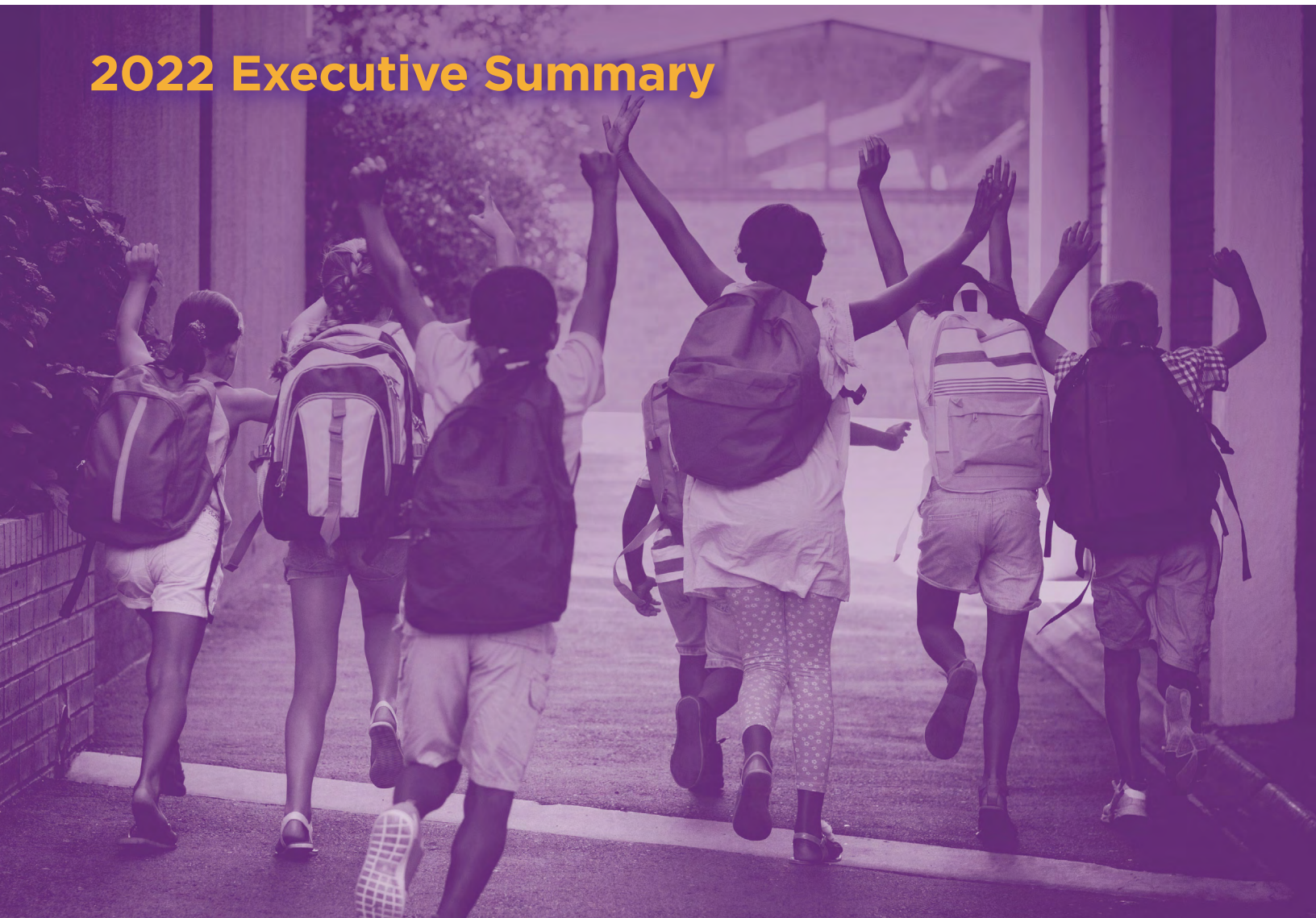


# PURPLE STAR SCHOOLS PROGRAM

2022 Executive Summary



Center for Public  
Research and Leadership



MCEC<sup>®</sup>

# INTRODUCTION

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**Military-connected students are no strangers to having to start over.** From a young age, many endure frequent moves, new schools, parental deployments, multiple friend groups and experiences. On average, they will move and change schools six to nine times throughout their academic career – three times more than their civilian peers.<sup>1</sup> While they often develop resilience, versatility, and self-sufficiency as a result, it can still be incredibly burdensome for military-connected students and their families to repeatedly advocate for their needs.

Like other highly mobile student populations in the United States, military-connected students face a distinct set of challenges as they navigate their educational journey. Children with deployed parents are more likely than their civilian counterparts to develop behavioral and stress disorders and to require more frequent emotional and behavioral healthcare visits.<sup>2</sup> While military-connected students often succeed academically, in many cases outperforming their peers on state-administered standardized tests, they can struggle to adjust to the social impacts of repeatedly moving and entering new school environments.<sup>3</sup>

**The Purple Star Schools (PSS) program** has been adopted in numerous states to help alleviate the pressures placed on students and their families as they adapt to their new school environments. Schools and districts that receive PSS designations are aware of and proactive in addressing the academic and socioemotional impacts that arise from being military-connected and provide support for these students to excel despite the challenges they face.

As the national advocate for the PSS program, the Military Child Education Coalition® (MCEC®), partnered with the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University in the fall of 2020 to better understand the impact and potential that the program presents for military-connected students and their families. In 2021, CPRL and MCEC released a [summary report](#)<sup>4</sup> of findings related to the landscape of the program, including recommendations for improvements at the school, district, and state levels.

MCEC then engaged CPRL in the spring of 2022 to conduct a follow-up study of the program. The results of the study are included in this report, which builds on the findings from the 2021 summary report by providing additional detail on how the program has been implemented over time. It specifically focuses on how the program has evolved and how stakeholders have worked to ensure rigor and sustainability. Drawing on research across six focus states, this report reviews the benefits of, and challenges associated with program requirements, provides insights on program administration at various levels, discusses the effects of COVID-19 on PSS, and provides recommendations at the state, district, and school levels to improve and expand the initiative.



### In brief, CPRL found that:

- There is variation across states, districts, and schools in terms of the robustness and quality of the PSS initiative;
- State- and district-level actors play an important role in ensuring compliance with program requirements and driving program quality and sustainability;
- COVID-19 led to a reduction of in-person programming and made it difficult for schools to establish personal connections with students and families; and
- The PSS program continues to have a positive impact on military-connected students, both academically and socioemotionally. It does this by streamlining the transition process, creating different avenues for ongoing communication, increasing staff awareness of and sensitivity to the unique needs of military-connected children, and facilitating opportunities for community-building.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Military-connected students have distinct educational experiences.** They are three times more likely to move than their civilian peers, which means they are continuously adapting to new academic and social environments. Many also must deal with the absence of a parent due to deployment, which can cause tremendous stress for them and their families. **The Purple Star Schools (PSS)** program, an initiative adopted in numerous states that sets standards to designate military-friendly schools, is designed to help mitigate the unique academic and socioemotional challenges faced by military-connected students and their families.

This report is a follow-up to a previous study by MCEC and CPRL conducted in 2021. It is based on research in six focus states — **Georgia, Indiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia.**

The 2022 report updates the previous study by providing additional detail on how the program has been implemented over time and furthers it with a focus on program evolution and how stakeholders have worked to ensure rigor and sustainability.

While PSS is primarily implemented at the school level, we found that continuously improving the quality of the program and ensuring that it is sustainable over time is a collaborative effort that involves both the district and the state. In recognition of this, our recommendations apply to every level of the school system.

## STATES SHOULD...

- 1 Use the application and renewal process to drive continuous improvement
- 2 Collaborate with and connect schools and districts to facilitate idea-sharing and program improvement
- 3 Act as a clearinghouse of resources and provide guidance on best practices for program implementation
- 4 Collect and publish academic and socioemotional data on military-connected students to assess and evaluate the impact of PSS and other relevant programs
- 5 Explicitly include family engagement practices in PSS requirements
- 6 Provide targeted funding for districts and schools to support military-connected families.

## DISTRICTS SHOULD...

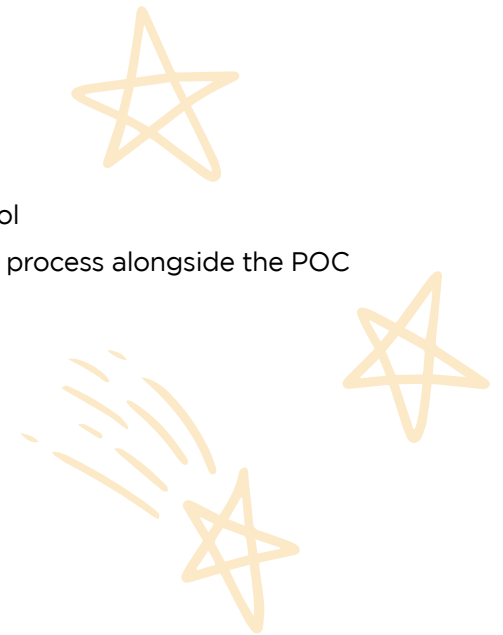
- 1 Act as another layer of support for families by:
  - Designating a district-level point of contact (POC) in addition to a school-level POC who can inform incoming families of transition requirements, school options, and other resources available in the community
  - Providing an avenue for families to provide feedback or raise concerns about issues arising at the school-level
  - Where relevant, building a district-level webpage in addition to a school webpage
- 2 Leverage their knowledge of implementation within schools (including challenges) to identify resources to support schools with the implementation of program components, and to ensure fidelity of program implementation.

## SCHOOLS SHOULD...

- 1 Collect and update information on military-connectedness at enrollment and as needed during the school year, and share data with relevant school staff
- 2 Be transparent with families on why reporting military-connectedness is important.
- 3 Use a broad conception of military-connectedness when identifying military-connected students.
- 4 Leverage social media and word-of-mouth to maximize family awareness
- 5 For points of contact (POC)
  - Strive to develop networks
  - Select POCs that have an interest in, or connection to, issues facing military-connected families and students where possible
- 6 For professional development (PD)
  - Customize PD instruction for the school's military population
  - Offer training for school staff throughout the school year
  - Make PD interactive and immersive
  - Collect school staff feedback on the frequency, timing, and utility of PD



- 7 For transition teams
  - Include parents in welcome programming
  - Empower students to drive programming
  - Support the socioemotional needs of students leaving the school
  - Ensure school staff are collaboratively engaged in the transition process alongside the POC
- 8 For webpages
  - Set webpage maintenance routines
  - Solicit family feedback
  - Drive traffic to sites through PD training and linking
- 9 For military recognition events
  - Use various modalities to include all community members
  - Engage students in event planning and execution



Addressing these recommendations will ensure that PSS continues to not only grow but also improve over time, and that military-connected students and their families will have a comprehensive system of support.



1. See Clever & Segal, *The Demographics of Military Children and Families* doi.org/10.1353/foc.2013.0018, 2013
2. See St. John & Fenning, *Supporting the Behavioral and Mental Health Needs of Military Children* doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1680945, 2020
3. See Mesecar & Soifer, *Getting School Districts Ready for the Military Student Identifier*, 2018
4. The 2021 report remains a valuable resource for all stakeholders and it is highly recommended that it be referenced alongside this report. It is particularly important for understanding the background, requirements, and purpose of the PSS. It also makes valuable recommendations, many of which remain applicable; see Appendix A: Recommendations from the 2021 Report