# Are American High School Students Enlistment-Ready?

*Expanding post-graduation data collection and readiness to the military, not just college and career*

**By RANDY WATSON**

HOW DO WE DEFINE SUCCESS after high school? Like many states, Kansas keeps count of how many graduates pursue a college degree or professional certificate. These are important measures, because strong K–12 education systems produce graduates who are career- and college-ready.

But those aren't the only paths well-prepared graduates take after high school. Inevitably, someone will ask, "What about the military?" Right now, that's a question we can't answer—and it's one we should.

So why, then, doesn't Kansas count military service in the same way it counts other college- and career-readiness outcomes? It's not because we don't want to. Like many other states that have tried before us, Kansas has been unable to get trusted, verifiable data on students who go on to serve in the military.

We're hoping that's about to change. Kansas, where I serve as commissioner of education, and more than three dozen states have asked the U.S. Department of Defense to create standard agreements and data-sharing protocols that would



*A lack of data sharing with states about post-secondary military service makes it an overlooked mark of success for high school graduates.*

Fighting to defend our country is an honorable mission, and the military offers a strong career path for many individuals. Through military service, young people can learn marketable skills like mechanics or computer science and interpersonal skills such as working on a team. By giving young people increased responsibilities and training over time, military service is also a leadership pathway for the country.

allow us to access accurate, secure, and standardized data on military service after high school. That effort is well underway, and a joint working group is aiming for a solution by 2026, with the encouragement of a bipartisan group of congressional leaders. If they are successful, it will solve a data issue that's been plaguing state leaders for years and allow us to view postsecondary military service alongside college and career.

## A Major Industry

As of early 2024, more than two million Americans were serving in the Armed Forces. It's a large industry, equal to a little more than 1 percent of all civilian workers.

And yet in recent years, military leaders have been struggling to recruit enough new candidates. Trust in the military remains high, with 60 percent of Americans expressing confidence in it, but even that majority is a 20-year low. Unemployment in the broader economy is also low, so other job opportunities are plentiful. In addition, many of the young people who would like to serve their country are deemed unfit because they do not meet academic or physical fitness qualifications.

But for those who do enlist, the economic advantages of military service are evident right away. Research shows that military service boosts income in the short and long term. The military also is a particularly important career pathway for traditionally underserved groups.

There is some debate in the research over whether initial advantages persist over time and for whom. Nobel Prize–winning economist Josh Angrist has found that non-white veterans continue to earn more money after they leave the military, whereas white veterans do a little bit worse. But overall, veterans tend to have low unemployment rates, higher college enrollment rates, and higher rates of employment in STEM fields.

In other words, the military offers a path to upward mobility for those who choose to serve. State leaders have long understood this reality intuitively, but they've struggled to collect reliable, verifiable data on which of their students pursue military service.

## Missing Measures

States are increasingly incorporating data on long-term outcomes into education accountability systems and work with institutions like the National Student Clearinghouse and the U.S. Census Bureau to track college enrollment and completion, employment rates, and earnings. The goal is to identify and recognize schools that are succeeding in putting kids on a path toward long-term success.

But these systems to date have not been able to track military service. A recent review of state accountability plans found that just 10 states intended to count military service among postgraduate outcomes. Of those, two allow schools and districts to self-report data, which puts the burden of proof on schools and individual enlistees. Two other states allow districts to count individuals who intend to enlist, not whether they actually do. The remaining states eventually made military data optional or dropped the idea altogether.

As a result, not a single U.S. state has an accurate count of actual military service. Researchers Chad Aldeman and Jake Steel, both of whom have worked in the federal Department of Education, conducted follow-up conversations with state agencies to diagnose the problem. The data simply weren't available, or at least not of sufficiently high quality to include in a formal accountability system.

## A Solution Emerges

This is a data problem and a coordination challenge—both of which are solvable through cooperation and effort. Organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers and Data Quality Campaign are providing both, including through a new working group called MEDALS (Military Enlistment Data Access to Lift Student Success).

On the data side, the technical challenges are not insurmountable—a past Department of Labor initiative had successfully linked military enlistment data to student outcomes in the context of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs. The data exist and can be used to track outcomes. The challenge is to provide a secure way for the Defense Department to share it with states.

That's where MEDALS comes in. The group is composed of military leaders, state officials, federal data experts, and other technical experts, with the goal of creating a standard process for states to access service data across all military branches.

One question they'll have to grapple with is how long to track and attribute adult outcomes to their high school education. If a student graduates high school in the spring and enlists that summer, that seems like an obvious reportable outcome. But what if the student graduates, floats around various jobs for a year or more, and then decides to enlist? Does their high school still get credit for preparing a military-ready graduate? In other words, what's the cut-off point for determining success?

The MEDALS group also is thinking deeply about privacy laws and broader concerns, including data governance policies and protecting student information. A key question here is who owns the data, and the answer must be state education agencies, not the Defense Department. The goal of these systems is to identify whether schools are preparing students to successfully enlist in the military, enter the workforce, or pursue further education. We don't want to merely build a better way for the military to identify and target candidates. While this effort includes a strong partnership with the military and may ultimately boost their recruitment efforts, that's never been the goal.

These are delicate issues, but I'm optimistic that the MEDALS group will produce a solution. With state education chiefs, defense officials, and congressional leaders keeping focus on this work, I believe we are on track to put military service on par with other college and career outcomes.

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