

Maxwell forms group in hopes of improving education options for military families

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The newly formed public education-focused working group at Maxwell Air Force Base has a plate full of topics to tackle, including increasing attendance at their on-base school, a streamlined application process for Montgomery's magnet schools, more school choice options for military families and exploring the possibility of charter schools in the area.

Formed one month ago, the group was created in response to statistics highlighted in August by Lt. Gen. Anthony Cotton at the Leadership Montgomery's Education Summit.

About 56 percent of airmen in last year's Air War College came to Montgomery without their families, said Cotton, the commander and

president of Air University at Maxwell Air Base. Schools were the No. 1 reason given in surveys to find out why they spent the time apart.

General: Military families live apart because of under-performing schools

"The reality is, 'If my kids aren't happy, I'm not happy. If I have to try to spend so much time trying to understand how to get them ready and prepared for secondary education, then I'm not doing my mission as far as taking care of you, and making sure that I protect our country'," he said to the attendees.

In addition to family separation, education in the area is impacting Cotton's ability to attract and retain faculty and service members to the base.

Cotton has signed an official charter to have the working group become a permanent asset on the base. The group's focus is to elicit issues and concerns among the military community, and to establish a dialogue with local public education officials, Kent Davis, the director of communication and outreach at Air University. His branch has made public education one of the facets of its portfolio to focus on, he said.

The state of education in the area is a "quality of life issue that really needs to be at the forefront and we want to be a part of the discussion and solutions," Davis said.

The base is the River Region's No. 1 employer and Montgomery's largest economic engine, bringing in \$1.2 billion annually. This quality of life issue does not just impact the base though, he said, but "the Hyundais of the world and other employers."

So far, the group has met twice and attended a four-hour strategy meeting with MPS Superintendent Ann Roy Moore. They are also working to host an education summit in January with the hope of bringing together all school systems in the River Region, Davis said.

More:State of Montgomery's schools have many in military struggling for alternatives

Those invited to the summit include Autauga, Elmore, Montgomery and Pike Road districts; the Montgomery Education Foundation; the BTW FAME Board; all university chancellors and presidents in the region, state superintendent Eric Mackey and representatives from all military installations in the area.

The group is led by Christina Karvwnaris, the chief of academic outreach. Since taking the position, Karvwnaris has started researching where Maxwell's military children are located and is attending MPS-related events in uniform.

Other members of the group include military and civilian faculty and staff, chamber of commerce members and a representative for military spouses.

Military children, Karvwnaris said, are considered an at-risk group, due to the complicated structure of military life. The worry of a parent's safety, the uncertainty of where the family will be located and the consistent effort to build new friendships in new places is challenging for many.

"I'm trying to make sure local school systems understand that and can support some of the specific needs military children might have," she said.

When it comes to expanding attendance at the school on Maxwell, the group is looking at ways to expand dialogue with federal legislators. Currently, military families living off base cannot send their children to the K-8 base school.

For families who do not live on base and do not separate to avoid the area's schools, paying for private school tuition, living outside of the county or homeschooling have been prevalent choices.

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The magnet school application process is another issue with which military families have struggled. Because orders are given unexpectedly, families often miss the application deadline. The group is hoping to reach some agreement that would eliminate this barrier.

In Elmore County Public Schools, families who are not residents can pay a fee to send their children to schools in the district. The Family Readiness Center, located on Maxwell, is working with Pike Road on a similar agreement, Karvwarnis said.

Additionally, the group is exploring virtual education opportunities and expanding the base's mentoring programs.

Aside from private schools, Karvwarnis said there are more than 2,000 military children attending schools in the River Region, including 671 in Montgomery, 634 in Autauga, 373 at the Maxwell schools, and 234 in Elmore.

In total, the base estimates there are about 4,000 military children in the area — a number Karvwarnis believes would be higher if families felt their children would receive a quality education.

For example, she knows of at least three families that have made the choice to live in separate cities for a three-year assignment so their children can stay in the schools at their previous assignment, she said.

"This is a long-term process," Davis said. "We are taking baby steps right now but we are serious that this is an issue that will be at the forefront. We are here to help, not to just be a critics."