



National Military Family Association, Inc.

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**The Voice
for Military
Families**

Statement of

Candace Wheeler

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THE NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION

***INTERSTATE COMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
FOR MILITARY CHILDREN***

**Joint Hearing of the House Education, Intergovernmental Affairs Committee
And Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee
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The Committee**

The National Military Family Association (NMFA) is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family. The Association's goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of those family members. Its mission is to serve the families of the seven uniformed services through education, information, and advocacy.

Founded in 1969 as the National Military Wives Association, NMFA is a non-profit 501(c)(3) primarily volunteer organization. NMFA represents the interests of family members and survivors of active duty, reserve component, and retired personnel of the seven uniformed services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

NMFA Representatives in military communities worldwide provide a direct link between military families and NMFA staff in the nation's capital. Representatives are the "eyes and ears" of NMFA, bringing shared local concerns to national attention.

NMFA does not have or receive federal grants or contracts.

NMFA's website is: <http://www.nmfa.org>.

Candace Wheeler

Mrs. Wheeler joined the National Military Family Association Government Relations staff as a Deputy Director in June 2007. However, Mrs. Wheeler is no stranger to the Association having been a member since 2001. She has held various positions within the organization to include Chairman of the Board of Governors and Chief Executive Officer. In that capacity, she served as the spokesperson for NMFA before Congress, the Department of Defense, and the military and civilian community. She also served as President of The Board of Directors for The Military Coalition which is comprised of 35 military, veterans and uniformed services organizations representing 5.5 million members.

In her position as Deputy Director of Government Relations, Mrs. Wheeler monitors issues relevant to the quality of life of families of the uniformed services. Her areas of responsibility include Education for Children and Military Impact Aid; Spouse Education, Employment and Unemployment Issues; Adoption; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Family Advocacy and Domestic Violence; State Initiatives; and Guard and Reserve Benefits. Mrs. Wheeler currently serves on The Military Coalition Guard and Reserves Committee, The Military Coalition Personnel Committee, and the Chesapeake Regional Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee Working Group.

Mrs. Wheeler is a native of California. She attended the University of Southern California where she majored in International Relations and studied Political Science and Journalism. Mrs. Wheeler has been an Air Force spouse for 23 years, and has lived in Texas, California, Virginia, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Alaska, Germany and Turkey. She has held various volunteer positions within the military and civilian community to include Director of Girl Scouts for Izmir, Turkey, numerous military spouse club positions, church committees and choirs, and has performed with local musical groups. Mrs. Wheeler also recently served on the Board of the Air Force Officers' Wives' Club of Washington D.C. and on the Joint Armed Forces Officers' Wives' Luncheon Steering Committee.

Mrs. Wheeler lives in the Northern Virginia area with her husband and their two children. As the wife of a former fighter pilot, Mrs. Wheeler knows first hand the affect deployment has on families and she remains committed to strengthening our military community, and highlighting the needs of our service members and their families.

Majority Chairman Roebuck and Minority Chairman Stairs, and members of the House Education, Intergovernmental Affairs Committee and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, on behalf of the National Military Family Association, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children*.

My name is Candace Wheeler and I am a military family member. My husband retired from the Air Force after nearly 26 years of active service. I am the mother of two children who have first hand knowledge of many of the issues you will be discussing today. I am also the Deputy Director of Government Relations for the National Military Family Association, a 501(c)(3), non profit that has been in existence for almost 40 years. The National Military Family Association (NMFA) advocates for the families of the seven uniformed services in all areas that affect them. We serve as a resource for members of Congress and policymakers for issues concerning military families.

For those of you familiar with military lifestyle, you know that change is a constant reality for service members and their families. Each new assignment normally means a change in duty station for the active duty service member and another move for the family. In fact, military children on the average will move at least twice during their high school years, and most will attend six to nine different schools between kindergarten and 12th grade. For example, our daughter attended five schools during her seven years of elementary education and this is not an uncommon occurrence within military families.

While reassignments are important for the service member's career progression, transition can be difficult for military families, especially children. Military children often experience feelings of loneliness, anger, or frustration with each new move. These feelings can be compounded when faced with educational obstacles as well. Though a great deal of progress has been made over the past several years to help military families

address their educational concerns, many issues still remain that need state cooperation. These issues include: kindergarten start age, participation in extracurricular activities, immunizations, timely transfer of records, placement in appropriate courses, missed or redundant entrance and exit testing, support for children of deployed service members, and an emphasis on on-time graduation.

NMFA has heard from military families regarding these very issues addressed by the *Interstate Compact for Educational Opportunity for Military Children*. We believe it is important for this committee to hear some of the personal stories military families have shared with us. We have included several of them within this testimony but have omitted references to locations, states, or personal names.

"As you know moving in the military is our way of life. We are transitioning on a continual basis. Our children have to pick up and start over again and again. They leave friends behind and try to make new ones at their new location. My daughter has attended a different school every year since the 4th grade and she currently is in the 10th."

Another parent told us that, "One issue we have encountered has to do with accelerated learning programs. My daughter was in an accelerated learning classroom for two years. When we were planning to move, I was told there were designated accelerated classrooms in the new location, but the standard for being placed in them was undetermined. The school where she had been for two years did not want to retest her at the end of her time there since she was not going to be in that district the following year. My husband went all the way to the district TAG facilitator to advocate having her tested so that she could be considered for the appropriate classes. It was a fight, but he prevailed and she was tested. Upon arriving in our new location, the standard still was fuzzy but I was told that with her recent test scores; a written letter I had hand-carried

from her teacher; and her report cards, she would be able to be placed in the more advanced class. Because of an error, she was not placed in one of the two classes they have here, but I went to the principal and was able to have her moved. I was then approached by other parents who had been told that their children could not be placed in the advanced class because they had not taken certain tests that are incorporated into the school system to test for the Gifted and Talented program. While we were lucky she was placed despite not having the same tests, it certainly would be helpful if the testing for such programs were somewhat standardized or at least some sort of reciprocal agreement reached that would incorporate a variety of appropriate tests."

We heard from another parent that said, "Not only am I a parent of one child that has graduated and the parent of one in grade school, I am also a High School teacher. One of the major problems we faced when we moved was transferring our daughter's records to the new state's system. She was receiving Special Education Services at our old base and here the standards were different, so she had to be retested. As a parent of a child with a deployed father another issue is attendance. When the deployed parent comes home on R&R the student usually needs days to see the parent...1. Come in on the plane 2. Spend some quality time with the parent. 3. To see the parent off when it is time for them to leave. These days are not considered excused absences at every school. When you only get 8 days absent before you have to make up time or fail some parents have to choose how they will deal with it. Also, as a teacher I see the unique problems our military students face. One of the major obstacles is testing. Our state requires many tests before a student can receive a diploma. When a child transfers from out of state they have to catch up on testing."

The following narrative demonstrates this point perfectly, "Our son didn't pass the last portion of the TAKS exit exam. The school board did allow him to walk with his class

(after much pressure), but he did NOT receive a diploma. They said he could re-take the last portion of the test on the 12th of July. My husband received short orders to take a command position overseas and he needed to be there the 10th of July. After we arrived in country, we put our son in school taking guitar and weight lifting, because he needed NO credits to graduate, but he needed to say he went to their school. Two months later the principal saw no need for him to continue and they graduated him. I understand that each state has their own graduation requirements, but when a child is moved their senior year, I feel like they should be allowed to stay on the course that they were on. It is so difficult to have them try and make up credits because of a new district."

These stories are just some of the many we received which help illustrate why the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children* is important to the quality of life of our military families. Designed to enable cooperation between states, the compact will allow for the uniform treatment of military children transferring between school districts and states. It recognizes that states, no matter how supportive they are of military children, can only control what happens within their individual borders. By becoming a better "sending" and "receiving" state, each state can help ensure that our military children have the educational opportunities they deserve.

Military families place a high value on education and define the quality of that education differently than most states or districts that look only at issues within their boundaries. For military families, it is not enough for children to be doing well in their current schools they must also be prepared for the next location. However, military families do not want special privileges for their children, only a level playing field. Above all, they do not want their children to make unnecessary sacrifices for a parent's military service. Though military family life comes with many rewards, it is not always easy. Our families endure long separations and repeated deployments, routine moves, and constant

change. For children and teens navigating adolescence, this lifestyle can often be extremely difficult. That is why it is important for legislators, teachers and parents to work together to alleviate additional burdens placed on military children.

We thank you for considering this important legislation which will help mitigate some of the many challenges military children and their families face when moving. We wish to congratulate the Department of Defense and the Council of State Governments for developing this compact. NMFA is very proud to have been among the policy makers and stake-holders on both the Advisory Group and Drafting Team that assisted in the development of this compact.

Once again, we appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Families* and look forward to Pennsylvania's leadership in adopting this vital compact supporting our military children.

