



MISSION: READINESS MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 5, 2009

Media Contact: Ted Eismeier

Cell: 315-335-9222, E-mail: ted@missionreadiness.org

Over 250,000 Young People in Mississippi Unable To Join Military

Education Secretary Duncan, former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark, retired admirals and generals say early learning key to reverse security threat

WASHINGTON, D.C. (November 5, 2009) -- According to a new report, 75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are unable to enlist in the military because they fail to graduate high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit. In Mississippi, that would mean over 250,000 young adults cannot join. However, that may actually be a low estimate because, compared to the national average, Mississippi has more young people who are overweight, (44% vs. 32%), and more young people without on-time high school degrees, (36% vs. 26%).

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark, and some of America's top retired admirals, generals and other military leaders called today for immediate action to address this threat to America's national security.

General Clark, Major General James A. Kelley (USA, Ret.), Major General James W. Comstock (USA, Ret.), Brigadier General John W. Douglass (USAF, Ret.), Rear Admiral James Barnett (USN, Ret.), former Under Secretary of the Army Joe Reeder and Secretary Duncan called for greater investment in high-quality early learning programs to ensure more young people graduate from high school, obey the law and have the option of military service if they choose that path.

The retired military brass are members of a new organization called MISSION: READINESS, led by nearly 90 retired military leaders, including two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton (ret.) and General Shalikashvili (ret.), and six other four-star generals and admirals. The group supports policies to help young people get the right start so they are prepared to succeed in life.

"According to the new report from our organization, Mission: Readiness, 75 percent of young Americans are unable to serve in the military. These are the same young people we depend on to serve in times of need and ultimately protect this nation," Gen. Clark said. "Support for high-quality early education will help ensure that more young people are on track for successful careers, including military service. Congress is currently considering the Early Learning Challenge Fund and must pass it so states can provide more children with this essential opportunity for learning."

Secretary Duncan said that the support of retired military brass demonstrates how important early childhood development is for the country.

"I am proud to be joining these senior retired admirals and generals who have served our nation with courage and distinction," Secretary Duncan said. "We know that investing in high quality early learning programs helps more young children enter school with the skills they need to be successful. That is why this administration has proposed a new investment in early childhood development through the Early Learning Challenge Fund."

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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.

1212 New York Avenue NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20005
202.464.5224
MissionReadiness.org

Major General Comstock said that he believes the early education of young children should be an area of bipartisan agreement.

“I’m a lifelong political conservative, and I believe that government should intervene on a limited and targeted basis,” Major General Comstock said. “Early education is not conservative common sense or liberal common sense—it’s just plain common sense. Reaching the most at-risk kids helps increase graduation rates and cut crime, so early education is a matter of national security.”

While the military is currently meeting recruitment goals due in part to the severe economic recession, the retired leaders said the challenge of finding quality recruits will return when the economy recovers.

“The armed services are meeting recruitment targets in 2009, but those of us who have served in command roles are worried about the trends we see. Our national security in the year 2030 is absolutely dependent on what’s going on in pre-kindergarten today. We urge Congress to take action on this issue this year,” Rear Admiral Barnett said.

The retired admirals and generals cited evidence from prominent research studies showing that children who benefit from early childhood education are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and avoid crime as adults.

For several decades, researchers followed children who attended Chicago’s Child-Parent Center (CPC) early education program. By the age of 18, children left out of the program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime than those who attended. By age 20, participants in the early education program were 29 percent more likely to have graduated from high school.

“Commanders in the field have to trust that our soldiers will respect authority, work within the rules and know the difference between right and wrong,” Maj. Gen. Kelley said. “Early learning opportunities help instill the qualities that make better citizens, better workers and better candidates for uniformed service.”

Many states have made substantial progress in providing early education services to young children. However, more than half of all states are reaching only 30 percent or less of their four-year-old children through state and federal programs. Ten states serve 20 percent or less of the four-year-olds in their state. Nationally, the federally-funded preschool program Head Start serves only half of at-risk kids, and Early Head Start serves less than five percent of infants and toddlers from eligible low-income families.

“The role of an admiral or a general is to look over the horizon, identify future problems and pinpoint the best way to overcome these challenges,” Brig. Gen. Douglass said. “The research shows today’s kids need early education, so let’s put that into practice now.”

Congress is now considering a new initiative, the Early Learning Challenge Fund, designed to help states provide more at-risk kids with access to quality early learning programs. The proposal will provide grants to the states of \$1 billion a year for up to ten years to improve the quality of early childhood development programs and expand access to more at-risk kids. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill in September that included support for the Early Learning Challenge Fund, and it is awaiting deliberation in the Senate.

“Imagine ten young people walking into a recruiter’s office and seven of them getting turned away. We cannot allow today’s dropout crisis to become a national security crisis,” former Under Secretary of the Army Joe Reeder said. “Starting with early education will make sure young people have a foundation that will prepare them for whatever path they choose, including the defense of our nation.”

The military brass called on members of the U.S. Senate to pass legislation supporting the early learning proposal, so more young people will succeed in school, obey the law and become contributing members of the community.

“The most important asset we have for our national defense is our men and women in uniform. To be successful in their careers, in or out of the military, young people need to get a strong start in life,” said Amy Dawson Taggart, national director for MISSION: READINESS. “The question is not whether we can afford to invest in high-quality early education. The real question is—can we afford not to?”

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Visit www.missionreadiness.org to read the report “Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve” and learn more about the organization’s members and activities.

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