



18th October 2023

Re: Request to Defence and government to strengthen the current ADF children's education support programs

Dear Minister Clare,

As the Ministerially appointed group representing the interests of the families of current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members since 1986, Defence Families of Australia (DFA) are the official advisors to Government and the Department of Defence and the voice of over 84,000 families posted across Australia and internationally.

We advocate for ongoing improvement in policy and practical support. Our aim is to reduce the negative impacts of military service on ADF families, and to support the positive aspects of this unique Defence lifestyle. Over the last 12 months, the DFA team have achieved over 80 advocacy goals to improve aspects of Defence life for families. For a summary please refer to the DFA Advocacy Map at: <https://dfa.org.au/advocacy-map/>.

DFA is writing to provide notice of early evidence of a trend in educational outcomes for ADF children with the potential to have broad implications for Defence and government in the future. DFA endorses the Veterans' Ministerial Council assertion the ADF's *transient lifestyle has an impact on Defence and veteran families, particularly children.*

Research from the United States Department of Defense suggests military children *'experience tremendous psychological strain [when compared to the general population] as a result of the cumulative effect of stressful military-related life events, such as the deployment of their parents. From here, the resulting stress and behavioural issues from this psychological strain negatively influence, inter alia, the child's academic outcomes.'*

'Although some children seem to be coping well, overall, school staff felt children's anxiety related to housing relocations, parental absence, increased responsibilities at home, poor mental health of some non-deployed parents, and/or difficulty accessing mental health services affected their ability to function satisfactorily in school. [Academic] Problems were most prevalent among preschool-aged children from single-parent and dual-military families.'



This research concludes the lower academic performance of children in military families is a contributing factor to the decrease in the average serving time of US active-duty members.

Education systems in a number of Australian states and territories (namely SA, ACT and QLD) are taking measures to identify children whose parents are current serving ADF members (and in some cases, veterans). The Veterans' Ministerial Council noted *the potential benefits of this initiative, intended to improve the school-based support for children from veteran families. Ministers agreed to explore this in their relevant jurisdictions.*

As other states and territories gather this data, it is likely to elucidate a broad trend of ADF children with poorer educational outcomes in comparison to analogous demographics. This trend has demonstrable implications for Defence and ongoing challenges with recruitment, retention and reputation.

Recommendations

The challenges associated with securing housing and a fixed address prior to a posting also influences school enrolment/catchment access. In response, the Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS) branch have been requested by Defence to provide support letters to Defence families to confirm postings to the chosen school in the new posting location. DFA endorse and advocate for this process to become permanent through an appropriate policy change.

The current Defence tutoring support is currently only available for children already failing. DFA endorse and advocate for enhancing extant support programs for school-aged ADF children by enabling proactive support before our children are failing.

In conjunction with Defence tutoring support, a review and enhancement of the Defence School Mentoring Program to ensure robust governance to better manage the implementation and quality of services funded through schools to support ADF children. Current governance means mentors can be used for, inter alia, school administration staffing instead of solely for the support of Defence children. This is a clear governance and accountability failure and DFA endorse and advocate for changes to the Defence School Mentoring Program to ensure the program remains prioritised to Defence families.

The application rate for Child Education Assistance (such as boarding subsidies and tertiary student support) remains stagnant. DFA endorse and advocate for clear and

consistent promotion of the Education Assistance available to Defence Families as this would likely increase interest and uptake of these valuable resources.

We appreciate your attention to these matters and kindly urge your support for the action of the above recommendations and would welcome you to reach out to us for further information, if required. Thank you for your time and consideration on the important subject of educating our Defence children.

Yours faithfully,



Monique Suters

National Delegate – Southern
Queensland
0418 939 675
sth.qld@dfa.org.au



Rachelle Meredith

National Delegate – Central and
Northern NSW
0418 728 859
central.nsw@dfa.org.au



Larissa Ostermann

National Delegate – Northern Queensland
0418 796 561
nth.qld@dfa.org.au



Samantha Cooper

National Delegate – Northern
Territory and Kimberley
0418 807 548
nt@dfa.org.au



Melody Song

National Communications Officer
0419 781 079
communications@dfa.org.au



Tracey Nutt

National Digital Communications
and Marketing Officer
0438 821 717
marketing@dfa.org.au



Kerry Prier

National Delegate – South
Australia
0439 315 973
sa@dfa.org.au



Nicholas Packer

National Delegate – Western
Australia
0432 982 178
wa@dfa.org.au



Ashley Smith

National Delegate – Victoria
and Tasmania
0419 668 495
vic.tas@dfa.org.au