
PARTNERS IN PROMISE’S MILITARY SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The average military child changes schools three times more than their civilian counterparts, experiencing gaps in education delivery.ⁱ However, the issues faced by special needs families are not as straightforward and largely undocumented. In order to examine what military families with children in special education are experiencing the grassroots organization, Partners in PROMISE conducted its second annual Military Special Education Survey. The purpose of the survey was to examine what aspects of the military lifestyle have an impact on military special education children’s ability to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The outcome measured was the absence of (in)formal complaint and/or due process filing by military families. Numerous variables were examined including location, military career level, branch of service, number of military moves, Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) enrollment, and special needs diagnosis. Of the six primary independent variables, two produced statistically significant results.

Military families with children who have special needs are less likely to file complaints based on type of cited disability and more likely to file based on their military career level. Secondary findings showed that mandatory familiarity with EFMP and enrollment status had an impact on the special education experience. The key takeaway from Partners in PROMISE’s 2021 Military Special Education Survey is that the choice to file a complaint does not follow a geographical, economic, or logistical pattern. Families who choose to file do so despite, not because of, external circumstances. Additional study is needed with a focus on military families citing poor experiences who do not choose to file complaints. It is those experiences that may uncover how the circumstances associated with the military lifestyle impact the delivery of a free and appropriate public education.

BACKGROUND

The transient military lifestyle creates many challenges with providing consistency in education for servicemember’s childrenⁱⁱ. Additional variables stand to further complicate the transitions for military families with children with special needs. Although there are umbrella protections under federal and state laws, many military families are reporting that school districts are not providing the minimum support and services mandated by law.ⁱⁱⁱ What is unknown is whether these struggles are related to aspects of the military lifestyle or simply highlighting service disparities as military families move across state lines^{iv} more than civilian families.

Educating children with diagnosed disabilities hinges upon a child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), created to allow access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) through the provision of specific and measurable goals and accommodations. IEPs can vary drastically



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from one student to another and one school district to the next. A student's IEP is the foundation for their education and is based on their individual needs, regardless of a child's gender, race, family income or school district. When a student moves to a new location it is at the discretion of the receiving school district to accept or reject the existing IEP (Figure 8). When transfers cross state lines school districts have the ability to require their own evaluation, restarting the lengthy process (Figure 9) If the school district proposes changes to an IEP or denies granting an IEP parents have the ability to reject the school's proposal by pursuing due process.

The decision to file for due process comes after a back and forth negotiation with members of a student's IEP "Team" that is comprised of the parent, general education teacher, special education teacher, public agency representative, someone who can interpret implications of evaluation results, and optional attendees include the child and any providers.^v While IDEA requires states hold an initial IEP meeting within 30 days, it does not mandate that states adhere to a specific timeline to establish a new IEP, rather that states do this in a "reasonable period of time."^{vi} Military parents must have the time, financial resources and emotional capacity to file for due process at their current duty station. Although states collect data on special education complaint filing they do not collect data on military families. Therefore it is unclear if military parents are more or less likely to file and if the military lifestyle has an impact on the receipt of a free and appropriate public education.

The military is aware of the impact frequent moves have on service members and their families. The Department of Defense solution is their Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). There are currently 130,000^{vii} military-connected children (and adults) are enrolled in this mandatory program. The primary purpose of EFMP is to coordinate the duty assignment process, preventing families from being sent to an area without adequate medical service capacity. However, EFMP does not currently have a mechanism to screen duty locations based on education delivery and has only recently recognized the need to build policies in support of special education.^{viii} There is a gap in data collected on this population that requires additional study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"THERE MAY BE A LARGE AND RISING NUMBER OF FAMILIES THAT ARE INVISIBLE BECAUSE THEY ARE NEITHER TABULATED NOR TARGETED IN FAMILY READINESS EFFORTS."^{ix}

As a result of the individualized nature of special education, evaluations that attempt to study this population cover a variety of topics ranging from specific diagnoses to benchmark testing. There is little evidence based research available on those who have comorbid diagnoses^x. Research exists that examines outcomes based on countless individual disabilities, however these findings do not have high external validity.^{xi} When examining special education outcomes researchers disagree on the unit of measurement. Scanlon and Mellard and others focus on the benchmarks of standardized testing, and graduation and employment rates are the benchmark for evaluating student success.^{xii} Still others, like Turnbull and all examine on quality of life-centric measurements. Even these quality of life measurements are contested with experts debating if



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quality of life should be based on subjective satisfaction qualifiers or based on individual's expressed level of satisfaction.^{xiii}

Secondary data on special education due process filing is collected annually by the Department of Education as a legal requirement of Section 618 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This mandate requires states submit annual reports^{xiv} covering due process complaints, with breakdowns by age, standardized testing in math and reading, and other variables. However, due process filings by military-connected status are absent. The "military student identifier" (MSI) was a datapoint established as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. This MSI data relies upon military-connected families to self-report military status annually. This change was adopted on the heels of a 2011 Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommendation to collect better data on military-connected students.^{xv} While the expressed purpose of the MSI to "provide local educators with quality, actionable data concerning their military-connected students"^{xvi} many qualified schools^{xvii} utilize this data to apply for impact aid. These grants are available to schools that serve military-connected students with higher amounts going to those with special education needs and therefore the number and location of military-connected students can be tracked.^{xviii} However, the state disaggregated "report cards" detailing military-connected student outcomes based on the MSI are collected at the state level and can vary due to their non-regulatory status.^{xix}

Studies of the military population at large are abundant. Military families, as compared to active duty members themselves, are studied in a few key areas, military spouse employment, child care, suicide rates, and education^{xx}. Up-to-date family "pulse check"-style surveys are conducted frequently by military service nonprofit organizations with Blue Star Families being the most prolific surveyors of the population. Department of Defense (DoD) studies focus primarily on active duty service members. For instance, children and spouses are the subject of questions in order to determine how their stress levels impact active duty service member readiness^{xxi}.

Special education and the military coalesce in the EFM Program. However, because the program's role has largely been focused on the availability of medical services^{xxii}, evaluation questions that pertain to special education are largely nonexistent. The last survey to examine military special education and EFMP was conducted by GAO in 2012, entitled "MILITARY DEPENDENT STUDENTS: Better Oversight Needed to Improve Services for Children with Special Needs,"^{xxiii} relying upon focus group generated data. GAO conducted a follow up study in 2018, "DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program."^{xxiv} Using secondary data to inform its methodology, site visits were conducted at seven military installations, focusing on program evaluation. Both evaluations show little attention has been paid to special education services provided by public school systems.

As a result of a lack of information and support, four military spouses formed a grassroots organization, Partners in PROMISE (Protecting the Rights of Military children in Special Education). They conducted an informal Military Special Education 2020 Survey ([Figure 10](#)) in November 2019. Qualitative results include parents comparing positive and negative school experiences. And both qualitative and quantitative data reveal overwhelmingly negative responses. Only three percent relate positive public school experiences. The remaining 97 percent of families relate some or all negative experiences. The primary qualitative finding reveals that the longer families serve in the military and the more moves they experienced, the



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more frequently they reported significant challenges in ensuring their child receives FAPE. Although, the findings provided insights into an understudied community, the 2020 survey instrument includes leading questions, biasing the data.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Given this lack of information and desire to improve the Exceptional Family Member Program and special education delivery for military connected students, our primary focus to answer the following research question: What aspects of the military lifestyle increase the likelihood of military special education families filing official, unofficial, and/or due process complaints against their child’s school district?

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT & METHODOLOGY

The unit of analysis was the number of military families who filed complaints with a school district. The total EFMP population sits around 140,000 individuals. There were 456 family responses, which was more than twice the response collected from last year’s annual grassroots survey. The survey was comprised of 65 questions and took roughly 10 minutes to complete with a 45 percent completion rate. Because the distribution strategy focused on a combination of purposeful and snowball distribution, which is the military family nonprofit standard, it is hard to measure the response rate. The survey was sent via direct email campaign to 373 recipients. Of these recipients, not all members of the distribution were eligible survey participants, with some being legislative, nonprofit, and/or press contacts. Of this subscription list at least 171 email addresses represented eligible survey participants. Partners in PROMISE also relied upon other military family community nonprofits and leaders to distribute the survey. Additionally participants were incentivized to complete the survey by offering an hour of pro bono legal services for up to five respondents.

Because the military population is diverse and located throughout the world, the most effective and common data collection instruments are online surveys. The military can survey active duty service members, but does not collect data directly from family members. Because no there was no existing secondary data to analyze, Partners in PROMISE drafted its own data collection instrument. The survey covered many topics, from EFMP wait times, Likert scale public vs. private school satisfaction questions, number of military moves, rank data, and out of pocket special education costs.

Respondents represented a representative sampling of the overall military

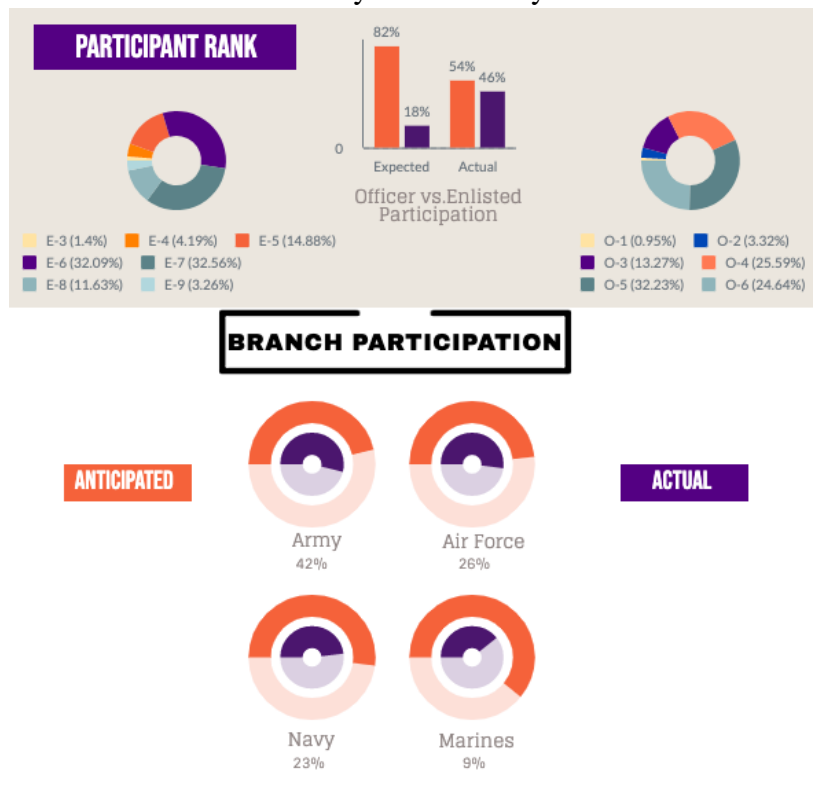


Figure 1



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population. All service branches were represented. Low participation rates by Marine families were interesting, given the positive reputation of their EFM Program^{xxv}. Officer families represented a greater than expected proportion of respondents. However, this phenomenon of low response rate from younger members of the military population has been studied by Miller et. al and is fairly standard within the military survey community. All in all the overall survey population was a large enough to be considered a representative sampling.

In order to analyze these categorical variables, numerous Chi Square tests were conducted via SPSS with a special focus placed upon the relationship between the dependent variable, EFMP enrollment status (multinomial variable) and a variety of military lifestyle factors (listed below).

- Location (nominal)
- Military career level/rank (ordinal)
- Number of military moves (ordinal)
- Special needs diagnosis (nominal)
- Branch of service (nominal)
- Number of children (ordinal)

In addition to examining the impact the independent variables had on the dependent variable, EFMP enrollment, I examined how a military family's EFMP enrollment status impacted other survey response questions.

- IEP status post PCS Move (multinomial)
- Being denied an IEP/504 (Binomial)
- Stress levels (Binomial)
- Paying out of pocket for special education services (Binomial)
- Desire to standardize EFMP across service branches (Binomial)

Chi Square was my preferred method of analysis, as it allowed an examination of the relationships between variables that have the propensity to impact the dependent variable, rather than simply examining the mean of responses.

FINDINGS

CLAIM FILING



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DEPENDENT Variable: Claim Filing

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>	<i>Statistics/Frequency Notes</i>
IV ₁ Military Career Level (Junior – Mid – Senior)	Ordinal	6.366	.041	Yes	Mean: 2.66 / Range: 2
IV _{2A} Special Needs Diagnosis – Speech/Language	Binomial	3.669	.055	No	Nothing of note
IV _{2B} Special Needs Diagnosis – Mental Health	Binomial	6.331	.012	Yes	Valid percentages: 84/16
IV _{2C} Special Needs Diagnosis – Autism	Binomial	5.695	.017	Yes	Nothing of note
IV ₃ Number of Military Moves	Ordinal	7.775	.169	No	Mean: 3.77 / Range: 5
IV ₄ EFMP Enrollment Status	Multinomial	3.830	.280	No	38% missing data
IV ₅ Branch of Service	Multinomial	4.693	.454	No	Nothing of note
IV ₆ High Military Population	Binomial	.283	.595	No	Nothing of note

Figure 2

Of the total survey population Given the overall lack of data collected on military children in special education and the multitude of nominal variables that create a diverse military experience this evaluation aimed to for an alpha of .05 percent, resulting in a 95 percent confidence level. The results examine both statistically significant findings as well as findings that warrant additional study.

1. Career Level: Military career level as a correlates with age and income. For this examination I aggregated E1-3, W1-2, and O-1-2 as “Junior” service members, with E4-E5, W3, and O3-4 as “Mid” and E6-9, W4-5, and O5-10 as “Senior” to track these more predictable lifestyle patterns. As rank, age and income increases, the more likely military members are to have children^{xxvi}. This resulted in a lower number of junior military member participants. Of the junior military families 75 percent have filed a complaint. This is significantly higher than mid and senior military members. Only 36 percent of mid-level and 32 percent of senior military members filed complaints, which was in line with the overall response breakdown. This junior military member filing pattern was statistically significant and implies that military family’s choice to file a complaint is not purely an economic one.
2. Type of Disability Diagnosis: Survey participants were asked to cite their child’s diagnoses. Of the 15 diagnoses listed on the data collection instrument, three produced statistically significant results. Of the 129 families citing an autism diagnosis 41.9 filed a claim as compared to the expected 34.7 percent (p=.017). Mental health factors like depressive or anxiety disorders filed 49.1 percent compared to the expected 34.7 percent (p=.012). Lastly speech or language impairment diagnosis were also more likely to file with 42.4 percent filing compared to the expect 34.7 percent (p=.055). Because of comorbidity of diagnosis it is important to no note that although statistically significant these findings cannot be considered decisive.
3. Frequency of Military “PCS” Moves: Although not a statistically significant finding, with a p-value of .169 the patterns that emerged were very telling. With every military move



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experienced the trendlines for filing for a complaint increased. However, those who did not file a complaint did not follow any perceivable pattern. Responses increased every other move. This may correspond to military deployment patterns, whereas deployable tours typically follow nondeployable tours in an alternating pattern. This abnormality warrants additional study. When aggregated to combine responses into low(0-1)/medium(2-3)/high (4+) number of military moves, those who experienced greater number of moves had higher rates of complaint filing. Although not statistically significant with a p-value of .364 the finding confirmed that moves have an impact on filing.

4. EFMP Enrollment: EFMP enrollment status resulted in a higher filing rate with 34.6 percent of those who are enrolled filing as compared to 28.6 percent for those who are not enrolled. Although the findings were not statistically significant ($p=.28$) it was an unexpected finding that requires additional study. It is also important to note those who responded that they did not know about EFMP were statistically more likely to file for due process, with 52 percent filing.
5. Branch of Service: While each branch has military installations throughout the country, and offer different EFMP support programming, this did not have a significant impact on filing with a significance score of .454.
6. Location: Location does not play a statistically significant role in military family filing special education complaints. When individual responses were examined no observable pattern emerged. Additionally when responses were aggregated by states with a high military population (California, Texas, Florida, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Hawaii and South Carolina) the expected results aligned with the actual results, with states with a high military population filing 36.5 percent compared to those with an average or low military population filing 32.9 percent. These findings produced a significance score of .595.

Of those who did not file for due process only 33.5 percent cited the reason they did not file was because they “did not need to file.” The majority (30 percent) of those who cited a reason to file indicated that abstained from filing to avoid putting extra stress on their family. Although not all variables showed statistically significant results, it important to note that data showed that military families are filing special education claims in predictable patterns.

EFMP ENROLLMENT

While many variables examined produced statistically significant results, not all findings presented material significance. Overall responses indicate that EFMP enrollment can be linked to a number of identifiable military and special education criteria.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: EFMP ENROLLMENT STATUS



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DEPENDENT Variable: EFMP Enrollment

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (p value)</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>
IV ₁ Military Career Level (Junior – Mid – Senior)	Ordinal	19.703	.001	Yes
IV ₂ Branch of Service	Multinomial	14.590	.148	No
IV ₃ High Military Population State	Binomial	1.270	.530	No
IV ₄ Special Needs Diagnosis – Autism	Multinomial	14.103	.001	Yes
IV ₅ Experienced a Military Move	Binomial	23.459	.000	Yes

Figure 3

1. **Military Career:** Of those who responded to both career level and EFMP enrollment status junior enlisted (E1 – 3) and junior officers (W1-2 & O1-3) were less likely to follow enrollment patterns of than those in their middle or late career. Most notably junior military members were the least familiar with EFMP enrollment criteria with 40 percent reporting that they were unfamiliar as compared to only 14 percent of mid-career participants or 5 percent of senior survey takers. The asymptotic significance score was .001 which indicates an alpha confidence level of 99 percent that career level has an impact on EFMP enrollment.
2. **Branch of Service:** this was not a statistically significant finding. There were only two Coast Guard respondents, because Coast Guard is not a DoD program, which may have had an effect on the overall distributions (p=.148).
3. **High Military Population:** This variable was calculated in the same manner as was the Claim Filing IV₆. Although these variables produced statistically significant results (p=.003) the data did not produce a practical finding. Distribution patterns were affected by low response rates for some states with higher responses from others.
4. **Special Needs Diagnosis:** Survey participants were asked to cite their child’s diagnoses. Of the 15 diagnoses listed on the data collection instrument, one produced statistically significant results. Of the 157 families citing an autism diagnosis who also responded to EFMP enrollment, 78 percent were enrolled in EFMP, higher than the expected distribution of 69 percent (p=.001). Because of comorbidity of diagnosis it is important to no note that although statistically significant these findings cannot be considered conclusive.
5. **Number of Military Moves:** Those who have never experienced a military move were more likely to not be enrolled in or to be unfamiliar with EFMP with 33 percent not enrolled and 27 percent unfamiliar with EFMP enrollment criteria. This finding is statistically significant exceeding the required alpha level (p = .000).



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DEPENDENT Variable: IEP Post PCS

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (p value)</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>
IV ₆ EFMP Enrollment	Multinomial	10.831	.029	Yes

Figure 4

IEP Post PCS: Participants were asked if their child’s previous IEP was accepted, changed or if they did not have a previous IEP after their most recent PCS move. Responses were grouped into three multinomial variables, those whose IEP was accepted without changes, those whose IEP was reduced/changed and those without an existing IEP. Of those who were not familiar with EFMP 68 percent did not have an existing IEP. This finding was statistically significant (p=.029).

DENIED AN IEP/504

DEPENDENT Variable: Denied IEP/504

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (p value)</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>
IV ₇ EFMP Enrollment	Binomial	12.661	.002	Yes

Figure 5

Denied an IEP/504: Participants were asked if they felt that their child had ever been denied an IEP/504 by a school district and were able to indicate yes or no. Of those who are not enrolled in EFMP or are unfamiliar with EFMP had higher than expected rates of feeling as though their child was denied an IEP/504. While those who were enrolled in EFMP 33 percent responded that they felt an IEP was denied this was compared to 52 percent who are not enrolled and 65 percent for those who are not familiar with EFMP eligibility. This was a statistically significant finding (p=.002).

PAYING OUT OF POCKET

DEPENDENT Variable: Paying out of Pocket

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (p value)</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>
IV ₈ EFMP Enrollment	Binomial	7.008	.030	Yes

Figure 6

Paying out of pocket: Those who reported not being enrolled in EFMP had a higher levels of paying out of pocket for special education services with 80 percent reporting that they had paid for private instruction. This was a statistically significant finding (p=.030).



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DIAGNOSIS NOT RECOGNIZED BY SCHOOL

DEPENDENT Variable: Diagnosis Not Recognized by School

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>Pearson Chi Square</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (p value)</i>	<i>Statistically Significant?</i>
IV ₉ EFMP Enrollment	Binomial	6.040	.049	Yes

Figure 7

Diagnosis not recognized: Families who chose to pay out of pocket for services were asked why they did so. Of 332 people who responded to both questions those who were not enrolled in EFMP had higher than expected percentages reporting that their child’s diagnosis was not recognized by the schools. This was a statistically significant finding (p=.049).

LIMITATIONS

The primary challenge to validity that was encountered was construct validity in the survey design. The primary focus in the design was to determine what variables contributed to the choice for a military family to file for due process. However, what it failed to capture was what military-specific variables may or may not have contributed to the choice not to file. Other validity limitations include the construct’s predictive ability. While some patterns emerged it is hard to tell if the findings are reliable because they can only be compared to the 2020 Partners in PROMISE survey. When comparing the two surveys the 2021 survey instrument replicated similar findings. External validity was limited by the lack of representative responses from enlisted service members. While enlisted families comprised the majority of responses they did not mirror the 4:1 enlisted to officer ratio.

This may have been related to data collection strategy, which relied upon a snowball method of distribution which is the military family nonprofit standard. This distribution method this opens the results to nonresponse bias as well as voluntary response bias. Additionally surveys that combine qualitative and quantitative data collection are open to the introduction of processing error during the data cleaning process as well as in the formation of the data collection instrument itself.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

CLAIM FILING

While a few variables produced statistically significant results the overall model lacks practical significance.^{xxvii} However, this by no means indicates that the results are inconclusive. Only 24 percent of military families surveyed described being very satisfied with their “best” public school experience. When the same families were asked to rank their worst public school experiences 57 percent reported they were very unsatisfied. The absence of a clear pattern of variables, combined with an overall negative special education experience requires additional research not only into *why* military families file, but *why they choose not to file*.



At the federal level further study is warranted in order to collect a more diverse sampling of data. I recommend that the Department of Education create a data point that tracks IDEA B and C filing by military status. This would be accomplished by utilizing the existing military child identifier. By not relying upon self-reported survey data we could more easily and comprehensively compare military family filing patterns to that of the overall civilian population.

A GAO report on special education concluded that “many parents feel they are at a disadvantage in a conflict with the school district due to an imbalance of power and so may be reluctant to engage in dispute resolution and take on the associated costs when they feel they are unlikely to prevail.”^{xxviii} This finding combined with a lack of measurable patterns; I recommend that Partners in PROMISE focuses its next annual Military Special Education Survey on those who have *not* filed. The conclusion of this evaluation is that the reasons and motivations *for* filing are more straightforward, with families choosing to file not because of, but despite their circumstances. However, the variables that impact the decision *not* to file may provide insights into the aspects of the military lifestyle that correspond with the reported dissatisfaction experienced by military families in their pursuit of a free and appropriate public education for their children with special needs.

EFMP ENROLLMENT

EFMP enrollment status is impacted by military lifestyle circumstances. Additionally EFMP enrollment status has a statistically significant impact on military special education factors like IEPs and paying for special education services. Because enrollment status has a relationship with special education delivery this should be a focus of additional study in order to determine if this relationship can be explained by other factors or if specific aspects of the program have played a role. Specifically studies should focus on how active involvement in the military community itself, rather than enrollment in EFMP plays a role in special education outcomes.

APPENDIX

FIGURE 8



Special Education: IEP process map

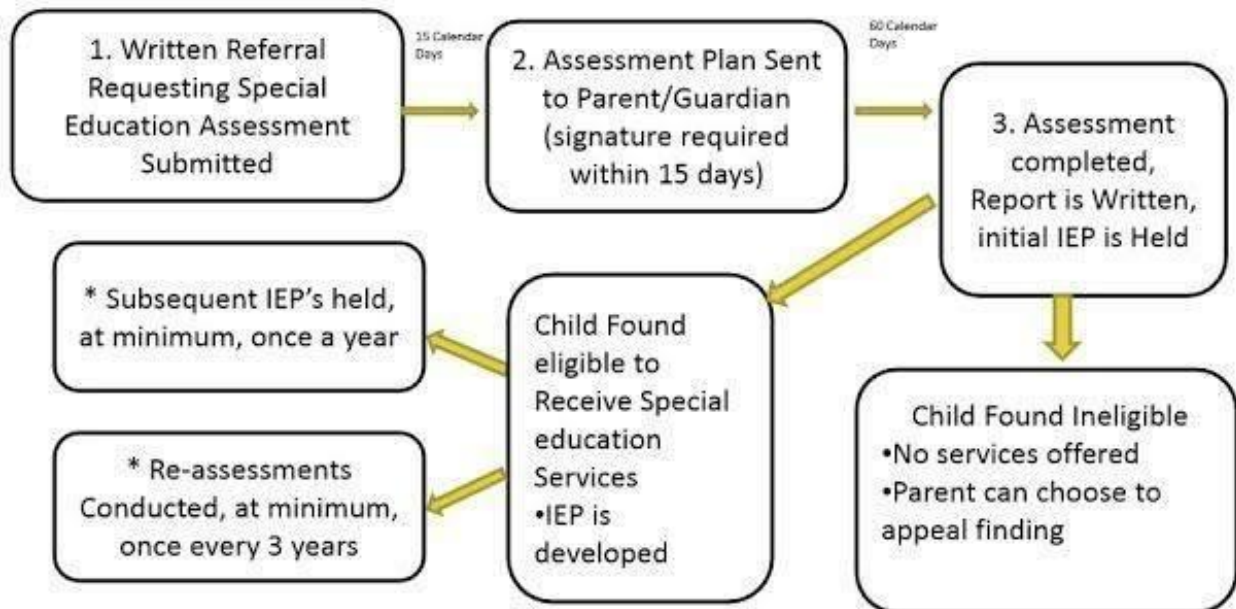


FIGURE 9^{xxix}



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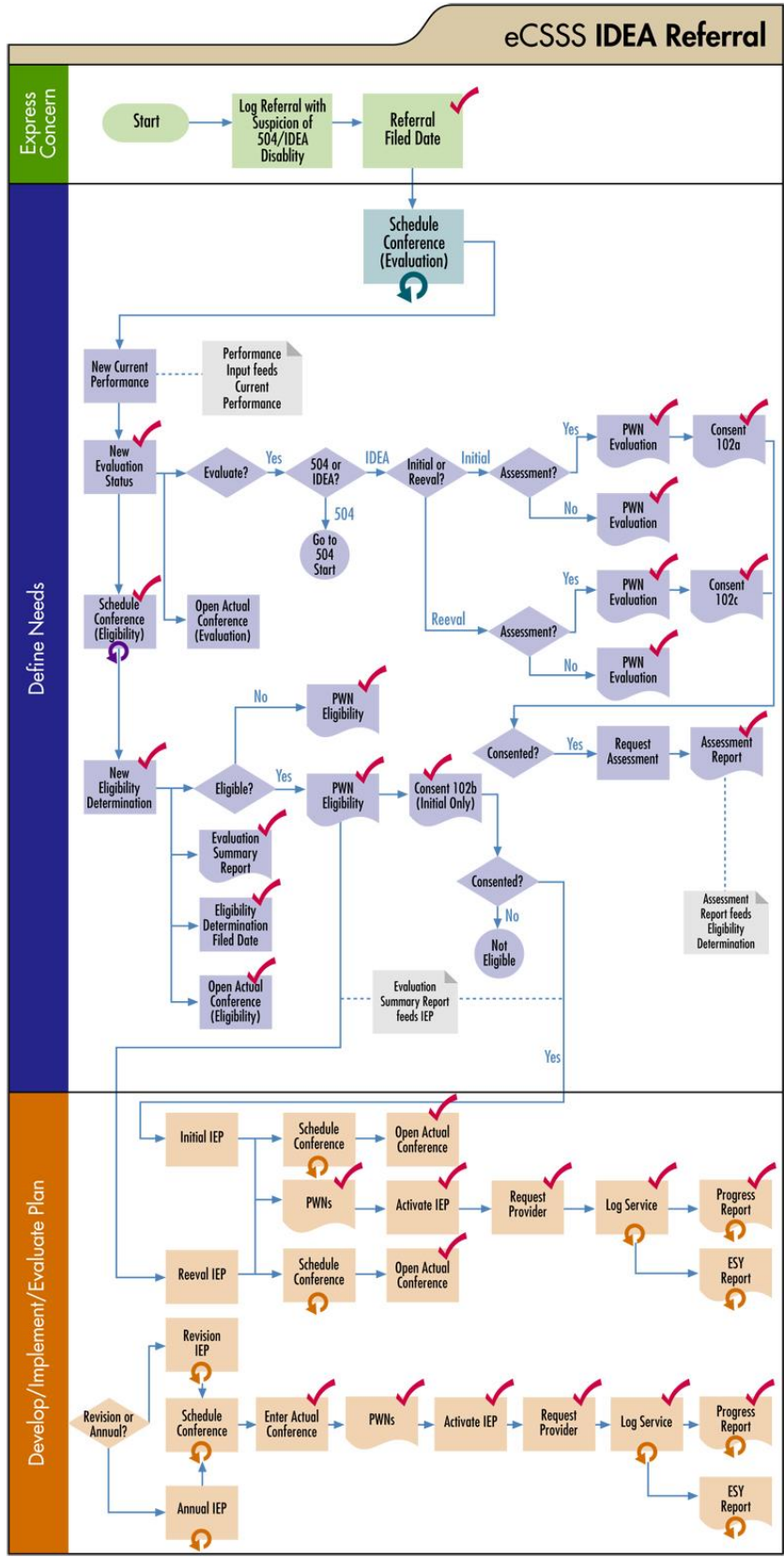
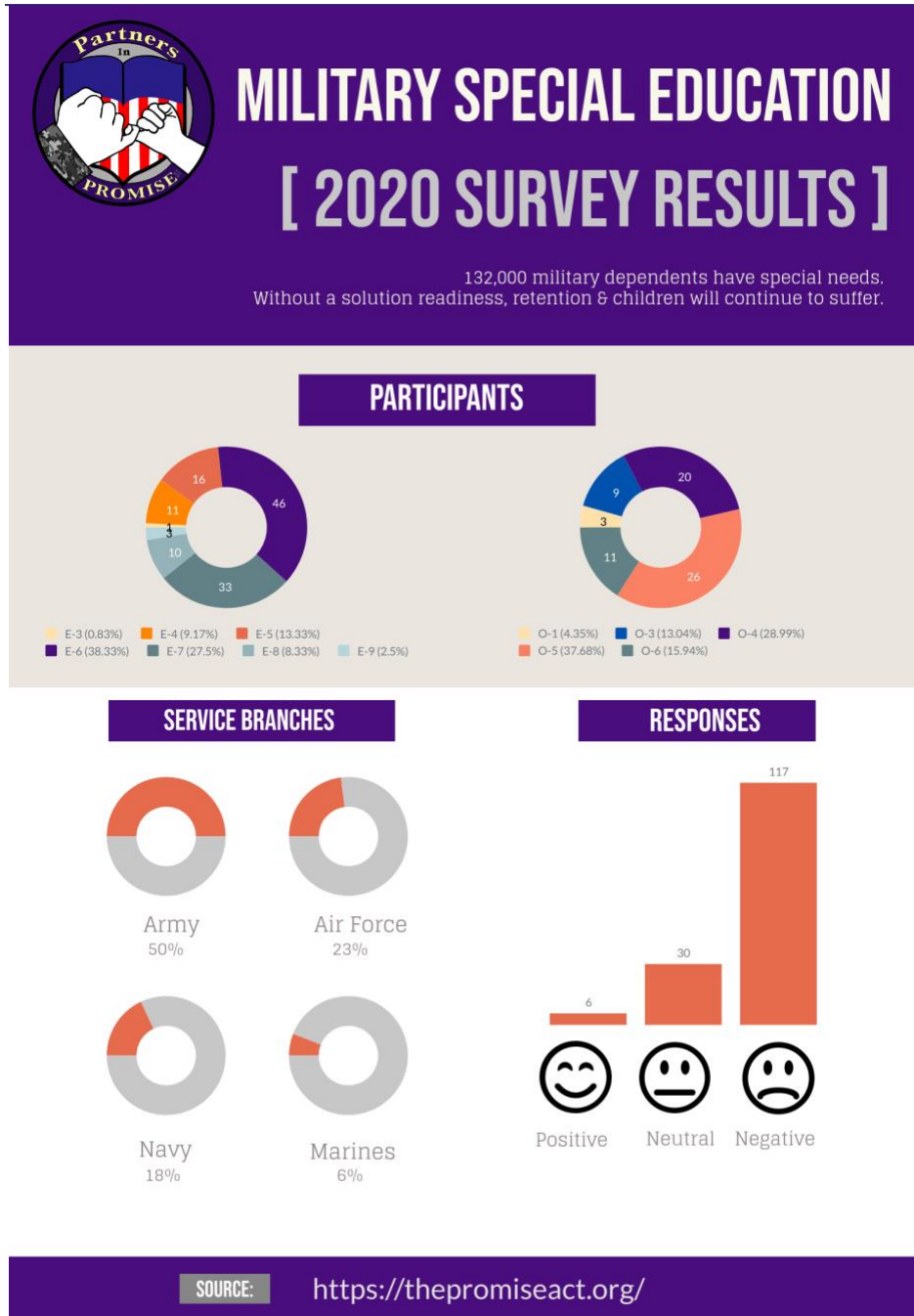




FIGURE 10



QUESTIONS?

All questions or requests for additional information should be directed to info@thepromiseact.org.



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