
OPERATION: Inform the Teacher

*Making the connection between
Wisconsin military families and their schools*

STEPHEN HORVATH

As a former classroom teacher and current youth development agent with the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension in Wood County, I have had the privilege of working with dedicated educators for the better part of my career. I have also recently returned from the war in Iraq, having served with Naval Mobile Construction Battalions 25/40 (Seabees) as a Navy reservist during most of 2006.

The first school function I attended with my family upon my return home was report card pick-up day in late November. At my children's junior high school, I was surprised to learn only one teacher knew that I had been deployed to Iraq. Looking back, I realize I could have let the school know of my deployment. As I prepared to report for duty and get all of our family's other affairs in order, I simply overlooked this task. And, quite frankly, part of me assumed that the teachers would "just know" given the central

focus of this event in our family's lives and the magnitude of our current military operations in our nation's history. I was wrong.

I have a unique appreciation for what a "citizen soldier" goes through when mobilized to active duty, and I feel much more needs to be done to formalize the relationship among educators, reserve military families and the military.

There is clearly a need to connect our public schools with the families who are making great sacrifices through their military service.

School leaders throughout the state have seen their local National Guard units called to active duty — it is major news in any community. Yet it may not be widely known within the community — particularly within the schools — which families are directly affected.

There are also citizens in many communities who are members of Reserve units that may or may not be locally based. When these units are activated, they may draw

members from several states, not to mention several communities.

Additionally, there are many "individual augmentees" now being called to active duty — these are soldiers "plucked" out of their reserve status and placed on active duty based on their special military skill.

Many people can be called away from their community and never make the headlines.

To connect military families and their schools, I am working to develop a program called "Operation: Inform the Teacher," a title borrowed from a program called Operation: Military Kids, a partnership between the National 4-H Headquarters, the U.S. Army Child and Youth Services and other organizations.

The first purpose of Operation: Inform the Teacher would be to increase awareness on the part of educators that they may have children under their charge who have a parent or primary caregiver away



Stephen Horvath is surrounded by his daughters Nina, Chandoppe and Eleanor as he returns from military service in Iraq. His son, Joe, took the photograph.

from home serving in the military or recently returned from duty. When educators — especially classroom teachers — have a good sense of what is occurring in the lives of their students outside the classroom, they will be able to meet their needs within the classroom. At the elementary level, students are likely to have just one teacher and parents are likely to have more contact with the school — a parent's deployment is more readily known. In middle school/junior high and high school, students have contact with more teachers and are less likely to freely share with their teachers that a parent is absent in the military.

Secondarily, the Operation: Inform the Teacher collaboration would, by increasing awareness of this ever-more common reality, encourage educators to make explicit efforts to meet the unique and often complex needs of these young people and their families. With today's state of affairs

demanding ever more of our reserve military members, it is practically assured that there will be increased stress and disruption placed on the children in these families. A child who may be an active, productive, happy youngster at school one day can become a sad, scared, withdrawn child the next day. While the emotions experienced by these young people are "natural," they nevertheless require attention.

Lastly, the collaboration would work to provide schools with the tools they need to address these needs and better provide assistance to children during a very stressful time. A goal of mine is to create a document that can be distributed to school districts throughout the state describing the most relevant resource information currently available. There are a number of worthwhile programs that have been created with the military child in mind. A future consideration could be to assess the long-term needs of chil-

dren whose lives have been disrupted by an absent parent, especially those children who have had a parent wounded or killed in service.

Increasing awareness on the part of school personnel about military families will require two-way communication between school staff and military units.

Educators can — and do — gather much information directly from families. A simple notice asking parents to inform schools of active duty status as part of a regular parent newsletter might formalize and augment the current processes of gathering this information. Such a notice could be included in a newsletter at the beginning of the school year and again at some point in the middle of the year. It can also be part of a new-family orientation.

I would strongly encourage school districts to make an initial effort to gather this information prior to the end of this current school year, if possible.

It would also be useful for school leaders, particularly influential elected school board members, to persuade National Guard and military reserve units throughout the state to inform the schools of Guard and Reserve members and military duty status. Similar contacts are being established simultaneously through UW-Extension to strengthen its position as part of the collaborative effort.

As I work to develop this Wisconsin effort, I am interested in hearing from school board members and administrators about their ideas for Operation: Inform the Teacher. Working together, local school districts, the UW-Extension and the military can enhance and formalize the important supporting role schools play in serving the interests of military families. ■

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