

At a moment's notice, U.S. military personnel must be ready to deploy anywhere in the world, facing danger and uncertainty. While they protect our basic freedoms and preserve democracy, their families must adapt to changing circumstances that include separation and transition.

Supporting the educational process for military families, whether their children attend Department of Defense Education Authority Schools (DoDEA), U.S. public schools, international schools, or other educational settings, is the mission of the Military Child Education Coalition. This national non-profit organization, commonly known as MCEC, was founded in 1996 by a group of educators and military officers, military-connected spouses, and active duty and retired military

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Mary Keller

personnel. Dr. Mary Keller is MCEC's executive director and a key leader with a vision for the future of military-connected students and their families.

After 25 years in education, during which she has served as a teacher, school and district administrator, and researcher, Keller remains committed to public education as one of the foundations of America.

"Jefferson said that the purpose of public education is to create or develop productive citizens for a democratic society," says Keller, who grew up in Plainview, Texas, the daughter of a cotton farmer. "In our nation, we need people who give, not just those who take. Service to our country, whether in the military or in education, is vital. We all serve children."

Today, with over 500 member school districts and military installa-

# Dr. Mary Keller

## And The Military Child Education Coalition: Driven to Serve

By Rob Gira, *AVID Director of Program Development*

tions, along with supporting organizations and individuals, MCEC serves 1.4 million students with military connections. The organization provides professional development for counselors and teachers so they can better understand military families, conducts research, and disseminates publications for families and educators. In 2001, MCEC published the groundbreaking Secondary Education Transfer Study

occur in their education."

An artist as well as a dedicated researcher, Keller describes herself as "naturally curious." In 1998, that inquisitive nature led her to investigate the AVID program, while she was an assistant superintendent for the Killeen Independent School District, in Killeen Texas. The district serves 26,000 students—55% of them are military connected—and features AVID in all its middle schools and high schools.

"AVID is a program without borders," says Keller, who has two grown children as well as a new grandchild. "It is a program that both affirms children and prepares them."

Mary Keller recently answered questions for ACCESS via phone from her office in Austin.

**MCEC is involved in supporting military families in many ways. Why and how did the program get started?**

MCEC started from a need, just like AVID. In 1996, when I was an assistant superintendent for instruction in Killeen, one of our school board members, Lieutenant General 'Pete' Taylor, and I had a conversation with Sandy Schwartz, the wife of General Tom Schwartz (base commander of nearby Ft. Hood) about the impact of block scheduling. General Taylor asked how block scheduling would affect military children and all mobile students. Killeen's superintendent, Dr. Charles Patterson, also joined the discussion. We then attempted to study students who left our district, to track their movements,

their course taking patterns, credits, etc. We couldn't find out anything. So, in 1997, we had our first conference for districts that serve military families. We had 200 people attend, including Mary Jo Reimer, the spouse of General Dennis Reimer, then the U.S. Army's Chief of Staff. The Army leaders were concerned about supporting the education of military families because today about 65% of our service personnel are married with children. If their families aren't happy, there is an impact on both assignment and retention.

While we were hosting our conference in Texas, to study the needs of military children, a similar meeting was being held in New England. We were all concerned about the issues. Thus, at our first conference, one key outcome was that we create a permanent alliance or group to act on the problems, to find solutions. In 1998, we chartered MCEC. We serve a very broad range of families, including those whose children attend Department of Defense schools overseas and in the U.S., embassy schools, parochial schools, and home schools. It's a very eclectic school experience. For example, 800,000 of the 1.4 million military-connected children are school age. Of these, 600,000 are in U.S. public schools and 110,000 in Department of Defense Schools. Thus, we are concerned about everything from day care to college tuition.

#### **What are some of your current promising initiatives?**

We're very proud that we did the Secondary Education Transition Study (SETS), the largest qualitative research project done on mobile military children. It is a compilation of wonderful ideas about how to support these children, as well as an extensive research study. The lessons learned from SETS should help

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military families as well as the systems that serve them. The MCEC board believes that the military owns the challenges of the mobile military life, but the school systems own the solutions. We also believe that all families can learn something from our SETS report. In fact a component of the SETS publication was a guidebook for parents, and we've already distributed 32,000 of them. In addition, we've recently published two additional studies for parents. *Charting the Course* provides guidelines for taking your child from middle school through high school, and cites AVID as an effective support structure. *Academic Passport* is a companion piece to this, and assists families in navigating the system. We use both of these in our counselor training as well. We believe that it is critical for our military families to develop a six-year plan for their children, middle school through high school. Our findings apply to all families but the intensity of the need is geometrically increased for military families for two reasons: their amount of movement and the uncertainty they face. These create turbulence in a child's life. It may be that their mother is alone and doesn't know where the father is deployed. Taking care of their academic needs is always tough, even when it isn't wartime. When September 11 occurred, deployments took place at a moment's notice. Ships went to sea,

and kids had no idea when they'd see their parents again. As you can imagine, school counselors deal with these challenges, and I am proud of our professional development for them. It's our number one priority, and we've trained counselors in 55 school districts in seven countries regarding what they can do to help the mobile military child.

#### **Why is AVID an important support structure for military families and children?**

AVID is a program without borders. From our research, we know that it has a positive impact on mobile students. No matter where they move, they know they will do okay. For 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade students especially, AVID ensures that they don't take a lesser path. AVID fits in with all our efforts. We know from our research that kids enter into rigorous courses like AP because they have friends or a cohort in the program. But if you're the new student, the way so many mobile military children are, you don't necessarily have a group you're comfortable with. What AVID does is prepare students with the skills and confidence, so they know they can make it. For example, if you had AVID in Germany, even if you move to a location without AVID, you bring your cohort with you. It showed up again and again in our findings. Kids told us that, because of AVID, they know they could do it. Their parents knew it, too.

#### **What strengths does the military community and its families bring to the educational process?**

This is an essential question. One of the findings out of the Peabody Research at Vanderbilt University examined the performance of military connected students in DDESS, and

continued on page 6

continued from page 5

the achievement gap by ethnicity. They found it is not there. Other researchers have looked at academic achievement for military connected students in Florida, Texas, and Georgia on standardized tests, and discovered that they scored as well as or better than other students. What we find is that military students are extremely capable. But they don't always get routed into the best programs. DoDEA is a fine school system, but military students only spend two to three years with them, on average. What we find is that because of the strong family culture in the military community, students do well. With the military community, you have to remember that it is a giant training culture, with an emphasis on education. After the Vanderbilt study was published, showing that there was no achievement gap for minority students in DDESS schools, I heard a great quote from an African-American commander about the findings. He said, 'I grew up in a condition of poverty. When I joined the army, there was no remediation. Instead, there were standards that I knew I must meet.' No matter what branch of the military you're talking about, there are standards, families are literate, and there are core values like respect and trust that are taught and reinforced. We currently have 1.4 million active duty military personnel called up, without the National Guard and reserve components. You're talking about men and women who do their jobs and are proud of serving their country. That's also part of their dinner table conversation. It's a strong, trained, caring service culture, and we think AVID fits because it's not remedial and has standards and benchmarks. As an outsider, as I look at the military community, it reminds me of the best characteristics of small town America. AVID fits with that, too.

**AVID is noted in MCEC's SETS report and is linked in that report with programs like Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate program. In what ways do you see these programs working together for military connected children?**

We don't advocate a national curriculum because that is a responsibility of the states, but there are some threads or cables among these programs that unite them so that they provide consistent links internationally. The majority of military kids have been to at least two high schools. How do you bring predictability and a robust curriculum into a child's life? That's what we believe AVID, AP, and IB bring, so that a consistent vocabulary and culture exist. For example, when students hear 'Get out your AVID notebook,' there is instant recognition. Students quickly relate and fall into a positive performance. Our research shows across the board that parents of military connected students are looking for touchstones like AVID, AP, and IB. All three of these have consistent professional development, so that children, whether they are in Germany, Florida, or wherever we have military personnel, have reliable quality. These are indeed programs without borders, so that even though the school setting changes, the academic preparation doesn't.

**As an assistant superintendent in Killeen, Texas, for eight years, you were essential in bringing AVID to the district, where AVID now serves all the middle schools and high schools. How does the program address the particular needs of Texas schools, districts, and families?**

For both Texas and for military personnel, when you have a diverse community, children sometimes have not had all the preparation they need. With expectations increasing in

Texas, everyone is more focused on what makes a quality middle school or high school program. You must have programs that make sure children have access. AVID brings two important components. First, the professional development is excellent. Secondly, there is a system to make sure a quality program is widely available and that children don't become disenfranchised. AVID serves children with great promise, who need the direction.

**AVID has served Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific for many years. Now, many stateside Department of Defense schools are implementing AVID. Why is that occurring, and what particular needs do stateside military families have?**

The Department of Defense Schools have done a great job of focusing on standards. They're like the 51<sup>st</sup> state. DDESS doesn't have as many high schools as other DoDEA schools, but they are concerned. Under the leadership of Dr. Joe Tafoya, the superintendent of DoDEA, and with the support of directors Dr. Elaine Hinman (DDESS), Ms. Diana Ohman (DoDDS Europe), and Dr. Nancy Bressell (DoDDS Pacific), through their strategic planning and curriculum they have put an accountability system in place. All of them are looking at AVID because they are serious about what a quality program in DoDEA looks like. Their schools may be spread out, but they want coherent quality. 🐾

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Keller was the keynote speaker at the Summer Institute in Austin, Texas.