

Strong Students, Strong Futures, Strong Nation - 2009 U.S. Army National Education Conference

The U.S. Army is working aggressively to meet the demands of one of its greatest challenges: recruiting an all-volunteer force from a population where fewer than three in ten young people meet the minimum education, fitness and character standards to serve. The troubling issues of low high school graduation rates and childhood obesity affect not only the Army, but are concerns shared by education, business, technical/career training, national service organizations, and the Nation as a whole.

This past September, respected educators, business leaders, governmental organizations and senior Army leadership gathered for the U.S. Army's "Strong Students, Strong Futures, Strong Nation" national education conference in Columbia/Fort Jackson, S.C.

As organizations deeply invested in the education and post-secondary opportunities for the Nation's young people, regardless of what path they choose after high school, U.S. Army Accessions Command partnered with the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Governors Association (NGA), and Be the Change, Inc. to share in dialogue that explored the mutual challenges these groups share in secondary-level achievement, post-secondary success and the workforce readiness of America's youth.

In addition to its partner organizations, the conference also hosted representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, state Departments of Education, the Beating the Odds Foundation, HENAAC, LULAC, National PTA, 100 Black Men of America, the National Education Association, the American Association of School Administrators, Army PaYS partner Sears Holdings, the National Consortium for State Guidance Leadership, the National School Boards Association, City Year, Teach for America, Troops to Teachers and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

The four-day conference provided its participants with first-hand knowledge about the Army and its training continuum, reinforced the groups' shared commitment to education, and generated dialogue about best practices and actionable activities in support of our Nation's students.

Held at Fort Jackson, the Army's largest installation for Initial Entry Training, the conference introduced over 80 education, business and industry specialists representing nearly 40 states to Army approaches to training, education, forging teamwork, remediation and leadership development. Conference attendees saw Soldiers conquer difficult training exercises, participate in confidence and leadership/team development courses, and perform skilled tasks learned through highly-specialized training for their chosen Army career. Additionally, participants got a glimpse of Army life on tours through barracks, on-post housing for families, and dined on "Meals Ready to Eat" (MREs) for lunch.

They also heard directly from Army Soldiers during interactive panel sessions featuring students at the Army Preparatory School, recent graduates of Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training and the Drill Sergeant instructors that are entrusted with the training and development of the young people that enter the Army. Other interactive sessions featured Soldiers that have benefitted from the Army's commitment to continuing education, representing a wide range of Army careers – from language interpreter to legal assistant to infantryman.

Conference activities were complemented by keynote speeches and other presentations from industry thought-leaders and senior Army representatives. Featured speakers included Lt. Gen. Benjamin Freakley, Commanding General, USAAC; Dr. Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools; Dr. Linda Barrington, Managing Director of Human Capital at The Conference Board; Mr. Hugh Price, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Col. John V. Vanderbleek with JROTC; Mr. Scott Fiske, Principal, Western High School in Broward County, Florida; and Mr. Rick Mills, Chief Area Officer, Chicago Public Schools.

Emphasizing a two-way dialogue, the Army solicited input, insights and guidance from conference participants during group synthesis sessions that addressed their observations, perceptions, and opinions

on the ways the Army and its partners can together contribute to, improve and influence the well-being and future success of young people.

Actionable elements of these continued partnerships included:

- Increased support and facilitation of resources within schools to highlight the education, training and career opportunities offered by the U.S. Army
- Efforts to counter common misperceptions about Army service, especially that higher education and Army service are mutually exclusive
- Importance of demonstrating the relevancy of knowledge and skills gained in the Army to civilian careers
- On-going and increased efforts to cultivate relationships between the Army and state and local-level educators

The confluence of interest between the Army, educators and business is very real. At an investment of hundreds of millions annually in college tuition assistance alone, no single institution spends more time and money on training and education per year than the U.S. Army. The Army is one the primary paths for young people leaving American high schools, along with higher education, direct-to-industry, and national service options. It is also a major conduit to placing skilled, trained workers, grounded in values and enriched by leadership development, into the workforce after their terms of service.

The “Strong Students, Strong Futures, Strong Nation” conference was intended to address this confluence of interest to forge actionable relationships between the U.S. Army and education, business, and national service organizations that are invested in and passionate about the post-secondary achievement of young people. The United States Army Accessions Command is grateful for the rich discussions, sharing and learning of best practices, and the development of meaningful partnerships in support of our Nation’s students that were enabled by the meeting of these groups and for the participation by its partner organizations.