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## OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

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February 3, 2022

**Maryland General Assembly  
Senate Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs  
11 Bladen Street Room 2 West Wing  
Annapolis, MD 21401**

**Senator Paul G. Pinsky  
Chair**

**Remarks of  
Christopher R. Arnold  
Northeast Region Liaison  
United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office**

**Support of: Senate Bill 234 – Establishing the Purple Star Schools Program to recognize public schools that provide strong services and support for military-connected students and their families; and authorizing a public school to partner with the county board to fulfill certain requirements to qualify as a Purple Star School under the Act.**

### **Testimony**

Honorable co-chairs and distinguished members of the Ways and Means Committee, the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in Senate Bill 234, by Senator Michael A. Jackson, which addresses the need to alleviate the challenges military-connected students face due to constant moves during their K-12 education years and beyond.

I am Christopher Arnold, the Northeast Region Liaison at the United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for our troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance.

With each move, military service members face numerous challenges as they bring their spouses and children to resettle into new communities and attend new schools. Mobile military students face issues such as gaps and overlaps in curriculum, different graduation requirements, course placement disruption, and many other hurdles when changing schools. Besides the academic issues, these students also face social and emotional challenges of relocation, such as leaving supportive social networks and activities, to start new again.

Senate Bill 234 will help schools aggregate and centralize knowledge so that critical information is easily accessible to students, families, faculty and staff by creating a statewide recognition program for military-friendly schools which demonstrate a major commitment to students and families connected to our nation's military.

Designated schools have met specific state designed requirements to support the unique situations facing military students and their families. The legislation gives Maryland the potential to build upon its robust network of local, state, and national stakeholders and cultivate statewide competency in the area of military-connected student transition, offering schools the opportunity to demonstrate their cultural fluency to parents and families.

The Department is hopeful the Old Line State will soon join the twenty-eight (28) states that have established a statewide policy utilizing the approach set forth in Senate Bill 234 since 2017. A study of four such programs by the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University reported positive impacts for military readiness and retention following recognition of the capacity of schools and districts to serve military-connected students and families and helping families identify the schools and districts that are best prepared to meet their needs.<sup>1</sup>

While the majority of these districts already had programming in place for military-connected students before seeking a formal designation, staff and faculty indicated “they have benefitted from the ... application process and the encouragement to refine and expand programming related to the program designation requirements.”<sup>2</sup>

As our military members and their families move from state to state, providing for a smooth educational transition for their children is key to eliminating one of the largest concerns the parents face. The Department has identified as a best practice that states utilize their discretion to design and administer a statewide program for recognition of military schools, with efficaciousness through research-driven components, such as those set forth in Senate Bill 234:

- Designated Point-of-Contact: Maryland’s designated schools will appoint a staff member to act as a liaison between military families and the school, easing military-connected students’ enrollment and acclimation period;
- Professional Development: Maryland’s designated schools will train staff on the unique considerations for and needs of military-connected students;
- Dedicated Webpage: Maryland’s designated schools may develop a dedicated page on the school or district website with easily accessible information and resources for military-connected families;
- Transition Programs: Maryland’s designated schools will implement a transition program to welcome and socially acclimate incoming military-connected students; and
- Military Recognition Events: Maryland’s designated schools will host, at least once per year, programming and events to celebrate and honor service members and military-connected students, families, and community members.

Subject-matter experts from the education department and the Maryland Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission retain discretion, through rulemaking, to further tailor the program to local requirements and needs to ensure equal opportunity to earn the designation for schools with varying levels of resources. The clarity and precision derived from Maryland

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<sup>1</sup> Columbia Law School Center for Public Research and Leadership. *A Study of the Purple Star School Designation Program: Summary Report*. January 4, 2021. Retrieved from <https://cppl.law.columbia.edu/content/study-purple-star-school-designation-program-summary-report>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 1

communicating clear expectations and responsibilities at the state level ensures standardization and creates consistency as the program scales and families move more frequently between designated schools, even to and from other states.

The Department recommends a state-level implementation effort, with local opt-in for schools and districts, to ensure that designated schools act with reasonable fidelity, provide models for core components including feedback to applicant schools that miss the mark, develop measurement systems to evaluate programmatic impact, and leverage the program to establish formal networks.

As Maryland is already home to 35,531 active-duty service members, 14,979 active-duty spouses, 29,868 active-duty children, 26,516 National Guard and reserve members, 11,325 National Guard and reserve spouses and 17,573 National Guard and reserve children as of 2022, it has the benefit of being able to draw upon existing expertise and engagement with existing stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> The policy proposed by Senate Bill 234 also creates an opportunity for military-impacted schools to bridge the gap between educators and evaluators of granular K-12 metrics utilized in basing decisions by the military services, such as the Department of the Air Force.<sup>4</sup>

In closing, let me say that we are grateful to Senator Jackson for helping shepherd this important legislation through the Maryland Senate, as well to the Veterans Caucus. On behalf of the Department of Defense, we thank you for considering the policies articulated in Senate Bill 234.

Yours etc.,

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<sup>3</sup> DMDC, Dec. 31, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission. *2020 Annual Business Meeting Minutes*. p. 13. Thursday, October 1, 2020. [https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-ABM-MINUTES\\_DAY1-DRAFT.pdf](https://mic3.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-ABM-MINUTES_DAY1-DRAFT.pdf)