How K12 Virtual Academies Meet the Needs of Mobile Military Families

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For children in most military families, mobility is a fact of life—after completing first and second grades in North Carolina, a child might move to Georgia for third through fifth grades, and then to California for middle school. According to the Military Child Education Coalition, “military-connected children move six to nine times during their K–12 academic experience.”¹ The authors of a recent demographic study of military families note that “active-duty military personnel must move on average once every two to three years, meaning that military families move 2.4 times as often as civilian families. They are also more likely than civilian families to move long distances, across state lines, or to foreign countries.”²


Curricular Consistency

When military family students move from one state to another, they often encounter a curriculum based on a set of standards different from the standards in their prior school. For students, this inconsistency can mean tedious repetition of material already covered or, worse, confusion and disorientation when confronted by lessons or assessments that assume prior knowledge and skills the student has not yet acquired.

A 2011 report from the Government Accounting Office analyzed results of a survey of more than 150 school districts that serve a high number of students from military families. According to this report:

The largest challenge reported by school districts . . . was the increased academic need of children in military families who transfer to a school with different curricula or academic standards than those in their previous school and thus need additional support. Forty-one percent of school districts rated increased academic needs due to differences in curricula between districts and/or states as extremely or very challenging, and 32 percent said it was moderately challenging. States use different curricula and have different graduation and academic standards and assessment practices, sometimes making it difficult for a receiving school to integrate new students.³

By contrast, in K12’s online schools, the core academic curriculum is consistent across virtual academies, thus reducing the possibility of a student unnecessarily repeating content or being placed at a disadvantage due to lack of assumed prior knowledge. Curricular consistency across K12 online schools means that military family students who remain continuously enrolled in K12 virtual academies can move from state to state without suffering from the adverse effects that afflict students who repeatedly move from brick-and-mortar schools in one state to schools in other states. Indeed, students who remain continuously enrolled in K12 virtual academies show increased average academic performance as the number of years of continuous enrollment increases.⁴

State-Specific Requirements

While curricular consistency across the K12 online network provides a foundation for academic growth, flexibility in implementation allows K12 virtual academies to help military families deal with challenges posed by regulations and requirements that vary from one state to another. As public schools, K12 virtual academies must abide by state-specific requirements. Teachers and support staff at each virtual academy work to individualize the student’s program in order to meet both the student’s educational needs and the state’s or district’s local requirements.

For example, military family children who have completed kindergarten in one state might move to another state in which they do not meet the minimum age requirement for enrolling in first grade. If the student is required to re-enroll as a kindergartner in his or her new location, K12 educators will work with the family to create an individualized education program. Once the student demonstrates readiness, he or she can move forward to more academically advanced lessons and avoid repeating too much material already covered.

In high school, students in military families may face difficulties in meeting graduation requirements, which vary by state. Military dependents who move from one state to another during their junior or senior year may face frustration if scheduling constraints or other conflicts prevent them from enrolling in courses required for graduation. In K12’s virtual academies, scheduling constraints are minimal due to the wide array of course options and greater flexibility available in the virtual model. High school teachers and counselors in K12 online schools work to make sure that military family students fulfill all requirements and graduate on time.

Community and Connectedness

In their demographic study of military families, Clever and Segal note that “for children, frequent moves can disrupt education and bring periods of stressful acclimation to a new environment where they may not have any friends and may be disconnected from school and community activities.”

When military family students move during a school year, they can arrive in their new school after the recruitment and enrollment periods for clubs and activities. Because they may be perceived as transient or having arrived “too late,” military family students may be left out of activities that promote socialization and connectedness to their new school community. In contrast, in K12’s online schools, students often become part of a larger online community, participating in various activities, clubs, and organizations with students not only in their own schools but with those from virtual schools across the nation and even around the world. Even when students move, if they remain enrolled in the K12 network they can continue their participation and develop their interests and talents as they remain part of a connected online community.

The interconnectedness of the K12 online community can help prevent the sense of isolation students feel when moving to a new school by allowing for connections to be made even before the student moves. Before moving to new communities and participating in field trips or other activities facilitated by the online schools, students can establish online connections with students in the new state. These advance communications give students from military families the chance to learn about extracurricular opportunities in their new community and to connect with those who are already engaged in those activities. Virtual support groups specifically for military children enrolled across K12 virtual academies also facilitate ongoing socialization for these children.

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Changing Laws Regarding Virtual Schooling and Military Families

It can be especially disruptive when military families move from one state (and school) to another during the school year. For students enrolled in K12 virtual academies, K12 is working to modify state laws to ease the disruption of mid-year moves. For example, in Wyoming and Nevada, K12’s efforts have led to regulatory changes that allow military dependents to remain enrolled in the virtual academy if the family moves to a state that does not offer a virtual academy option. When the family of Kylie Todd, a student at Nevada Virtual Academy, received transfer orders for Alabama, the Nevada law allowed Kylie to remain enrolled in NVVA for the remainder of the school year. In this way, Kylie benefited from continuity in curriculum and connectedness to her teachers and virtual classmates. K12 continues to work to have similar laws passed in other states.

While K12’s virtual academies can help meet the needs of highly mobile military families, until recently a graduate of a K12 virtual academy (or of other online or blended high schools) would have faced obstacles to enlisting in the U.S. Armed Forces. According to Pamela Davidson, senior director of government relations for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “based on outdated data,” Department of Defense policy has “limited the ability of students who attended non-traditional high schools to enlist in the military . . . [by] requiring students who graduated from non-traditional high schools to score higher on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) than students who attended traditional high schools in order to be eligible for military service.”

In December 2013, however, new legislation was passed “prohibiting DOD from creating different standards on any assessment or screening tool based on the type of high school a student attended.” Because of this change in federal policy, graduates of K12 virtual academies who aspire to enlist and serve their country are held to the same standards as graduates of traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Face-to-Face Support

While ongoing online connections help alleviate the isolation felt by some highly mobile students, some military family students also require face-to-face instructional support. Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, various K12 virtual academies have established Military Learning Centers to provide face-to-face instructional support, enrichment activities, physical education activities, supervised work on science or art projects, and holiday gatherings and field trips. These programs are intended to help students develop social relationships as they meet other students facing similar challenges and build a network among their peers.

Military Learning Centers Associated with a K12 Inc. Virtual Charter Academy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Learning Center Location</th>
<th>School Year Launched</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma</td>
<td>2010–2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado</td>
<td>2011–2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Hill Air Force Base, Utah</td>
<td>2011–2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Joint Bases San Antonio, Texas</td>
<td>2011–2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Fort Hood, Texas</td>
<td>2012–2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>7  Fort Bliss, Texas</td>
<td>2012–2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Joint Bases Anacostia Bolling</td>
<td>2013–2014</td>
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A Firsthand Report from a K12 Military Family

The following firsthand account illustrates how mobile military families with school-aged children can benefit from the educational continuity and connectedness offered by K12 virtual academies.

The Babcock Family,
Wyoming Virtual Academy and Air Force Base Youth Center

I am the parent of two military family students and I also help coordinate the Wyoming Virtual Academy face-to-face program. Our sons are in 7th and 10th grades and are as different as night and day. One has challenges associated with autism. The other son is academically gifted. But this program meets the needs of both our sons.

When we lived overseas we were pretty much on our own. Not too big of a support system, just a few families here and there. It was hard and some days had us wondering if we were doing the right thing. But when we got orders to move to Wyoming, we immediately enrolled in the Wyoming Virtual Charter Academy. We were immediately amazed at what that school offered our sons. Most teachers call weekly to check up on my boys, which I love! Also they will set up one-on-one sessions to go over things that need more help. So we thought that it couldn’t get any better. We were wrong! We have had so much fun with this group. They are able to do a gym class with all ages. We have many kids in the same grade and they will often do art or science projects together. They help each other with mathematics and literature. Lunch time is filled with giggling and fun discussions.

The very best thing about this support group is the kids and their families. Military kids are awesome, well-rounded, open-minded, traveled, amazing people. Having a group where they can come together not just for academics but also to be there for one another through PCSs¹ and deployments is so important and such a huge part of this group.

¹ PCS = permanent change of station