MISSION: READINESS
MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

TO: Sen. Walker, Chair, K-12/Ed Budgets
Sen. Caswell, VC
Sen. Pappageorge
Sen. Hopgood, Dem VC
Sen. Pavlov, Chair, Education
Sen. Emmons, VC
Sen. Colbeck
Sen. Hopgood, Dem VC
Sen. Young

FROM: K.P. Pelleran, Michigan Director, and
Executive Committee Members of Mission: Readiness *Michigan*

DATE: ~~August 27~~, 2013 10-2-13

SUBJECT: Common Core Standards for Michigan

When thinking about military service, most people consider the physical demands. There is good reason. Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan routinely carry between 60 and 100 pounds of gear, including body armor, weapons and batteries.

Equally important, however, are the mental demands. Today's service members operate complex, high-tech weapons systems and find themselves in intense situations that require not only proficiency in technology, but strategic thinking as well as decisiveness and diplomacy.

With this in mind, it is alarming that the Department of Defense reports that poor educational achievement is one of the biggest reasons why an estimated 75 percent of all young Americans are unable to join the military.

On average, more than one out of four students in Michigan (26 percent) will not graduate from high school on time. Of those Michigan students who do graduate and want to join the military, 20 percent do not possess sufficient skills to pass the military's entrance exam testing in math, literacy, and problem-solving.

This alarming situation has clear implications regarding international competitiveness and was a focus of the recent Council on Foreign Relations task force led by (among others) former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The task force report challenged America's schools to do better "in order to produce citizens who can serve" either in uniform or in the civilian sector.

As retired general officers of the U.S. Armed Forces and members of the national security organization known as Mission: Readiness, we view the continued implementation of the Michigan Common Core Standards and related assessments as an effort to better serve the students of our great state.

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MissionReadiness.org

Mission: Readiness is the nonprofit, bi-partisan organization of senior retired military leaders ensuring continued American security and prosperity into the 21st century by calling for smart investments in the next generation of American children.

Michigan's Common Core Standards make English language arts and math education more rigorous and relevant to success in the 21st century. They challenge students on critical thinking, complex problem solving and effective communication—all essential skills for today's and tomorrow's military.

It is important to note that local school districts and classroom teachers will still decide what specific lessons make up their student's K-12 curriculum.

Just as every good battle plan requires a strategy review, so do education standards. That review comes with standard-aligned assessments, or tests that will ultimately tell us if student achievement is rising. The truthful reporting of these aligned test results and subsequent reforms that would occur will help make our schools more accountable to the student. Michigan's Common Core aligned exams will serve this purpose.

Student mobility is also of special concern for our nation's roughly 2 million children from military families. On average, a military child will move six to nine times during their pre-K – 12 education. This can be a frustrating experience as these students often find themselves either ahead or behind their new school peers because of the lack of consistency among different states' education standards.

Michigan's Common Core Standards will help ensure that students are receiving a high-quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state. In doing so, all students, no matter where they live, or how often they move to a new school, will be better prepared for success in postsecondary education, the workforce and the military, if they choose to serve.

Just as business and industry need a highly qualified workforce to compete in the 21st century global marketplace, our armed forces need the same highly qualified soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen to protect our future national security. Full implementation of the Michigan Common Core Standards, with aligned assessments, is an important part of our future national security.

Sincerely,

Thomas G. Cutler
Major General
U.S. Air Force (Retired)
DeWitt, Michigan

Gerald Miller
Major General
U.S. Army (Retired)
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Errol G. Stump
Major General
U.S. Air Force (Retired)
Novi, Michigan

Carol Ann Fausone
Brigadier General
U.S. Air Force (Retired)
Canton, Michigan

Ronald Seely
Brigadier General
U.S. Air Force (Retired)
Haslett, Michigan

K-12 CORE Curriculum Standards

Why are they the same, only different?

"Sometimes when you move, your curriculum is flip-flopped so you're learning the same thing over and over again without learning anything new which has happened a couple of times"

-student

SPECIAL TOPIC

Common Core Standards:

Will it make a difference for our military-connected students?

A phrase you may hear or read about over the next few years is "Common Core" or "Common Core State Standards" (CCSS). CCSS represent a major education shift toward an emphasis on rigorous and consistent standards throughout students' K-12 academic careers. The adoption and implementation of CCSS in schools will provide consistent and clear standards of student expectations. The new standards require a high level of student engagement as well as a focus on both content and a depth of understanding to apply the knowledge. Standards are designed to be relevant to what students need to know in order to be prepared for college or their careers and to position our students to be successful in our global economy. For our military-connected children, CCSS are a dramatic shift from an education experience that has traditionally been a patchwork of various standards and expectations as they move from state to state to one that will be as close to academically seamless as possible. Students will not be caught off-guard when they move, because CCSS outline the specific skills and knowledge by each grade that students need to have in order to be prepared for college or employment after high school.

Artwork by Daniel, Grade 7 | Poquoson Middle School, Poquoson, Virginia | U.S. Army

Q What are the Common Core State Standards?

A

CCSS are a list of specific, grade by grade, academic standards that cover mathematics and English language arts. It is important to understand that CCSS are not intended to dictate *everything* that is taught, nor do they mandate *how* to teach. They describe the critical knowledge and skills our students need to be successful in college or the workplace. The example below is from seventh grade mathematics, under the geometry section:

- Draw, construct, and describe geometrical figures and describe the relationships between them.
- Solve real-life and mathematical problems involving angle measure, area, surface area, and volume.

Q Why do we need common standards?

A

Prior to the adoption of CCSS, each state had its own process to develop and implement academic standards or expectations. This autonomy caused in a great deal of disparity in content, rigor, and standards from one state to another. For the military-connected student, this disparity often resulted in students not having pre-requisite skills or knowledge or having to repeat content when they transitioned. All students need to be prepared for success in college or the workplace, wherever their post-secondary endeavors take them. All students are entitled to a high quality education no matter where they live. All students, especially our mobile military-connected students, should know that standards and expectations for academic excellence will be consistent as they move.

Q Why are CCSS so important to military-connected students?

A The education experience for many military-connected students can be frustrating. Some students find themselves in a class where they do not have the expected knowledge and skills needed to do well, skills their classmates learned the previous year. Other students find themselves repeating material and are expected to be content to spend class time "reviewing." The adoption and implementation of CCSS are a critical step and particularly important to the mobile military-connected student because they provide consistency, continuity, and clear expectations of the knowledge and skills students need in each grade.

Q Who created the standards?

A The Council of Chief State School Officer (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) have worked for several years with 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia to develop curriculum standards for English language arts and mathematics that reflect the skills students need to prepare them for post-secondary education or to enter the work-place (college or career ready). Many other groups were involved in the development of these standards including Achieve, ACT, College Board, National Association of State Boards of Education, and State Higher Education Officers. Other groups like the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics provided feedback on the standards. States voluntarily decide whether they will or will not adopt the standards and how they will implement them.

The adoption of CCSS is not a federal government program or mandate. The federal government does, however, have the ability to support the states' efforts to implement CCSS through a range of incentives such as allowing states greater flexibility in the use of federal funds and in the current accountability system. The federal government can also revise existing federal education laws to support the most effective and promising research-proven practices in the classroom.

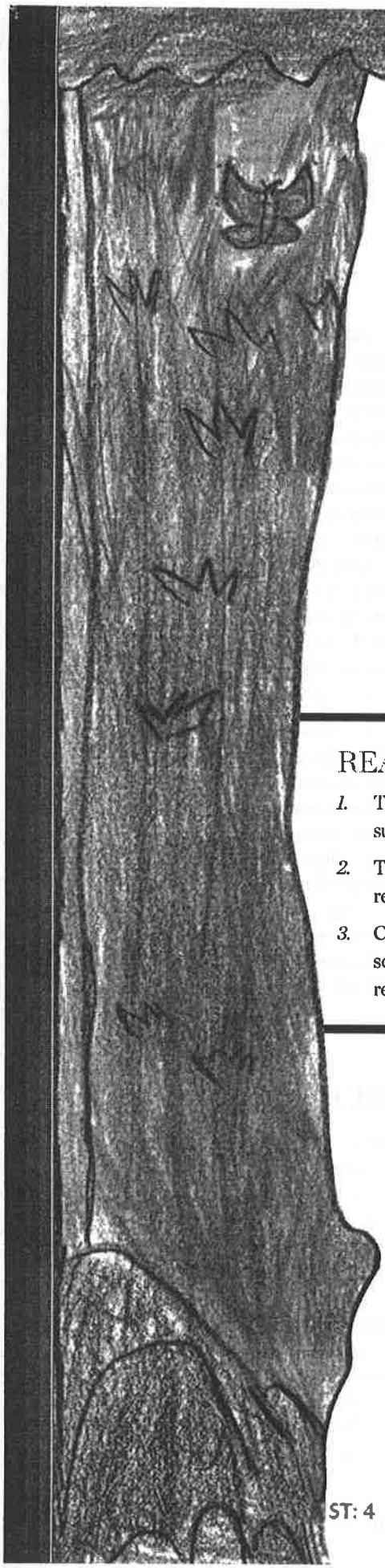
Q Where and when have CCSS been adopted or implemented?

A To date, 45 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands have voluntarily adopted CCSS (see map). The states that have adopted CCSS are home to approximately 80% of all military-connected children. The remaining students are in one of the states that have not adopted CCSS or attend a Department of Defense Education Activity school. Although the adoption process has occurred, school districts may take several years to implement CCSS. Implementation involves many steps, including necessary changes in curriculum and assessments. States may also refer to CCSS by different names. States that have adopted CCSS have planned to implement them fully no later than School Year 2014-2015. Kentucky has been leading the implementation process with plans for students being assessed on CCSS at the end of School Year 2012.

CCSS are based on the best and highest standards in the country. They are aligned with college expectations in both content and skills; therefore, concerns about whether CCSS will result in lower standards are unfounded. A 2011 study completed by the Education Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) compared CCSS to five different sets of standards recognized as exemplary state standards or standards that were written specifically for college readiness. This study suggests a substantial concurrence between CCSS and the comparative standards. (The complete study can be viewed on the EPIC website, www.epiconline.org/CommonCoreStateStandardsStudies)

Q How do I get involved?

A Start by learning as much as you can about your state's and district's progress toward implementing CCSS. A good place to begin is the CCSS website www.corestandards.org. You can see all the standards, grade by grade, as well as links to information about the state that interests you to get more information on the adoption and implementation process. You can also hear the voices of education leaders from around the country who support CCSS. In addition, The National PTA (www.PTA.org) has great resources that explain how parents can work with their children and what children are expected to know at different grade levels. We at the Military Child Education Coalition are always happy to answer your questions. Contact us through our website, www.militarychild.org.



A NEW ASSESSM

GOOD NEWS FOR THE MOBILE

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS (CCSS) IS A LONG PROCESS. One thing states must consider is how they will assess their students on the new standards. Two consortia were formed to focus on aligning the standards with the assessments. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College Careers (PARCC) and The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced or SBAC) are multistate consortia awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Education to develop an assessment system based on the new CCSS.

The CCSS are des
Exit testing at the
ready for college a

Each state that has adopted CCSS has joined one or both of these consortia. (*See map on pages 8-9*)

REASONS FOR DEVELOPING NEW ASSESSMENTS

1. The new standards are more rigorous and the tests need to accurately assess students' mastery of subject area knowledge and skills.
2. The new assessments will use technology, resulting in more accurate assessments and a faster return on results.
3. CCSS are designed to make sure students are college or workplace ready. Exit testing at the high school level will help identify those students who are ready for college and those who may need remediation to be successful in college.

What do military families need to know about the new assessments that are being designed to align with the standards? Parents will want to know *who will take these new tests?*

Similar to tests previously administered under the No Child Left Behind legislation, both PARCC and SBAC are designing tests for students in grades three through eight. High school level tests include formative non-secure items for grades 9 through 11 and a summative college readiness assessment in grade 11.

Parents may also be interested in *how these tests will be different than the tests their children currently take.*

Each consortium promises new, innovative question types in addition to the performance tasks. Few states currently incorporate task performance other than written composition into their assessments. Preparation for these assessment activities will be incorporated into classroom activities throughout the year, and

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igned to make sure students are college or workplace ready.
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nd those who may need remediation to be successful in college.

Artwork by Chyne, Grade 2 | Netzaberg Elementary School, Netzaberg, Germany | U.S. Army

the final tasks will be administered at the end of the year. SBAC will implement computer-adaptive testing, which uses the response a student gives to a question to determine the difficulty level of the next question. This method of testing will give a more accurate assessment of student performance.

Test achievement results will be aligned through the grades to enable measurement of student growth and determine college readiness. The SBAC high school test will be administered at grade 11. Students who are not identified as college ready may be scheduled into grade 12 bridge courses and upon successful completion of those courses be prepared for college level studies.

It may be a few years before your student is affected by the new assessments. The first year, 2010-2011, was devoted to the concept and design of the various types of assessment instruments. This year, test specifications and blueprints

were released and the first item types, including performance tasks, were written. The 2012-2013 school year will be devoted to pilot testing various test item types: multiple-choice, short answer, new item types enhanced through technology, and performance tasks. Both programs are expected to be fully operational by the 2014-2015 school year following field testing in 2013-2014.

Since the states are using the same standards, CCSS, parents may ask *will all states use the same tests?*

This question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. As we have already seen, there are two different consortia. The thirty-four states who have adopted CCSS have reported that they do plan on implementing the new aligned assessment. (Kober & Renter, 2012) Because eight states belong to both consortia and six do not belong to either one, both test programs will most likely be used.

Current plans are for states to commit to one of the assessment programs at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. If states have included additional standards, they may elect to add up to 15% additional items to meet their additional state-specific standards. They may also plan to test other subjects. Some states have already made plans to offer transitional tests prior to the 2014-15 school year.

One piece of good news for the mobile military-connected student is the PARCC and SBAC already have committees at work to address the question of interpreting test results if a student moves from one state program to another. The committees plan to develop common achievement standards that will enable student scores to be comparable between the two consortia.

If you are interesting in learning more about assessments, visit your state education assessment website. You can link to this through the SchoolQuest library at **www.schoolquest.org/state-education-resources/**. Both of the Consortia have websites and plan to release sample test items, tutorials, practice tests, and scoring information. More information can be found at **www.smarterbalanced.org/** and **www.parcconline.org.**

MCEC TIPS FOR PARENTS

1. *Know what your child is responsible for on the test and how well they have to perform on each test to pass. Encourage your child to strive for more than a "basic" level of proficiency.*

As soon as you know you are moving, inquire about the required state tests that your child must take. You can do this the first time you meet with your child's teacher. If your student did well on his tests last year it doesn't guarantee he will do well on his tests this year. For example, under the current system of state standards and assessment, a student who was proficient in grade 4 math in one state may or may not be proficient in grade 4 math in another state. This student could be behind before the school year even starts. This is a great example of an issue that will be alleviated with the implementation of CCSS – the standards for math are the same no matter where you live.

Ask your child's teacher(s) for information on state required assessments. Inquire about family nights that introduce the state assessment programs. Visit the MCEC Resource Center at www.SchoolQuest.org, and choose your state and resource area to learn about the test frameworks, test performance, and proficiency provided by the state education agencies. Look for released versions of the tests; just make sure released version are for the current assessment program.

2. *Parents of children who have unique learning challenges will want to know about accommodations and modifications for state assessments. When state assessments are not appropriate, know the options for alternative tests in order to make the best decision for your child.*

Military parents must relearn the Special Needs identification process and assessment for each state they live in. This knowledge may result in speeding up the ARD or LPAC decision process. If your child was scheduled to receive accommodations or modifications on state assessments or take an alternative assessment at a previous school, make sure you bring your child's records with you and immediately inform your new school upon arrival. Quick decisions must still be correct decisions.

You can find out more about accommodations and modifications for assessments through the MCEC Education Resource center on the SchoolQuest website www.SchoolQuest.org. Look for "Special Education" or "Bilingual/ESL" for English as a Second Language (English Language Learners). You can also address specific questions to "Ask Aunt Peggie" at Peggie.Watson@MilitaryChild.org

3. *Start looking for test format information through the MCEC Education Resource Center located in the SchoolQuest Library www.schoolquest.org. Once you are at the site, got to the Library, then to State Education Resources to find information about assessments in your state.*

Look for other words like "Exemplars" or "Sample Papers." Also look for "Blueprints" which sometimes tell the number of each question type or objective. Don't skip over the rubrics (a rubric tells you how tests are scored and what each point means to the scorer). Knowing why an answer is wrong instead of simply knowing the answer is wrong will help your student avoid repeating the same error.

Don't rely entirely on the format from the previous year to study for the test. The same concept can be tested many different ways.

Informed Advocacy:

A look at some of the myths and misunderstandings surrounding the Common Core State Standards

The adoption and implementation of CCSS represent a major shift in education in the United States. As with any change, and especially one of this magnitude, many myths and misunderstandings often accompany the change. Here is a quick look at a few of those myths and the reality surrounding them.

Myth **The Common Core State Standard Initiative is a federal program.**

REALITY The Common Core State Standard Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practice (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Adoption of the standards is completely voluntary. A state may "un-adopt" the standards if they desire.

Myth **The federal government will take over the Common Core State Standard Initiative.**

REALITY
The Initiative is and will remain a state-led effort. The NGA and CCSSO are committed to developing a long-term governance structure with leadership from governors, chief state school officers, and other state policy makers

Myth **The standards are the same as a national curriculum.**

REALITY The standards are NOT curriculum. The standards are statements that clearly describe the goals and expectations for learning. They describe the skills and knowledge students need to be successful in college or the workplace. Decisions about curriculum are at the local levels – the schools, principals, and superintendents. Teachers will continue to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the needs of students in their classrooms.

Myth **The standards are not rigorous and bring all states down to the lowest common denominator.**

REALITY The standards were designed specifically to prepare all children for success in college or their careers. No state has lowered its academic standards. The standards were informed by the best and highest standards in the country, the highest international standards, and evidence and expertise about educational outcomes.

The adoption of CCSS is critically important to our nation. CCSS set the bar high for all students so they are equipped to succeed in our highly competitive global economy. CCSS adoption is particularly important to our mobile military-connected students as they move from state to state and district to district during their kindergarten through high school years. This effort to address the issue of common standards and emphasize high expectation is one all parents should welcome and support. More information about the standards and facts responding to the many myths that surround them can be found at **www.corestandards.org**

CCSS *Adoption Status* by State

Alabama
- 23,804
- Nov. 18, 2010
- PARCC/Smarter Balanced

Alaska
- 17,190

Arizona
- 20,120
- June 28, 2010
- PARCC

Arkansas
- 11,505
- July 12, 2010
- PARCC

California
- 97,986
- Aug. 2, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Colorado
- 36,031
- Aug. 2, 2010
- PARCC/Smarter Balanced

Connecticut
- 6,262
- July 7, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Delaware
- 5,043
- Aug. 19, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

District of Columbia
- 14,342
- July 22, 2010
- PARCC

Florida
- 55,319
- July 27, 2010
- PARCC

Georgia
- 63,747
- July 8, 2010
- PARCC

Hawaii
- 31,854
- June 18, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Idaho
- 6,278
- Jan. 24, 2011
- Smarter Balanced

Illinois
- 22,202
- June 24, 2010
- PARCC

Indiana
- 14,334
- Aug. 3, 2010
- PARCC

Iowa
- 7,930
- July 29, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Kansas
- 25,756
- Oct. 12, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Kentucky
- 39,380
- Feb. 10, 2010
- PARCC

Kentucky was the first state to implement CCSS

Louisiana
- 26,305
- July 1, 2010
- PARCC

Maine
- 3,340
- April 4, 2011
- Smarter Balanced

Maryland
- 30,505
- June 22, 2010
- PARCC

Massachusetts
- 11,149
- July 21, 2010
- PARCC

Michigan
- 13,550
- June 15, 2010
- Smarter Balanced

Minnesota
- 11,204

The 2010 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in English and Language Arts uses the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects as a base.

Mississippi
- 19,197
- June 28, 2010
- PARCC

Total number of school-aged military-connected children: **1,207,628**

A *Student's* Perspective *Andrew Parry*

"Although I excelled in academics I found myself 'out of sync' with my classes."

I spent my whole childhood as a military child, so moving around was a pretty common occurrence. In fact, I moved 12 times by my 18th birthday, which included attending four different high schools. While my situation is certainly not unique, it was not without its challenges. Because of the frequent moves and school changes I had to take frequent assessments to determine where I "belonged" in my new classes. The "advanced" reading group in one school may have been the equivalent of the "average" group in the next school I attended. In high school the challenges were even greater. Although I excelled in academics I found myself "out of sync"

"For the sake of all children, it is imperative that the knowledge and skills taught from kindergarten through high school be both consistent from state to state as well as challenging."

with my classes. In English I found myself re-reading books in the 10th and 11th grade that I had read in 9th grade. Additionally, there were books my senior year that, according to my teacher, I SHOULD have read, but didn't because they weren't part of the curriculum at my past schools. Math proved to be even more difficult. I never took a class in geometry but was expected to know it my sophomore year. This required extra effort on my part to "catch up" with the rest of the class or risk falling further behind. My senior year I found myself in a freshman geography class that was required for graduation.

I am confident there are other military children who experience the same issues I faced. That is why the implementation of Common Core State Standards is beneficial to families that must relocate frequently. No longer will kids risk falling behind because of a parent's reassignment. The curriculum, while challenging, is also uniform from state to state, ensuring that military children are afforded the same opportunities as their peers and that, regardless of where they graduate from high school, they are prepared for either college or the workforce. With the support of the Military Child Education Coalition, this issue and its importance to military-connected students can get the necessary attention of state governments and school systems. More importantly, the effort will help ensure that all children leave high school ready for the next phase in their life whether that is college, working, or both.

Although I succeeded in school without Common Core Standards in place, I had a fair number of challenges. Fellow students not well-equipped to handle the frequent changes struggled more. For the sake of all children, it is imperative that the knowledge and skills taught from kindergarten through high school be both consistent from state to state as well as challenging.

Does It Add Up for Military Families?

1 military family +1 change of duty station

A **change** of address, **change** of school and teachers,

Change of friends, **change** of place of worship, **change** of weather, **change** of scenery

Change of schedules, **change** of neighborhood, **change** of sports, and **change** of routine

For our nation's 2 million military connected children these changes happen an average of 6-9 times over the course of their school years. But what if, just what if, the impact of one of these changes is lessened for every move? That possibility is very real and attainable with passage of the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core Standards Initiative's mission is to "provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected

A *Parent's* Perspective

Zoe Trautman

As a parent of military-connected children and a veteran of 12 global and interstate relocations, our family navigated its share of turbulent waters when it came to changing schools. Research tells me that my children were typical among their peers. They were in a group of nearly 1.1 million military-connected students with parents who are Active Duty, National Guard or Reserves, 80% of whom attend public school systems in the United States. They also move 3 times more frequently than their civilian classmates and change schools an average of 6 to 9 times before graduation. For the most part, my children embraced each transition – although my son had to work hard at putting a good face on his third high school in four years.

That is why it is with a grateful heart that I follow the progress of a grant from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). Through this partnership, the MCEC will be a champion for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that will help ensure that all students are receiving a high quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state, as preparation for future success at work or in higher education. CCSS are designed to provide a clear, rigorous set of shared goals and expectations for the knowledge and skills that will help all students.

This predictability is singularly critical for our military-connected students who currently are challenged with adapting and flexing as they move through each state's unique curriculum, specific materials, requirements, and assessment formats. Often this means repeating courses or missing concepts altogether, given that the scope and sequence of core subjects differs from state to state. Math, in particular, can present these challenges at all grade levels.

So while our military families negotiate the choppy seas of change that characterize their lives, changes resulting from military assignments, or a parent's deployment, they need the reassurance that their children's educational progress will not suffer – no matter where they are.

An *Administrator's* Perspective

Karol Carlisle

to learn, so teachers and parents know that they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real work, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy." So for every child across the United States, these rigorous expectations for learning provide consistent and predictable learning goals. Schools and teachers continue to make decisions about how lessons are presented, keeping intact the art of teaching.

From my experience as a former principal of an elementary school situated on a large military installation, military families hold their children's education in high regard, keeping that one item at the center of their most critical decisions. Decisions such as keeping the family together at the same duty station, or separating the family while the service member moves to the next duty station, or whether or not to remain in the military. Hundreds of our conversations centered on the differences they experienced in school expectations, curriculums, textbooks, etc. and the dramatic effect these fluctuations placed on their children.

"Like the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children that provides common guidelines for states to follow in handling issues that impact children of military families as they transition between schools, the rigor of the proposed academic Common Core Standards will be a benefit to military dependent students everywhere," said USAAC Commanding General, LT. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley. "Moreover, I fully agree with Secretary of Education Duncan when he says there is no more important work than preparing our students to success in the global economy. Our national security as well as our national economy hinge upon education and our ability to adapt to global changes. National standards will raise the bar in education, and ultimately, serve our Nation by producing high school graduates fully prepared for higher education, the military, or the workforce."

As our service members continually sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy, passage of Common Core State Standards afford military families one less change to face in their transitions and add one more item of familiarity to their world.

There are no *miracles*, but there are *teachers*:

An educator's view on the Common Core

BY DARREN BURRIS

ASK 10 FIFTH-GRADE TEACHERS how they teach fractions, and you'll probably get 10 different answers. That's the beauty of teaching: part art, part science, all creativity.

Will Common Core State Standards change that? Will we suddenly have a nation of automatons at the front of our classrooms, delivering identical lessons?

As a teacher, I think not. To me, the Common Core represents an empowering opportunity for teachers to collaborate, exchange best practices, and share differing curricula—because a common set of standards is not the same thing as a common curriculum.

Darren Burris (Photo by Kate Goldenheim)

A report recently released by the Brookings Institution, *The 2012 Brown Center Report on American Education*, would have us believe otherwise. The report begins with this oversimplification (unfortunately perpetuated in a blog post by Peter Wood on *The Chronicle of Higher Education*) and repeats it throughout: "The push for common education standards argues that all American students should study a common curriculum..."

Curriculum is informed by standards, not determined by them. By equating a set of standards with the curricular experiences created by teachers for their students, you immediately undercut the craft of teaching. This flawed approach to understanding the Common Core amounts to an elimination of the power of the classroom.

Consider this Common Core State Standard from fifth-grade mathematics:

5.NF.1 *Add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators (including mixed numbers) by replacing given fractions with equivalent fractions in such a way as to produce an equivalent sum or difference of fractions with like denominators. For example, 2/3 + 5/4 = 8/12 + 15/12 = 23/12. (In general, a/b + c/d = (ad + bc)/bd).*

Fifth-grade teachers across the country will determine what set of classroom experiences will allow students to fully master this standard. How many ways could 5.NF.1 be experienced?

Well... a teacher could organize students in rows and directly instruct them on how to add and subtract fractions by filling the board with examples and having students complete worksheets at their desks.

Or a teacher could provide a pair of students with fraction manipulatives and ask them to create equivalent fractions for a half, a third, a fourth, and a fifth. After this, students could be asked to add fractions with different denominators using the manipulatives.

A teacher could ask students to reflect on how they spent their time over the weekend and then to determine what fraction they spent sleeping, eating, playing, gaming, or texting. What fraction of the time was spent eating and sleeping? How did you figure that out? How did you get your common denominator? How could you add 2/3 + 5/4?

Or a teacher could have students rotate through stations where they look up different words from the standard and make flashcards, listen to a short lesson online, and interact with a virtual applet that explores the topic. This set of independent experiences could fuel a classroom discussion that formalizes the process of adding and subtracting fractions with unlike denominators.

Not one of these lessons looks alike, and the student experiences would be quite distinct. But because as teachers, we are designing lesson plans to teach the same standard, we have an unprecedented opportunity to share our experiences about what's working, how it's working, with whom it's working, and which areas of growth still need support.

Artwork by Sara Noemi, Grade 7 | Ramey School, Aguadilla, Puerto Rico | DoDEA

The Brookings Institution report misses the significant difference between the old standards and the new: the Common Core State Standards are shared in common. True collaboration among teachers could be the single most important result of common standards—if we seize the opportunity.

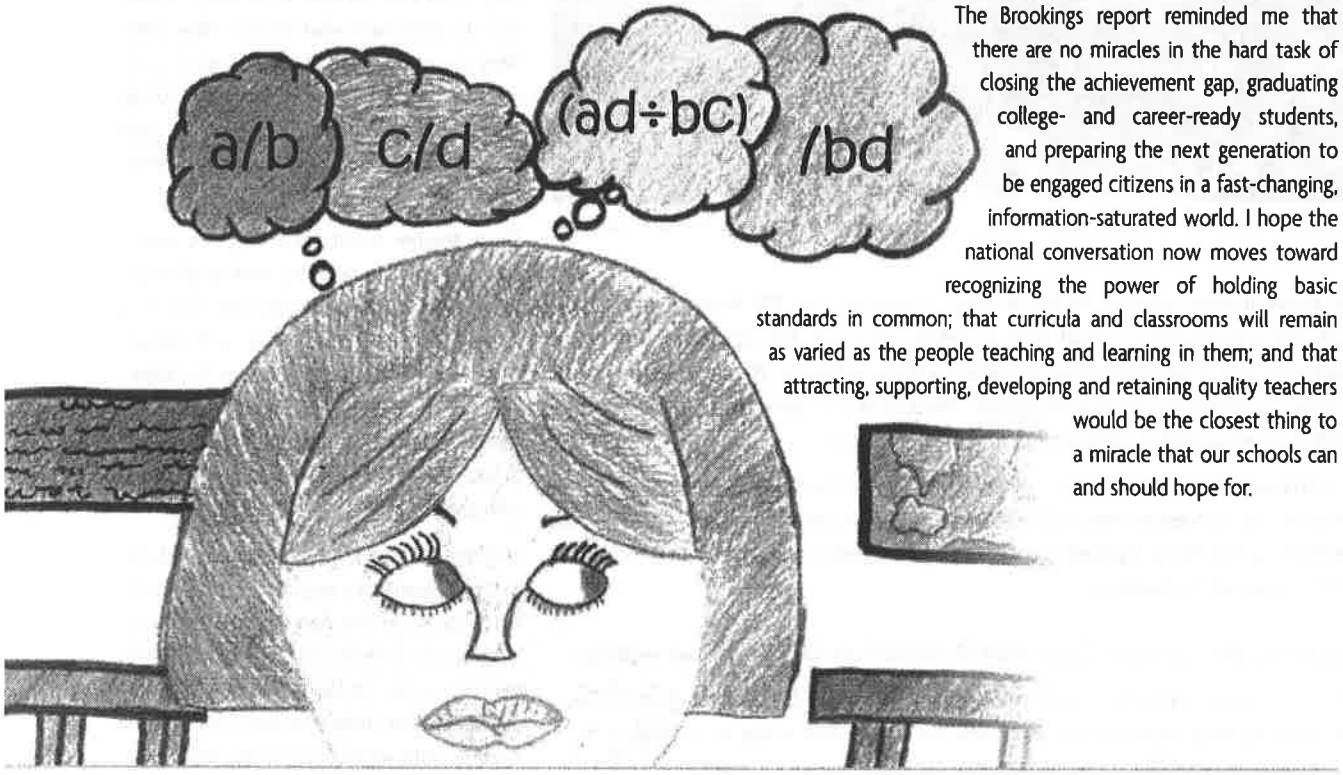
As we craft our curricula from these common standards, we can connect with the best ideas from around the country to inform how we bring the standards to life in our classrooms. We should feel empowered to use evolving technologies to go beyond our classrooms, schools, districts, and even states and to start crafting and sharing curricula and experiences in order to serve all students and families well.

The Brookings report's headline-grabbing finding—that standards will not, on their own, improve student achievement—is nothing new. It only confirms what teachers have known since the standards movement gained steam in the 90s: standards will not in and of themselves improve achievement. Well-led collections of committed and effective teachers, not standards, transform schools.

As Kathleen Porter-Magee states in her critique of the Brookings report, "[S]etting standards alone does very little, but... thoughtfully and faithfully implemented rigorous curricula can move the achievement needle, sometimes dramatically."

So the report should not be taken as evidence that standards are useless, or that the Common Core State Standards are a step in the wrong direction. In fact, I find its message ultimately empowering for teachers if we write ourselves into it — empowering *if*:

1. We marshal the experiences and lessons learned from the classroom and bring them to bear on the national conversation about education reform.
2. We see this as an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration and the sharing of best practices.
3. We turn the conversation toward enabling and supporting quality teaching in our schools.
4. We connect the K-12 conversation to the demands of college and the workforce.



The Brookings report reminded me that there are no miracles in the hard task of closing the achievement gap, graduating college- and career-ready students, and preparing the next generation to be engaged citizens in a fast-changing, information-saturated world. I hope the national conversation now moves toward recognizing the power of holding basic standards in common; that curricula and classrooms will remain as varied as the people teaching and learning in them; and that attracting, supporting, developing and retaining quality teachers would be the closest thing to a miracle that our schools can and should hope for.

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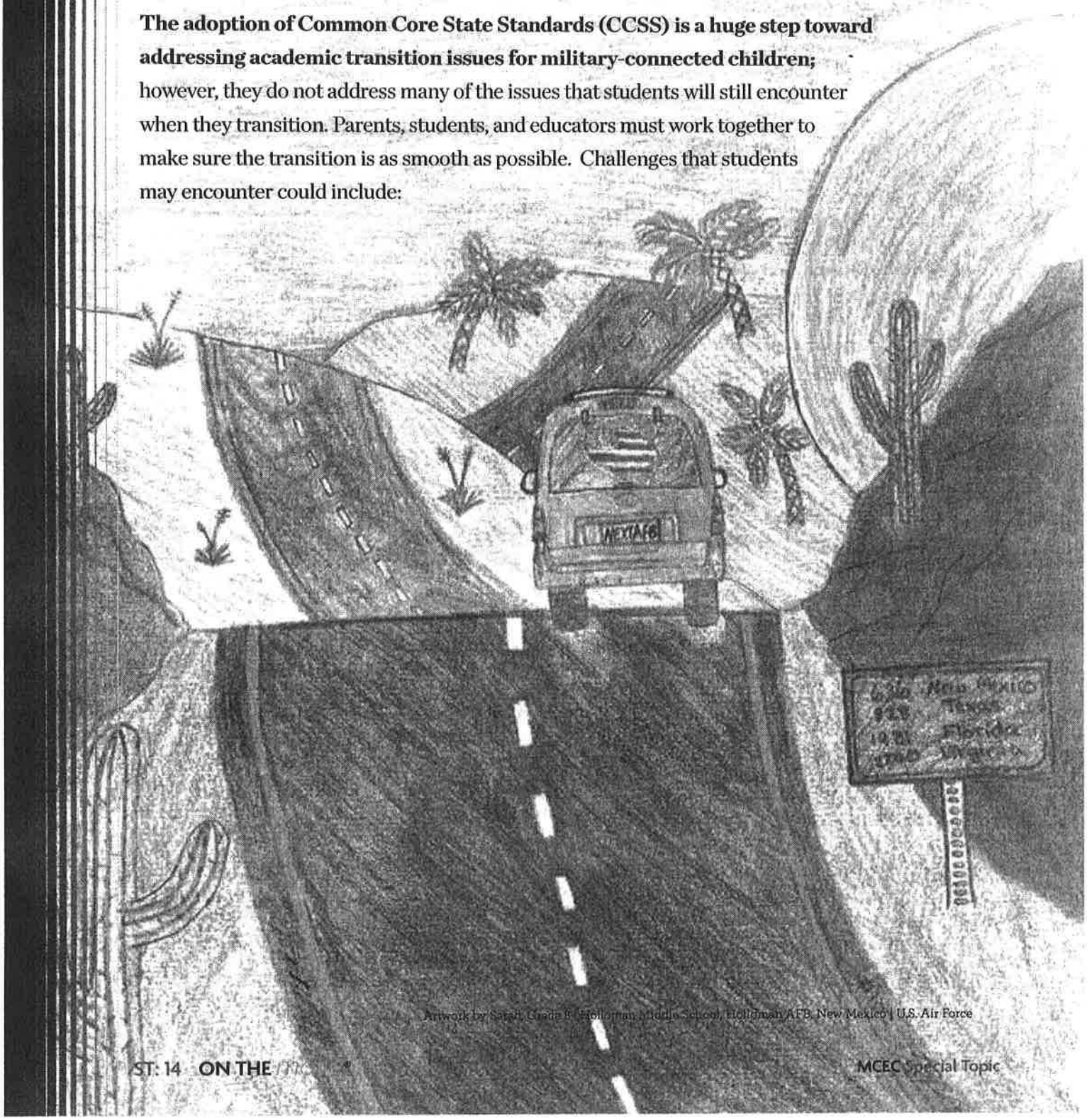
Common Core Standards:

One *Step* on the Road to Smooth

The adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a huge step toward addressing academic transition issues for military-connected children; however, they do not address many of the issues that students will still encounter when they transition. Parents, students, and educators must work together to make sure the transition is as smooth as possible. Challenges that students may encounter could include:



Artwork by Sarah, Grade 8 | Holloman Middle School, Holloman AFB, New Mexico | U.S. Air Force

CALENDARS

Even though schools may teach the same content, the school calendar may still look very different. The adoption of CCSS does not mean schools will have the same calendar. School calendars are inconsistent. Start dates, end dates, and mid-year break dates can vary considerably between different school districts and even within a district in the instances of different schedules or schools of choice. Start dates can range from early August to after Labor Day in September. If the school is on a year round calendar, this creates another range of dates, usually with school starting and ending in July. The semester break can also be a stumbling block, especially for high school students who take a final exam or end of course test for a class that is only one semester. The first semester may end prior to the winter holiday break or as late as mid-January. Military Families who move over the summer need to pay close attention to starting dates to ensure their children arrive, enroll, and are ready to start when the school year begins. Districts typically post the calendar for the upcoming school year as soon as it is available on their website. If the calendar is not available, call the district or campus office and ask for the start date. Do this early so you have this information when you start planning your move.

SCHEDULES

The difference between a block schedule and traditional schedule[1] will always create transitioning challenges; these challenges are exacerbated if a student moves during a semester. Moving a student between a traditional and block schedule and vice versa can cause loss of credit. Even though this loss may be mitigated by credit recovery classes, it still contributes to a bumpy transition, particularly for the secondary student. If possible, plan your moving date to coincide with the end of a semester. If you have a high school student, make sure you have course descriptions or a syllabus for his classes to assist the receiving school counselor with placing your student. Make an appointment with the new school counselor as soon as you have moving dates in place.

INTERPRETATION of GRADES

CCSS do not address how students are graded or what type of grading system is used. When a student moves, the receiving school will need to interpret a student's grades in a manner that is comparable to its system. "Weighted" grades, a higher grade given for an advanced course, may present challenges. Take, for example, a student who earns a "B" in an advanced placement course where grades are not weighted and this "B" is worth three points on a four point system grading system. The student then moves to a school where advanced courses are weighted, and a "B" in an advanced placement course is worth four points on the same four point system. This student may or may not receive the extra point toward his grade point average when he moves to the new school. A percentage grade is usually easier to interpret, but a 90% may be an "A" in one school and a "B" in another school. Make sure you have a copy of the sending school's grading scale and policy.

OPPORTUNITIES to PARTICIPATE in SPECIAL PROGRAMS or EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

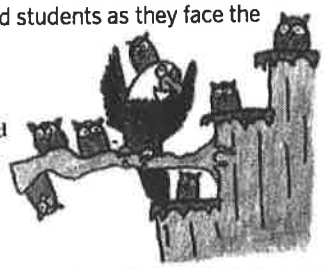
Mobile students frequently miss cut-off dates for applying for special programs or do not have the necessary pre-requisite coursework to take advantage of special academic opportunities. Mobility may also impact a student's ability to participate in extracurricular activities. Although many districts have policies in place to accommodate the military-connected student, access to these types of programs may be limited. Students who may participate in special programs, like gifted and talented programs, may have to be retested and meet a new set of qualifications to continue participation in these programs. Parents who are proactive in researching programs as soon as they know they are moving will have a better chance of getting their children access to these opportunities.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL IMPLICATIONS of TRANSITION

Moving is always difficult. Finding a way to fit in and make new social connections will always be the greatest challenge for some military-connected children. Find out if your child's new school has an MCEC *Student 2 Student* (S2S) or *Junior Student 2 Student* (JS2S) program. These programs are designed to help your students get connected and assimilate quickly at their new school.

The implementation of CCSS will certainly address many of the academic issues that mobile students have encountered in the past, but there are still educational barriers for mobile students. The implementation of CCSS does not address policies for placement in special programs, access to services for a student with special needs, or the ability to participate in an extracurricular activity when a student moves after a deadline to qualify for programs, services, or activities. Kids are kids, and some of them will always struggle and need extra support finding a way to fit in at a new location. The implementation of CCSS mitigates some of the transition issues related to academics such as not having learned a specific skill that is a building block for another skill, repeating material, and finding disparity in standards and expectations. CCSS create an academic environment in which students know what to expect and allow them to feel more prepared to handle the academic challenges no matter where they go, alleviating that stress and allowing students an opportunity to focus on finding their niche in their new school.

The adoption and implementation of CCSS are positive steps in the right direction to easing academic transitions for the military-connected child, but there is still work to be done to support the 1.2 million military-connected students as they face the uncertainty of school transitions.



1 Scheduling at high school may be block, alternating block, or traditional. Block schedules are sometimes referred to as accelerated or four-by-four block schedule in which students take four, 90-minute classes a day, every day, for one semester. The alternating, or alternative block, is where students have an extended time in each class, usually 90 minutes, and go to four classes on one day and four additional classes on the alternating day. The days are frequently identified as A/B days or two colors such as Black/Gold days. In a traditional schedule, students take six to eight classes for the entire year.

Resources

www.SchoolQuest.org
SchoolQuest is an educational resource tool from the Military Child Education Coalition. Although our primary audience includes military students and their parents, SchoolQuest is well-suited to anyone who is "questing" information about schools, college and workplace readiness, transition, etc.

www.parcconline.org

www.smarterbalanced.org

www.epiconline.org/files/pdf/LiningUp-FullReport.pdf

www.corestandards.org

Aunt Peggie
Do you have questions about military-connected students and education? Aunt Peggie has the answers! She and her team would like to hear from you! www.militarychild.org/ask-aunt-peggie

Peggie Watson – Aunt Peggie – is an expert researcher for the MCEC and serves as a trusted resource for families and educators around the world. She has answered thousands of e-mails over the years.

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