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March 9, 2021

Rhode Island House of Representatives
Attn: Education Committee
State Capitol
82 Smith St, Providence, RI 02903

Dear House Education Committee Members,

I'm writing this witness statement to communicate the [Military Child Education Coalition's \(MCEC\)](#) strongest support for House Bill 5824, PURPLE-STAR RHODE ISLAND DEPENDENT EDUCATION ACT, an act that establishes a Rhode Island Purple Star School designation program. We sincerely appreciate the support of this bill's sponsors, Representatives Vella-Wilkinson, Noret, Solomon, Azzinaro, Kennedy, and Filippi. We urge the Education Committee to move this bill forward to the Rhode Island General Assembly for a full and affirmative vote of this HB 5824.

The purpose of this act would provide that the commissioner of elementary and secondary education designate schools as "purple-star" schools if the schools establish a program to assist children of military service members. The focus of this letter is to communicate our strongest endorsement of the Purple Star School Designation Program.

With the passage of this legislation, the Rhode Island General Assembly will be following the precedence set by 13 other states (UT, MT, NV, TX, AR, TN, IN, OH, SC, NC, GA, VA and NH) that have already adopted and implemented the [Purple Star School Designation Program \(PSSDP\)](#). Like RI, [ten other states \(NM, OK, MO, NE, IL, AL, MD, CT, MA and FL\)](#) have already introduced legislation to implement the PSSDP.

America's military-connected children experience academic and social-emotional challenges as they relocate to new schools due to a parent's change in duty station. These transitions create challenges since schools often have differing cultures, curricula, standards, course offerings, schedules and graduation requirements. As a result, many students struggle to stay on track to be college-, workforce- and life-ready. This has the potential to impact military readiness by degrading retention of service members and the economic viability of local communities and states that host military installations.

Military-connected students must move whenever their active-duty parent receives a relocation order (called a Permanent Change of Station). A military-connected child can expect to move six to nine times from kindergarten through their high school graduation, with approximately 200,000 students transitioning to a new school in any given year. Eighty percent of America's military-connected children attend public schools. In every state with a military installation, military-connected children will be transitioning into and out of nearby public schools due to parent PCS orders.

With an estimated 1.2 million active-duty military-connected U.S. children enrolled in schools in the United States and abroad, the number of children affected by these transitions is significant.

A Purple Star School designation lets military parents know – whether they are on active duty or in the National Guard and Reserves -- that a school is dedicated to helping their child gain the educational skills necessary to be college-, workforce- and life-ready. It signals that a school also supports the social and emotional wellbeing of military kids adjusting to new schools and the absence of a parent during deployment.

A Purple Star School program offers states the following benefits:

- All states have obligations under the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. Although the Purple Star School program is not funded by or associated with the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (which administers the Compact), a statewide Purple Star School program shares the Compact's goals of ensuring that military children transition successfully into new schools and stay on track for graduation.
- It helps protect state revenue. The U.S. military is now including the quality of K-12 schools near military facilities as part of its calculus in deciding future basing and personnel decisions. Communities with Purple Star Schools can help retain bases and attract military families who bring economic benefits to local communities.
- Purple Star Schools foster diverse, inclusive and supportive school environments through their initiatives and trainings, which serves all students, regardless of military connection.

To better understand the landscape around and impact of the Purple Star program, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the initiative's national advocate, engaged the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University (CPRL) to conduct a study of the program across four states. In this enclosed report, we summarize the findings of that investigation, assessing the strengths of current initiatives, identifying potential areas of growth, and offering recommendations to guide the improvement of both extant and emergent initiatives.

In our enclosed research report, we found that the Purple Star program has already gained traction and motivated hundreds of schools and scores of districts to improve services for military-connected (MC) students and families. This is especially notable given that the program has been in place for less than three years in most states, with a third of that time overlapping the COVID-19 health crisis.

- The Purple Star program's true value derives from its potential to:
 - Centralize and make knowledge accessible,
 - Develop stakeholder networks, and
 - Support schools in cultivating and communicating cultural competency in supporting military-connected families.
- Most Purple Star schools and districts already had programming for military-families in place before seeking designation. Still, staff and faculty report that they have benefitted from the Purple Star application process and the encouragement to refine and expand programming related to the program designation requirements.



- Of the core designation requirements, selecting a point-of-contact, training more staff and faculty, and establishing new student transition programs are commonly cited as the highest-impact activities. Designing an accessible and relevant dedicated webpage is still a need for many schools.
- Schools and districts appreciate and benefit from the recognition and publicity the designation offers, but brand recognition for the program among families is still fairly low.
- A number of simple steps — outlined throughout this enclosed report — can help states, districts, and schools continue to refine Purple Star programs and offerings as well as build recognition for the program.

In closing, we can't over state how important and beneficial this Purple Star School Program will be to all military families and to the state of Rhode Island. We heartedly applaud the Education Committee and the General Assembly in advance for passing this HB 5824.

Point of contact for this witness statement is the undersigned at COO@militarychild.org or (254) 953-1923 ext. 1124.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John L. Ballantyne".

John L. Ballantyne
Colonel, US Army (Retired)
Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Military Child Education Coalition

Enclosed