

# Focusing on First Day Fears

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*(Above) Brig. Gen. Milford Beagle, Jr., speaks to a PE class about nutrition and exercise at Pinckney Elementary School. Photo by Fort Jackson.*

Being the new kid is always hard. For children arriving at Fort Jackson in Columbia, S.C., a youth program can help alleviate some of the first-day jitters. Before they even arrive at the installation, new students can be connected to student volunteers through the Fort Jackson Student Ambassador program and gain a friend who can help them navigate life in the new school, neighborhood and community.

“The Student Ambassador Program was designed to address a concern that we consistently hear from our military families: the stress transitions put on their children,” said Col. Joseph McLamb, deputy commanding officer, U.S. Army Training Center. “This concern is not unique to Fort Jackson, but local conditions can affect the intensity of stress associated with transitions.”

For parents, too, the added stress of worrying whether their kids will find friends can make the move to a new installation even more difficult, Sunny Bolton, coordinator of Fort Jackson child and youth services, said. Parents can feel relieved that their children won't be alone.

The program also serves graduating 6th grade students who attend Department of Defense Education Activity schools and then must transition to one of the off-post middle schools. As students attending school on the installation matriculate through sixth grade, they miss the first year of middle school, which in the local school district runs from sixth through eighth grade. Through the Student Ambassador program, students can spend a day as an honorary seventh grader. They can do a school walk-through, meet administrators, teachers, and other students, and get a sense of what the middle school experience will hold.

"We have realized that the [richer] the program is, as far as real experiences, the better," school liaison officer Fred Henley said. "Giving them an experience like that is very fruitful."

Henley agrees that the services the Student Ambassador program provides can help put parents' minds at ease, allowing them to do their jobs.

"The soldiers go through basic training here," he said. "We need their minds to be focused on the mission. With programs like this it helps them to be assured that their children are being taken care of."

The Student Ambassadors program was created after an Education Summit, spearheaded by Nanette Pigg, school program manager at Installation Management Command, and held in partnership with the Columbia Chamber of Commerce and local school district.

"We had everybody from the community come in, and we came up with a game plan for things that we needed to do a little better job with, school liaison officer Gary Williams said. "One of those things was enabling effective transition for military students."

Fort Jackson's leadership has developed several education-focused goals, including re-establishing effective lines of communication between families and the school district, providing families with timely information about educational opportunities available to their children, and strengthening ties between the school district and the installation, McLamb said.

The work has paid off. "The partnership Richland Two shares with Fort Jackson is highly

regarded and well-respected,” said Baron R. Davis, Richland School District Two superintendent. “It becomes that much more meaningful when the top brass makes what educators do every day a top priority for the military as we work together to provide the best education possible for students.”

The Student Ambassador program serves as an important step towards making military-connected students more successful both on the installation and in the larger community.

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