

My deployment was an incredible year that led to even more opportunities to help our youth. I believe that our positive attitudes and intentional behavior were the keys to success.