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Lunch & Learn Webinar Series - Educators Working with Military Children with Special Needs
January 31, 2024

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[Music] [Music] Good afternoon and welcome, everyone. I am Michelle Norman, the executive director and founder of Partners in Promise. Thank you so much for joining us today to learn more about our research on military special education. Today's webinar is presented by the USAA Foundation, and we'll be focusing on understanding the knowledge and experience of educators working with our military children with special needs. These findings are based on the responses of educators, school administrators, and related service providers who work with military-connected children.

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Our goal is to finish the slide deck portion of this webinar within the first 30 minutes, but then we want to leave some time for a Q&A. Additionally, we have live comments, hopefully on the right side of your screen, so please introduce yourself, tell us where you're joining us from, and drop any comments or questions in there. We do have a moderator and will get to those at the end of the webinar.

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Okay, for those of you who are new to our organization, Partners in Promise is a military and veteran spouse-run nonprofit organization whose mission is to protect the rights of military children in special education, also known as Promise, and to ensure they receive equal access to an education. We often say we love data, and it really does inform everything that we do. We utilize that data to develop top-down solutions that equip our parents, inform leaders, and enable our military children to thrive. We know that education is a collaborative community effort, and that is why I'm thrilled to introduce the presenters we have today.

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First of all, let me introduce you to our main presenter, Dr. Jenna Kowalski. Let me tell you a little bit about her. Dr. Jenna Kowalski is our lead researcher and will be the main presenter for this webinar. She's an associate professor in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Elmhurst University. She completed her master's and Ph.D. at Pennsylvania State University with an emphasis on autism, augmentative and alternative communication, child language disorders, and stakeholder training and perspectives.

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Alright, good afternoon, everyone, and thank you, Michelle, for that introduction. I'd also like to introduce our two other co-presenters. First, I welcome Barbara Bratton. She works with students with dyslexia and various specific learning disabilities in reading. "It's nice to be here." "Alright, thank you, Barbara." And next, I'd like to introduce Carla. "Hi everyone, I'm Carla. I am

a retired Marine Corps spouse and a special educator, and currently, I'm working in the virtual space, so welcome. So glad to have everybody here." "Alright, thank you for joining us, Carla and Barbara, and thank you, everyone, for joining us in the audience."

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Now we're going to talk about a brief overview of some of the background of the data. So, why was this survey necessary? And then we'll jump into the data themselves. First, military families move approximately three times more frequently than civilian families, and this can be up to nine times between when a child starts kindergarten to when they graduate high school. Every time a military family moves, they have to reestablish new personal connections and community connections. And when you have a child with special needs, those connections just get larger and larger. So, there is more that you have to reestablish: connections with medical professionals, educational professionals, and a number of different therapeutic professionals.

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This can present a real challenge for families because they move so frequently, every two or three years or so. There are also some other stressors that are specific to the military lifestyle, so things like deployments or long-term separations where the military spouse may be gone on assignment for a month or two. And all of these can potentially impact the military child's education. In fact, educators of military-connected students have reported that transitions and deployments impact the military student's social-emotional health as well as academic performance, and we know this from military-connected students who are in general education.

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So, if it's true for them, how much more true would it be for military students in special education as well? We went back to the research literature, and there just isn't a lot out there on the military experience for children with special needs, and so we wanted to try to bridge that gap by doing a study. So, every year, Partners in Promise surveys the military community for those who have children with special needs to get a sense of what the experience is like for them, what some challenges that they're having, and how a number of different people, including educators, can best support their education and their experience. So, this past survey, we broadened the survey not just to military spouses and military parents but to include educators as well. So, this survey was included to learn more about the knowledge and experience they had that was related to serving military-connected students in special education. This survey was designed to meet best practice standards in survey development and was distributed online through social media and other channels.

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So, who are some of the respondents that took our survey? We had 81 educators take our survey. You can see in the pie chart over on the side there that the type of educator really varied. The most respondents we had were from special educators, and then general education service providers, related service providers, and finally administrators. The majority of these professionals indicated or self-identified as white and female, and a sizable majority—maybe like 50 to 60 percent of them—were also connected to the military themselves, so they were

either a military spouse, a retiree, or a veteran, as you can see on the side there. Something important to point out is the years employed as an educator. So, approximately 75 percent of our survey respondents had been in the educational system working in the educational system for at least six years, so these were not people who were new to education or new to special education.

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We also asked the different educators if they ever felt overwhelmed in their position as an educator. And if there are any educators in the audience, it's no surprise to you that many of them did feel overwhelmed. And you can see on the second graph there that the percentage of educators who were often or always feeling overwhelmed really ranged from about 45 percent with the related service providers all the way up to 80 percent with the special educators. "You know, Jenna, I can really speak to that because personally, I have been in that role as a general educator and as a special educator, and I'm not surprised by the statistic that it's over 85 percent of our special educators feel very overwhelmed. The number of hours you perform after school and on the weekends is significant, and all without pay, so I'm not surprised by that. I think that's one of the reasons why there's a huge retention rate issue and there's a big hiring crisis issue across the board in our country.

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For reference, I'm going to direct people to look at two of the many press releases from the National Center for Educational Statistics. Those state that 45 percent of schools reported open positions for special education staff and 78 percent reported difficulty in hiring, and those statistics are current as of 2023." "Yeah, our educators do a lot for our students and our children, for sure. Our data suggested three main findings. The first finding is that improved communication between those serving military students and parents is necessary to bridge knowledge gaps. As you can see from the first graph there, educator familiarity with EFMP and SLO, there's a sizable percentage of educators who are not familiar with EFMP coordinators, so Exceptional Family Member Program coordinators, or SLOs, school liaison officers." "Jenna, I've worked in... go ahead, go ahead, Barbara." "I was just gonna say I've worked in several different states, from California, Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, and now in the District of Columbia, and very few teachers that I've worked with are familiar at all with EFMP or with SLO.

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And that's in huge military communities, so it's surprising." "I can also speak to that as well. Having worked for the EFMP program and also on base in the Marine Corps for the Children, Youth, and Teen Program, who works closely with the school liaison officer, big picture: both programs are really fantastic. They're a great resource for both families and the school district. However, some of the issues with it are that across branches and even within your within branches from base to base, you'll see some differences in the types of services offered or provided by each individual office. It all kind of just depends on who's in that office working and their background and experience.

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That lack of consistency kind of is frustrating for families, but it's also frustrating for educators. And one of the things that Partners in Promise has done a really great job advocating for is that consistency and standardization across programs. I'm going to go ahead and pop a link in here in the chat for everyone to reference, but back in 2021, some of the advocacy work that Partners in Promise did got some traction, and in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, it was mentioned that Congress was looking to mandate standardization across the service branches in EFMP, which is huge. But just last summer, in June of 2023, this long-awaited Department of Defense instruction came out, and one of the things that was highlighted in there was this collaboration between the school liaison program and EFMP, which will help create that standardization and also kind of give that push to help educators and those in the community become familiar with the programs available to both them and the families."

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"Yeah, that's wonderful. Hopefully, it makes a difference so that educators and everyone are more aware of the supports that are out there." "Excellent. So our second finding is that the knowledge of military policies like advanced enrollment is vital for educators and military-connected families. So, in both of these graphs, we can see the educator knowledge of military programs. The educators don't always have knowledge of these different programs, like the Purple Star designation. And then in the second graph, educator knowledge of military-related policies, educators aren't always aware of things like advanced enrollment, which can be beneficial to military families." "You know, in my experience, there's not a lot of teachers that understand or know what the MC3 is, but most of our teachers do know what the federal impact aid form is because districts really push for 100 percent return on that information. It seems to me like most districts put that funding into their general funding across the board, and so they really want teachers to make sure they have a 100 percent return, and there are districts and schools where teachers get in trouble if they don't have that, so most teachers do know about that one specific program."

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"Alright, and then our third finding is challenges offer opportunities to train those who educate military children in special education. So we asked different types of educators, including administrators, what are some of the challenges they faced while working with military-connected students in special education? On the administrator side, we asked specifically for accessing advanced enrollment. And as you can see from the different challenges that are listed there, these are the top six. Some of them were tied for like, you know, there were, I think there were two top ones, two top twos. But you can see from some of those challenges that some of those are outside of the school's control. So, things like differences in special education policy or services across states, that's not something a school is going to be able to make any changes with. But there are some things that are within the school's control that could make it easier for military families to access advanced enrollment. So, something like not having a policy in place for admitting a student without an address, well, if a military student doesn't have an address yet and they can't be admitted, they can't use advanced enrollment."

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And on the other side there, the top five challenges for each educator: the general education professionals, special education professionals, and related service providers all had slightly different challenges that they faced, which makes sense because they're all interacting with military students with special needs in different ways. But importantly, there are two different challenges that really stuck out that were the same across those three different types of educators. The first is the differences in special education service across schools and just some of the challenges that presented with communicating with families trying to meet IEP goals when, you know, they, the services that they had at a previous school are different than the services that are available at this current school. And the second one was managing social-emotional needs of military students. So, since there is this challenge there that all of these educators reported, it might be that some more military-specific training, maybe understanding military culture, understanding how the military lifestyle can impact education, providing more tools and more resources to educators, may help them to be able to better serve military students in special education."

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"Jenna, I really agree with this slide. It's interesting to me to look at the top five challenges for each educator and what our teachers responded to for the survey because, having worn all three of those hats at different places in time and in different states as a special educator, general education educator, and a related service provider, it is astonishing to me to see how spot-on each of those are with my own experiences." "Very good. Thank you, Barbara." "So, based on our data, we have a few recommendations: one for parents and then a handful for educators or schools. The first one we have is for parents. So, military parents should consider self-disclosing their military status to their child's educators. Most educators wanted to know this information and thought it would be helpful, but not all of the educators had this information. About 70 percent said that they knew who was a military student and who wasn't, but about 85 to 86 percent said that they thought it would be beneficial to know.

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And so military families can disclose that information to educators so that educators are more aware of the changes that they might be seeing in the military child with special education so that they know this isn't the child regressing; this might be something happening at home, like maybe the service member just was deployed or was separated for long-term training or something like that." "Yeah, Jenna, I think a great way, as a parent of a child on an IEP and also as a special educator, kind of relying on those programs we talked about earlier, a great way to self-disclose is using the EFMP program or the school liaison officer to assist with that if you're a little bit unsure or uncomfortable doing so. I know when we moved from Japan, one of the things I did was I reached out to my child's school ahead of time. I kind of sent an email and said, 'We're excited to come. We're retiring from the military from overseas. This is going to be a huge thing for my daughter,' just to kind of give them a heads-up in case they saw some things that didn't seem as typical as other students.

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Another great way, and I'm going to put the link right here now in the chat, is that Partners in Promise has come up with this wonderful special education and P binder for families. I would not feel right in saying that I know that this is a great tool, but probably like everybody else, mine has all the stuff shoved in the back, not all organized yet, but at least all the papers are in one place, and it's a great tool not only for parents but also for educators. As a special educator, something I did for my students was to create a portfolio so when I was going to those IEP meetings, I had artifacts to show progress, and it's something that's beneficial to parents as well, especially those moving. So a great way to kind of form that collaborative team effort is to kind of share this binder and see if there's a page in there for school contacts. It would be a great thing to share ahead with your child's school and kind of get that information ahead of time, so it's a great way to start that collaborative relationship with your child's new school."

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"Yeah, definitely. And as a related service provider, my history is a speech-language pathologist. If I knew that military families were collecting this data like this for a special education binder to then bring to their new school, I could provide copies of some of the data that I would take in sessions. Related service providers take all kinds of data, so it would be very easy to make a copy and just hand it over to parents during an IEP meeting. Our next recommendations are for educators in schools. So kind of on the reverse side, for schools, schools can develop policies to inform educators about military students in their classrooms. So, as we just discussed, most educators want to know and think it would be beneficial to know who's a military child in their classroom. And so, schools could maybe give the teachers a list or something at the beginning of the school year or mid-school year of who is a military student so they're more aware."

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And the second recommendation we have on this slide is that schools could increase awareness of policies supporting military-connected students. So, educators were less aware of some of these programs and policies than administrators, but educators may still benefit from knowing about these programs and policies so that they can utilize them themselves or inform the military parents that there's something that they can also utilize as well, some supports."

"You know, Jenna, this is so important because I think it's really hard, unless you have an awareness of which students you're working with have that military-connected student designation, you may very easily find yourself out of compliance with federal law. There was a EP policy, it's 22-02, and I'll put it in the chat, that specified about a year and a half ago that states cannot deny identification for highly mobile students, and they cannot delay identification, and military-connected students fall under that category. And so it's so important, and I think that we are staying abreast of the policies that are supporting our military-connected students."

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"Alright, and then the last two sets of recommendations we have are that schools should make efforts to improve communication to families about differences in special education across schools, across districts, or across states. All educators, including administrators, mentioned that this was a challenge, or one of the biggest challenges, in working with military families with children in special education. So, just increasing the, increasing communication that's open and

honest about these differences may help students, families, and the school build some more rapport. And then the last recommendation we have is that schools should provide training in the military culture. So, managing the social-emotional needs of military-connected students with special needs was one of the top two challenges that was reported by general education teachers, special education teachers, and related service professionals. And so, clearly, there's a need for more training, more tools for these educators to then better support these students."

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"Yeah, Jenna, I think a great thing that I've seen work really well in this was when we were stationed in North Carolina. We had a great collaborative effort between programs on base. So we used other base resources, like the Marine Corps Family Team Building group, and what they did was they set up this training for educators in the community that was called Links for Educators. And it's Lifestyles, Insights, Knowledge, and Skills. And what they would do is they would bring the educators on the base and they would kind of go through what military life looks like for kids. They would also do a tour of the base so they could, you know, kind of understand if a child's talking about the commissary or the PX or whatever it is, they kind of understand that language that's being used. And definitely some training on the deployment cycles because, you know, depending on where the child is in that cycle, they might be seeing certain behaviors and things like that at school. So, again, getting kind of connected into the base programs is something that that school liaison officer can go ahead and coordinate with the local school district."

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"Alright, wonderful. So, thank you so much, Barbara and Carla, for joining us today with this discussion. It helps so much to have some personal experience from military spouses and educators to really bring the data alive, so we really appreciate that. Thank you, everyone, in our audience for joining us in this discussion of our educator data. We're hopeful that this information will help schools and educators better support military families but also improve the policies that are already in place. We're incredibly grateful for our presenter, the sponsor, the USAA Foundation. The USAA Foundation has been a champion of the military community with special needs, and we are so, so thankful for their support, not only in our research but in our programming on behalf of military students with disabilities.

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For everyone in our audience, please stay in touch with us. You can visit our website at thepromiseact.org and sign up for our newsletter. You can also look at or use the QR code up on the slide for easier access. Our website has many different resources available for military families, for educators, for leaders, and for students. As mentioned previously in this webinar, our newest resource is the Special Needs Binder. This is free, customizable, and will help military families prepare for their PCS or their relocation to transition them to a new school, a new educational system. You can also email us at info@partnersinpromise.org if you have any questions. So that concludes our webinar for today. If there are any questions, we are happy to take them.

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"I do agree, Michelle. I see that you put that EFMP has come a long way. I worked back there in 2013, and even in that short amount of time, there's been change, so I think that it can only get better as people continue to tell their story and advocate for their family member that's in the program." "Absolutely, yes. Any other questions from the audience?" "Alright, I'm not seeing any. Oh, actually, yes, there's a couple that popped up. See here, 'Can each of the panelists offer military parents any tips or advice?'" "I cannot echo strongly enough what Jenna and Carla were talking about with keeping everything in one binder. One of the issues that I've seen going from state to state is that sometimes a family will get the MTSS or RIT process started in one state, but then they have to move to another state, and then that school may then erroneously believe that they have to restart that process again. But if you take with you copies of what has been done at your previous school, they should not need to do that, and that goes back to that EP policy guidance letter.

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If you've had intervention in one place and you're leaning towards getting to the point where you need to really look at identification and being evaluated, it really helps to have data to back up what you're saying." "Yeah, I totally, totally agree with that, Barbara. We, during our move from Japan to back to the states, that was one thing I made sure of when we had the testing done for my daughter was to ensure that we had that, and the school was actually very grateful that we came organized. So again, I'll echo that same sentiment: organization is key. Even if you're like me and you want to be organized and you know, have high hopes of this binder, but even if it's at least all in one place, hand-carry those documents with you because, as we all know, things get lost when you're moving, and yeah, hand-carry with all your medical records and everything else, for sure.

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And honestly, I think the other thing, too, I'm huge on creating relationships. Just reach out and just be a person to the school. Yes, we all have demands and requests for our children, but I think kind of, not even extending the olive branch but just reaching out and saying, 'Hey, I want to get to know you. I want to get to know the school culture. Maybe I can volunteer, or what do you need for the classroom?' or any of that, I think goes a long way, just making yourself relatable and giving them that personal connection." "I agree. And I think for educators—for any educators that are listening to this and watching this—just understand that your military families have such a high level of stress and have had to go through so many different moves. It is so typical for a military student to have to move six to nine times between kindergarten and 12th grade, and so that brings its whole set of stress for these families. And so, just knowing that and having the knowledge of that to be able to reach out with maybe a little more patience and kindness as you go through the process. It is difficult for educators, for special educators, because the vast majority of them, I think, are very overwhelmed and have a lot of students on their caseloads, but we still all need to work together. It is a team process." "It is a team process.

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So please keep that in mind as you're working with these families." "Yeah, and from a speech-language pathologist point of view, with a related service professional point of view, it would be helpful if military parents would give the contact information for the previous SLP. Like, sign something to say I would be able to talk to them so that I could talk to the previous SLP and see, you know, what were some things that they were working on and just get more information than documents would show. Documentation is, of course, so important; looking at data is so important. A previous IEP would be really important, but having that ability to just talk to someone else who served that same student would be really beneficial as well." "Yeah, Jenna, I love that. I think one thing I did, too, for my daughter was I had her teacher go ahead and just write a quick email just with some things, and I made sure to give her enough time because again, as an educator, I understand that they're busy, and the end of the school year is difficult to ask for things. But, I feel like you go into a school, and any parent is going to say how wonderful their student is, and you know, I'm saying, 'Oh, I think my daughter's gifted. Can she be in the gifted program?' and that holds a certain weight, but having that email along with the objective data also is extremely helpful."

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"Absolutely, Jenna, there's a question in here about, 'Will there be a recording of this webinar available to share with others?'" "Yes, there will be a recording available shortly after I think we finish here. It'll be on the Partners in Promise website as well as on the YouTube channel. I think there's a YouTube channel." "Alright, any other final questions before we wrap up? 'Any recommendations on getting some of these, or any recommendations on getting some of these great recommendations into action in the community?'" "That is a really good question. So, I think part of how to get these into action is just being aware that there is this gap in the literature. So, part of the reason why we did this study was to just get more information from educators about the experience that they were having, about the knowledge that they have about military-connected students and special education.

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So, I think just being aware that there are differences and that the military families in your community may have some different needs and may require different supports is really important. Another question, 'To piggyback on that, who would you distribute the survey or these results to?' I would potentially bring them to a special education coordinator or an administrator to just highlight, 'Here are some of the gaps in knowledge that educators may be facing,' and see if your administrator is able to even just send out an email every once in a while with like just a reminder, 'Here's information about the military-related supports and policies we have in place.' I think even something like that would just bring more awareness to some of the programs that are that may be already in place at different school districts, especially if those school districts serve the military community. Barbara and Carla, I don't know if you have any other suggestions." "I mean, I just think that you as an educator for a military community and you as a parent for receiving services within a military community, even within the local public schools, you have an opportunity to be a font of information. So, educate yourself on those policies on advanced enrollment. I think there's something like 35 states that have advanced enrollment laws, but they're very different from state to state, and so you really want to be aware

of what those are in the location that you're going to be aware of the MC3 and then partner, just partner with that school and say, 'I'm here to be a resource.'