Year Two Evaluation Report: A Case Study of the MCEC S2S™ Program in Diverse School Settings

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Introduction

Student 2 Student® Program Description

Student 2 Student® (S2S™) is a peer-to-peer student-led, faculty-advised, program designed to welcome new students, foster belonging, support educational opportunities, and build connections through service. Developed by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), the program is rooted in the belief that student-driven initiatives can ease school transitions and enhance the school culture for all. While S2S is intentionally inclusive and supports all students experiencing school transitions, it was developed by the Military Child Education Coalition with a particular focus on the needs of military-connected youth. The program's structure and mission reflect a deep understanding of the challenges military families face, while still fostering belonging and connection for all students.

S2S programs are active in elementary, middle, and high schools around the country. Participating schools typically receive training from MCEC, which includes comprehensive sessions delivered by highly qualified instructors, either through MCEC's Student Summits or the 360 Summits. These professionally facilitated events focus on building strong program foundations using the S2S six core values: Leadership, Academics, Service, Climate and Culture, Relationships, and 100% Acceptance. The training equips students and S2S sponsors to understand the unique needs of military-connected and transitioning students, apply core values to mitigate academic, social, and emotional challenges, and develop personal skills necessary for implementing and sustaining a successful S2S program. After completing their training, student leaders form S2S teams that carry out welcoming initiatives such as conducting school tours, eating lunch with new students, and providing academic support. While implementation varies across schools, the program's core competency areas are designed to cultivate leadership, belonging, and school-wide engagement. After completing S2S training, each program receives support, curriculum, follow-up support materials, and ongoing implementation support. For more information, see the Logic Model included in Appendix A.

Purpose of the Evaluation

In 2023, MCEC partnered with the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) to conduct a two-year, third-party evaluation of the S2S program. The first year focused on formative evaluation: understanding how the program was implemented across a wide range of schools and collecting insights from students, S2S sponsors, and school staff. Findings from the first year of the evaluation revealed an overall positive reaction to the S2S training, as well as a positive impact on student leadership development and smoother transitions for new students, particularly those from military-connected families.

Building on these insights, the second year of the evaluation, summarized in this report, explores the conditions and factors that shape successful S2S implementation. This phase includes in-depth case studies of three schools representing a range of funding models and community contexts. The report offers school-specific findings, highlights cross-site comparisons, and includes actionable recommendations to guide current and future program implementation.

This report starts by outlining the methodology used for the case studies, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis. The findings are then laid out by school, highlighting key differences and similarities across program implementation. Finally, action-driven conclusions and recommendations are drawn to aid in programmatic expansion.

Methods

The second year of the evaluation was intentionally designed to meet the MCEC team's goal of gaining deeper insight into how the S2S program is implemented across varying school contexts. Case studies were selected as the most appropriate methodology, as they enable an in-depth exploration of local dynamics, allowing MCEN to capture the nuanced factors that shape program implementation, adaptation, and impact. This section elaborates on the methodology for these case studies including, school case selection, data collection methods, and data analysis.

School Case Selection

Insights from the first year of evaluation and ongoing conversations with the MCEC team highlighted the importance of examining schools with diverse characteristics, particularly in terms of geographic location and funding structures. Three schools were selected based on their strong participation in the S2S program, high engagement levels, and willingness to participate in the study. Each reflected a distinct funding model and geographical region:

- Swansboro High School (North Carolina) operated without state funding.
- Driscoll Middle School (Texas) received funding from a variety of sources.
- Carroll High School (Alabama) received state funding, which was designated specifically for a program coordinator.

Although each school context is unique, all three sites are considered exemplary models of S2S implementation and were chosen for their potential to offer actionable lessons for other schools, districts, and program staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place between October 2024 and May 2025 and included semi-structured interviews with five S2S sponsors and two MCEC state coordinators, three school administrators, one military school liaison officer and three parents, as well as focus groups with a total of 18 S2S students. These conversations were guided by protocols aimed at understanding both the implementation process and the perceived impact of the program on school culture. Interview and focus group protocols are included in Appendix B.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify common ideas and recurring patterns across stakeholder groups. To strengthen the credibility of findings, key themes were shared with S2S sponsors for validation through a member-checking process.

Report Organization

The findings in this report highlight how the S2S program works in practice. Each case study is summarized, showcasing the stand-out themes captured during interviews and focus groups. Each case study concludes with lessons learned and key takeaways that can be implemented in other school environments. Within each case study, the key findings are grouped into three overarching themes:

- **Promising Practices.** Reflections, strategies, and ideas that other schools can apply.
- **Impact on School Culture.** How the S2S program influences the broader school environment.
- **Supports and Funding.** The financial resources and leadership support that help the program succeed.

The Conclusion and Recommendation section brings findings from each case study together to highlight lessons learned for the MCEC team and program administrators. By studying the cases wholistically, key strengths, opportunities, and process improvements paint a data-informed path forward.

Swansboro High School in Swansboro, North Carolina

Introduction

Swansboro High School, located in a military-connected community in North Carolina, is home to a nationally recognized, student-led Student 2 Student (S2S) program. In 2020, the school was honored as the MCEC High School S2S Team of the Year.

Swansboro High School exemplifies how a well-resourced, student-led program, rooted in a strong military community, can become deeply embedded in school culture. The S2S program enjoys consistent leadership, sustained student interest, and strong administrative backing. It is seen not as a supplemental club, but as an integral part of how the school welcomes and supports all students. The program's culture of inclusion, leadership, and peer connection reinforces both academic and social success for new students.

Swansboro was selected as a case study site due to its high levels of student engagement, sustained program history, and strong administrative support. MFAN conducted interviews with S2S stakeholders including students, sponsors, administrators, and parents. Findings from Swansboro highlight how a competitive student selection process, strong administrative support, and intentional leadership development contribute to a thriving, student-led S2S program that is embedded in school culture, benefits all students, and sustains itself through creativity and community engagement, even without dedicated external funding.

Promising Practices
Intentional Student Selection Process
One of the most defining features of Swansboro High School's S2S program is its intentional approach to student selection. The S2S program has a strong reputation within the school, making participation highly competitive. This is possible because S2S has become so well-regarded, that students from all backgrounds and personality types want to be part of it. Each year, approximately 120 students apply, and about 60 are selected through a rigorous, multi-phase process. The application assesses each student's motivation, character, and readiness to lead. The S2S Sponsor explained,

> "I send the list of applicants to about 25 trusted teachers and ask, 'Would you trust this student to give your child a tour of Swansboro High? Finalists participate in speed interviews with returning S2S officers, rotating among seven stations. The questions are often quirky and designed to see how students think on their feet, interact with others, and step out of their comfort zones. Sometimes we ask them to act, sing, or dance. We want to see if they can be dynamic and help others feel included."

While the selection process is competitive, it also prioritizes diversity. The process intentionally brings together students with a range of personalities, experiences, and leadership styles. Some students are outgoing and naturally charismatic, while others are quiet, thoughtful, and reflective. This blend of

student leaders ensures the program can connect with, and support, a broad cross-section of new students.

Strong Commitment to Student-led Program
A consistent theme across interviews was that Swansboro High School's S2S program is genuinely student-led. S2S students take on a wide range of leadership responsibilities, including delivering ninth-grade homeroom lessons, providing one-on-one student tours, and leading academic mini-lessons on GPA calculation, study strategies, and social-emotional learning. As one administrator put it:

> *"I don't walk into those meetings and see [the S2S sponsor] talking. I see students leading grade-level academic support sessions, rehearsing training modules, and planning service activities. The students are trained well—they do the work and set the agenda."*

Their S2S Sponsor attributes this culture of student ownership to MCEC's training and its emphasis on trusting students to lead:

> *"The MCEC training gave me the confidence to step back and let them take charge, knowing they're capable of making it meaningful."*

Swansboro High School also benefits from having a Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) School Liaison plays a key role in supporting military families by helping them navigate the educational system. The school liaison serves as the primary point of contact between military families, local schools, and the Marine Corps base. The school liaison assigned to Swansboro High School noted how uniquely strong the students' voices are:

> *"Having S2S members lead classroom lessons, like teaching about GPA, makes a big difference. It's something we don't see in other schools."*

The program's student-led structure was also evident during focus groups, where students confidently described their roles and the program's impact. During the focus group, one student shared:

> *"Throughout the year, we give tours to new students, hold welcome parties, and do lunchtime games. We try to help people get connected and feel welcome at our school."*

Swansboro's S2S program demonstrates what is possible when students are selected, engaged, and trusted to lead.

Summer S2S Leadership Training and 8th grade Orientation
One of the most important opportunities for student leadership at Swansboro High School is the week-long S2S leadership camp held each summer before the school year begins. The camp combines leadership development, team-building, and academic preparation, helping students feel confident and connected as they prepare to welcome their peers. Typically, 50–60 students participate in the camp.

Although the school no longer receives funding through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the camp continues thanks to a small participation fee and support from local sponsors. Students receive team shirts, name tags, and supplies, and engage in creative, fun activities designed to build relationships and teach icebreakers they can use throughout the year. What began six years ago as a small, grant-funded effort has grown into a beloved tradition. The camp sets the tone for a strong year of student-led support and has earned enthusiastic feedback from the school community. As one parent shared:

> *"As a busy mom of four kids, I appreciate that they dedicate a full week over the summer for orientation. It shows how committed they are. After the summer orientation, my child felt transformed. They walked away from orientation with instant friends and confidence to start the school year."*

Another notable aspect of the Swansboro program is its orientation for incoming freshmen while they are still in 8th grade. Rising ninth graders visit Swansboro High School to receive practical information and begin forming connections with upperclassmen. During the summer, a separate orientation helps both incoming freshmen and new upperclassmen feel prepared for the transition to a new school environment. The goal is to give all new students the tools and confidence they need to start the year successfully.

Swansboro's S2S student team is responsible for planning and leading the entire orientation. From welcoming students and presenting school policies to leading games, giving tours, and helping students find their homerooms, the S2S members create a supportive and engaging experience. They also introduce themselves by sharing personal interests, which helps new students relate and start building friendships. The orientation includes a short speech by the principal and ends with a group photo of the freshman class. These student-led efforts are designed to make new students feel supported and connected. As one school administrator shared:

> *"One remarkable thing is the 8th grade orientation. The entire 8th-grade class tours the high school with S2S students, and it's amazing. The S2S kids do a great job. They practice and take it very seriously. S2S students know how to make a good first impression. They meet students where they are and continue building connections throughout the year."*

Designated Club Time
One of the unique strengths of Swansboro's S2S program is the school's decision to include a designated 20-minute club period in the daily schedule. This built-in time ensures students can participate without the barriers of after-school transportation or scheduling conflicts. "*This time built into the day is crucial,*" said the S2S sponsor. "*It makes consistent engagement possible and shows the school's commitment to student leadership and support.*" The daily meeting time has helped normalize club involvement across the school and elevated the presence of S2S within the broader school culture. As one student reflected, *"Having time during the day means everyone can be part of something. It's not just the kids who can stay after school, it's all of us.*

The school's principal is especially proud of the school's support for this model, adding:

> *"This model is great because students can be involved in multiple clubs without transportation or after-school barriers. The program fosters inclusivity and academic support. If students are struggling, they can get academic help during this time. It's a game changer."*

Impact on School Culture
Like many S2S programs, Swansboro High School's most immediate impact on school culture is the way it welcomes new students. From day one, S2S students are intentionally matched with new students who share something in common, whether it's a background, a shared interest like sports, or personality traits, such as being more reserved or outgoing. Their principal shared a memorable example with a new student who seemed notably uneasy:

> *"Last year, we had a new student who I thought would struggle. He looked like a fish out of water and I have come to recognize those prone to struggle. But his S2S youth turned to me and said, 'I got this one. I'm going to take care of him.' And he did. That student blended in just fine because he had someone advocating for him from day one."*

This peer-led model builds empathy and leadership skills among S2S members while ensuring that every new student has someone looking out for them. S2S members continue to support new students well beyond the first day. They check in during lunch, in class, and the hallways so no new student eats alone or has to figure out the school. In a focus group, one student shared:

> *"It's not just a welcome committee. It's a support system that helps students succeed in every aspect of their school experience. If we notice a student sitting alone at lunch, an S2S student will step in to invite them to join their group. We might just start with something like 'Hey, come sit with us'. It is more than that. We also make sure that new students know where to find resources to help them in school, like tutoring, or even just walk them to a teacher's office hours to introduce them. "*

One student shared their personal experience of how valuable it was to discover there was an S2S program at Swansboro:

> *"I'm a military child, and I moved here from Okinawa, Japan. It was my freshman year, and I didn't know anyone from middle school. My mom made me go to freshman orientation. I was super nervous. But when I got there, everyone made me feel welcome. I was grouped with three S2S members who played games and helped break the ice. As a military child, it is hard to always be new. That sense of community and connection from S2S has only grown since then."*

While the S2S program is deeply rooted in its original mission to support military-connected students, Swansboro is an example of how its reach now extends well beyond that population. Students and staff alike emphasized that the program has become a central part of the school's culture, benefiting all new students regardless of background. The program fosters a school-wide ethic of welcome, belonging, and peer leadership. At the same time, Swansboro's high concentration of military-connected students and broader military support infrastructure have shaped the program's evolution and depth. This dual identity, as a military-informed but universally inclusive model, is one of S2S' greatest strengths.

Supports and Funding

Swansboro High School's S2S program operates without financial support from the state, county, or school district. Instead, it is sustained entirely through student-driven efforts and community support. A modest $25 membership fee helps cover essential costs such as S2S t-shirts and graduation cords. During leadership training days, students are also provided lunch as part of the program's community-building efforts.

The S2S program continues to thrive through creativity, volunteerism, and student initiative. A favorite fundraising event is the annual "Masked Pirate Singer," where students and staff perform in inflatable costumes to raise money. Parent volunteers frequently assist with events, reinforcing strong ties between the program and the broader community.

Although Swansboro's program operates without state or district funding, the school leadership and S2S sponsor do not view the lack of funding as a barrier. A strong sense of student ownership, creativity, and adaptability has helped the program thrive. Key factors in its success include creative funding strategies,

strong support from school leadership, and a student culture that actively engages with and supports the S2S program.

In addition to grassroots fundraising, one of the program's greatest assets is its strong administrative support. The school's principal is a consistent champion of S2S, creating a school environment where the program is not only respected but integrated into the fabric of school life.

Conclusion

The S2S program at Swansboro High School exemplifies a student-led model that fosters meaningful leadership opportunities while easing school transitions for both military-connected and civilian students. This case study highlights how schools can cultivate a respected, self-sustaining program by empowering students, securing strong administrative support, and embedding the program into school culture. Many of the practices seen at Swansboro are replicable and could be adapted to strengthen S2S implementation in other school environments.

- **Establish a Competitive but Inclusive Student Selection Process.** Create an application process that emphasizes leadership potential, diverse perspectives, and peer-to-peer connection. Creating a competitive angle increases the visibility of and excitement around the program.
- **Integrate S2S into the School Day.** As much as possible, provide designated times for engagement. This ensures equitable access to all students and embeds the program into the daily life and culture of the school.
- **Prioritize Student-Led Implementation.** Empower students to lead core components of the program, limiting adult guidance to foster genuine leadership development amongst students.

Driscoll Middle School in San Antonio, Texas

Introduction

Driscoll Middle School, situated in San Antonio's Northeast Independent School District, serves a large number of military-connected families. The school's S2S program showcases their diversity, resilience, and strong sense of self-care. In 2024, the school's S2S program was named MCEC's Middle School S2S Team of the Year, recognizing its commitment to fostering a welcoming environment for new students. The program's success is particularly noteworthy as the school approaches its closure at the end of the 2025 academic year.

The Driscoll S2S program stands out for its thoughtful balance of peer support, meaningful services, and community-building activities. Students plan and lead initiatives that uplift others, both in the school community and the broader community. Events that center on the experiences and sacrifices of military families have become beloved school traditions, which create spaces for shared recognition and storytelling. These activities help military-connected students feel seen and celebrated while building empathy across the wider student body. Behind this program is a deeply committed leadership team with lived military experience and a care-driven approach to student engagement. Even in a time of transition, the Driscoll S2S program continues to model what is possible when students are empowered to lead with purpose.

Driscoll was selected as a case study due to high levels of student engagement, program history, and administrative support. From March to June 2025, MFAN conducted interviews with S2S stakeholders.

The findings from this case study highlight strong practices for building inclusive student leadership and the role military families play in the school community.

Promising Practices

Strong Focus on Community Service

Driscoll's S2S program approaches student leadership by centering service to others. S2S participants lead hands-on projects that both address community and school needs. Initiatives have included assembling sack lunches for the homeless, writing encouraging notes and disseminating them across the entire school, and celebrating unsung heroes on campus such as bus drivers and cafeteria workers. Students also participated in the City of San Antonio's Global Walk with Amal project, using the experience to explore themes of displacement, resilience, and the military child journey. One S2S student shared:

> *"One of my favorite parts was when we did a service project. We made about 140 sack lunches for the homeless. We had an assembly line with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and we added positive messages to each bag. It felt good to give back.''*

Veterans Day is a major event organized by S2S members. Students planned a school-wide ceremony that included a photo booth, poppy and pin distribution, and performances from student musicians. JROTC students presented the colors, reinforcing a strong message of respect and honor. In the words of the S2S sponsor,

> *"Honor, sacrifice, and patriotism are on full display in what we do. Our students are always looking for ways to engage with the community, support each other, and honor our veterans. That's what S2S is all about."*

In April, Driscoll celebrates the Month of the Military Child with a full spirit week designed by students. Activities include camouflage dress day, branch t-shirt day, and "Where in the world is your family serving?" day. These activities build school-wide awareness and pride. Another very popular activity sponsored by the S2S program at Driscoll is the Military Family Breakfast, held each year with music performances and family recognition. One of the S2S sponsors reflected:

> *"You see real emotion in the room. Sometimes it's a grandparent who comes. It means something. Students are always looking for ways to engage with the community."*

By creating a sense of student leadership centered in service to the school and broader communities, the Driscoll S2S program embodies a culture of empathy, inclusion, and purpose-driven connection that leaves a lasting impact on students, families, and staff alike, one which will extend beyond the school's transition at the end of the 2025 school year.

A Thoughtful, Inclusive Welcome Program

Driscoll's S2S team has developed a robust new student welcome process that goes far beyond first-day introductions. Each month, the team runs a report to identify new students, sends postcards to check in, and ensures that no student eats lunch or rides the bus alone. *"We serve everyone who is new,"* the sponsor explained. *"A lot of our students have never been to a school with an S2S club before, so we try to make the transition as smooth as possible."* This intentional structure is paired with passionate

leadership: both S2S sponsors have military ties and a deep personal understanding of the challenges students face. Their lived experience and commitment to a care-driven connection have helped shape a program that is not only welcoming but deeply transformative. In the words of the school principal:

> *"I think what made the S2S program really stand out was how personal it felt. The program leader truly understood the challenges that military kids go through. She didn't just organize events; she created meaningful experiences."*

The S2S program's approach to inclusion is thoughtfully hands-on. Their interactions go above and beyond greeting students when they start transition but spread throughout the school year to ensure continued engagement. Fostered by an adult leadership team with lived experiences, these outreach are particularly impactful for the military-connected students as they add their experiences to the broader school culture.

Genuine Parent Engagement

One of the most powerful outcomes of the S2S program at Driscoll is its ability to create a shared sense of community among students and their families. Through small, intentional efforts, the program has helped parents feel connected to the school, not just as supporters, but as valued members of the community. As one parent explained:

> *"The S2S program wants parents to be there. They rarely ask for donations. Unlike other schools where activities often depend on parent contributions, she made every event feel inclusive and well-organized without requiring us to give more than we could."*

Events like a Veterans Day breakfast, open to both students and parents, offered more than a meal. They created a space for families to come together, share stories, and recognize one another's service. As one parent noted, *"You'd meet someone new and find out, 'Oh, you're military too,' and then you'd talk about where and when you served."* These organic moments helped build a small, tight-knit network of military families within the larger school community.

A key feature of Driscoll's approach is that engagement is offered without financial expectations. Parents were regularly informed about upcoming activities, food drives, walks, and fundraisers, but were rarely asked to contribute money. This sense of trust and flexibility allowed parents to feel supported rather than obligated and helped build long-term buy-in. Their S2S sponsor summed it up with the following:

> *"One of the greatest impacts of this program is the way it brings people together. It's not just about helping new students, it's about creating a culture where everyone feels valued."*

By fostering such authentic relationships with parents and removing financial barriers to participation, the Driscoll S2S program strengthens their community-centered approach which empowers students and parents alike to contribute.

Impact on School Culture

The S2S program has become a cornerstone of Driscoll's school culture. While designed to support transitioning students at large, by intentionally engaging military-connected students, its broader effect is a more compassionate, cohesive community. Events like Veterans Day, the Military Family Breakfast, and Month of the Military Child offer spaces for both recognition and human connection. The S2S sponsor reflected on the impact of these events on their military students, sharing:

> "This program gives them a space to talk about their service. For many families, this might be the only space they have in the community to share their stories. I've seen families cry at these events. It's a powerful moment of connection."

A parent described how welcomed she felt after visiting campus for an S2S event:

> "My son moved 14 times as a military kid. I've seen families thrive, and I've seen families struggle. But here, at Driscoll Middle School, military families are welcomed."

This intentional engagement has led to tangible changes in how families experience the school environment. The school's principal emphasized that military families now feel more comfortable and supported. The result is a stronger, more unified school community at large. These military-connected family experiences are both shared with the civilian students but also contribute to a broader sense of understanding and connectedness.

Funding and Support

At Driscoll Middle School, the S2S program has operated successfully despite minimal direct funding from the school. The S2S sponsor has skillfully leveraged grassroots fundraising, such as Amazon wish lists and local initiatives like Paper John and Kendra Scott fundraisers, to generate approximately $3,000, enough to sustain the program's core activities. *"We're only allowed two fundraisers a year,"* the sponsor explained, *"so we have to be creative."* The S2S program's strength and stability, even without direct financial support from the school or district, is a testament to the commitment of its leaders.

While the Driscoll Middle School S2S program does not receive direct financial support, it does have strong administrative backing. Unique within the set of case study participants, the North East Independent School District offers specific support for all S2S at other schools in the district. District leadership has consistently recognized the value of S2S, with the superintendent personally visiting Driscoll to participate in a media shoot and offering public praise for the program during a district-wide address. His endorsement helped elevate the program's visibility and inspired additional schools in the district to consider adopting similar practices. This blend of passionate sponsorship and high-level advocacy has been key to the program's success. As the school closes, the legacy of this program will continue to inspire others. Even in resource-limited environments, care-driven programs like S2S can create lasting connections for students and families alike.

Conclusion

Driscoll Middle School's S2S program shows how a dedicated team of both students and adult leaders can make a big impact. The S2S program created a strong sense of community for students and military families through a strong focus on service projects and special events. As the school prepares to close, the S2S program leaves behind a lasting example of what's possible when staff and students work

together to make every family feel welcome and valued. Despite their S2S program coming to an end, their lessons learned are practical opportunities for any school environment.

- Center Student Leadership in Service. Design student activities to meet real community and school needs. Such hands-on service projects build purpose, connection, and responsibility, cornerstones of student leadership.
- Build a Structured and Ongoing Welcome Process. Go beyond first-day greetings to monthly check-ins, peer-led connections, and personalized outreach. These activities foster a sustainable culture of welcoming and inclusion.
- Use Events to Build Connection, Not Just Recognition. Host gatherings that create space for connections through shared stories and experiences, deepening bonds between students, parents, and the school community at large.

Carroll High School in Ozark, Alabama

Introduction

Located in Ozark, Alabama, Carroll High School offers a compelling example of how a student-led S2S program can thrive even amid leadership transitions. Despite changes in faculty sponsorship and limited exposure to formal MCEC training for the sponsor, the program has remained a vital part of the school's culture, welcoming new students, celebrating military families, and empowering young leaders.

The heart of Carroll's success lies in its ability to sustain momentum through a strong foundation of student ownership. When a new S2S sponsor stepped into the role in Fall 2024, she inherited not just a group of committed students, but a culture of collaboration and purpose. With guidance from community partners and district leaders, the program continued to grow without missing a beat. Today, the S2S program is a dynamic force for student connection, military family engagement, and community outreach.

The MFAN team hosted four conversations with Carroll's S2S stakeholders and students from March to June 2025. These conversations highlighted leadership evolution, flexible implementation, and supportive ecosystems uniquely helpful for schools aiming to build or sustain similar S2S efforts.

Promising Practices

New S2S Sponsor Leadership: Flexibility and Support in Program Implementation

Strong leadership and continuity are often considered essential for S2S program success, but what happens when an established leader leaves and a new sponsor steps into the role? At Carroll High School, the transition to a new S2S sponsor in Fall 2024 demonstrated how the program can remain strong even during leadership changes. A new faculty member stepped into the sponsor role without prior MCEC S2S training but with a clear sense of purpose and commitment.

> *"I didn't know how to begin, but I knew we could make it meaningful. Even though I'm not from a military family, we get so many new students, and I just knew this program was important. I've seen new students struggle in other schools and understand firsthand how much a program like this can help."*

Despite never having attended a formal MCEC S2S training, the new sponsor effectively utilized available MCEC S2S training materials that are available online, including videos, templates for flyers, and posters, tailoring the program to her own leadership style. She also felt supported by consistent, behind-the-scenes coaching from their MCEC Community Coordinator. This state-funded role is unique amongst the case study schools captured in this report. This role is designed to support the implementation of S2S programming and provides a direct connection to the MCEC team even after initial training is complete. The new sponsor also valued the support of and a collaborative meeting with the School Liaison Officer (SLO) from Fort Novosel. These early touchpoints were essential in helping her navigate the role and build confidence.

The S2S sponsor inherited a solid foundation built by the previous sponsor, including a group of experienced and engaged student leaders who were ready to carry the program forward. As the MCEC coordinator explained,

"One thing I emphasized to the students, especially the seniors, is the importance of training the next group of leaders. [The new sponsor] had a great team and even had a secretary taking notes at meetings. I told them: 'You have something great—make sure it doesn't end with you.' I reminded them of this throughout the year."

By encouraging student ownership and passing down leadership responsibilities, Carroll High's S2S program maintained momentum. Crucially, the program also benefited from a supportive school and district environment throughout their leadership transition. The principal and superintendent valued the S2S program, ensuring it remained a visible and supported part of the school culture. The district's Student Support Coordinator and the MFLC (Military Family Life Counselor) also served as informal thought partners, offering encouragement and ideas. As she explained, *"It's not financial support that I rely on—it's ideas, collaboration, and encouragement."*

The smooth transition in S2S sponsor leadership at Carroll was made possible by a strong foundation of student leadership and a supportive network of partners. The presence of an engaged MCEC Community Coordinator, a collaborative School Liaison Officer, and a trusted Military Family Life Counselor provided the new sponsor with consistent, personalized guidance. These relationships offered practical tools, encouragement, and thought partnership, demonstrating how layered, behind-the-scenes support can sustain and strengthen student-led programs, even in the absence of formal training or long-standing experience.

Leadership Buy-In and District Support Strengthen S2S Program Success

The guiding relationships highlighted above, coupled with school and district leadership support, play a key role in the success of the S2S program at Carroll High School. The principal and superintendent offer visible and consistent support, attending events and reinforcing the program's importance within the broader school culture. Their involvement ensures continuity, especially when there are transitions in S2S sponsor leadership or a lack of formal training from MCEC. The MCEC Community Coordinator explained the important and background support offered by her role:

"My role is a little unique. Not every state or area has an MCEC community coordinator like me. But having this position lets me know the schools and community well, and I can advocate for programs like S2S, spread the word, and be a consistent source of support, especially when sponsors are busy."

This support goes beyond encouragement. When the School Liaison Officer (SLO) identified a funding need, the superintendent responded by directing district resources to the program. The district's student support coordinator and the Military Family Life Counselor also provide hands-on guidance, helping the sponsor with ideas and implementation.

"Ozark City Schools and Carroll High School have strong support from leadership. The superintendent is very supportive. Whenever I see him, I make a point to share what an amazing job [the S2S sponsor] is doing. Our School Liaison Officer (SLO) also works closely with him. It's a smaller district, which really helps with responsiveness. That kind of backing makes a big difference."

This strong administrative backing helps ensure that S2S is not viewed as just another club, but as a meaningful part of Carroll's student support system. Combined with student leadership and community involvement, this layered support makes the program more sustainable and impactful.

Highlighting Military Families Through Student-Led Events

One of the most powerful examples of student leadership and community engagement at Carroll High School was the military family luncheon. This event, organized entirely by the S2S student team, was a defining moment of the school year for the S2S program. From start to finish, students led every aspect of the luncheon, from designing invitations and managing RSVPs to selecting catering, decorating the venue, greeting guests, and delivering speeches. Their ownership and pride were visible throughout the event. The impact was immediate and deeply felt by attendees. A school administrator commented:

> *"The Colonel's wife came up to our secretary and student president afterward and said, 'This is one of the best school-led events I've ever attended.' Our student president told me he wanted to cry after that. I said, 'You should. That's a big deal.'*

The luncheon was more than a one-time celebration. It represented the culmination of months of student growth and leadership development. The S2S sponsor described it as feeling *"almost like a graduation ceremony,"* saying, *"Back in August, we were all learning together, me and the students, and figuring out what we needed to do. Seeing them come full circle, being able to confidently talk with the families… it meant everything."*

The event also drew broad support from the school and military community, including school board members, administrators, the Garrison Commander and his family, and local education and military liaison leaders. Special recognition was given to CHS's guest speaker, a teacher, veteran, and military child, whose story of service and resilience resonated deeply with all in attendance.

Ultimately, the luncheon elevated the visibility of the S2S program and underscored its role in fostering leadership, connection, and recognition for military families. As one staff member summed it up, *"It was a powerful example of how students can lead when you trust them and give them the space."* This student-led event not only strengthened connections with military families but also elevated the visibility and credibility of the S2S program within the school community.

Impact on School Culture

While the S2S program is well known for welcoming new students and organizing meaningful service projects, one of its most distinctive contributions at Carroll High School is its role in student-led community outreach and military family engagement. In a district where school funding is closely tied to enrollment, outreach efforts are important. Carroll's S2S students actively participate in monthly recruitment events, such as the Fort Novosel Newcomers Briefing, where they represent the school to incoming military families.

According to the school's S2S sponsor, *"With declining enrollment, the school principal is especially grateful for this effort. Each month, S2S students attend the Fort Novosel Newcomers Briefing. We let students decorate the booth and make personal connections. They own it. We allow the student to talk directly to parents."* At these events, students wear S2S shirts, share a short introductory video, and

speak directly with families about how the program supports military-connected students. This authentic, student-led approach helps military families recognize Carroll High School as a welcoming, military-friendly school. This type of outreach is student leadership in action that shapes the school culture while strengthening community ties. S2S members also emphasized the importance of including all new students in their outreach, not just those from military families. To that end, they planned quarterly events like "Friendsgiving" and end-of-year ice cream social, giving new students an early opportunity to connect and feel a sense of belonging. *"Our members take on a leadership role and create that welcoming environment."* These events not only support transition but also foster a more inclusive and connected school culture.

Funding and Support

The success of Carroll High School's S2S program is rooted not in financial resources, but in the strengths of its relationships and intentional involvement of district and community stakeholders. Rather than relying on dedicated funding streams, the program thrives on creative problem-solving, district-level advocacy, and broad-based administrative backing.

The Ozark City Schools superintendent is a consistent champion of the program, and school administrators actively attend events and show support. These partners provide ongoing investment in program sustainability by attending events, promoting visibility, and integrating S2S into the fabric of the school community.

Carroll's S2S program operates with minimal funding. The students raise money through small fundraisers to support activities and events. *"It's not about the money,"* said their S2S sponsor. *"It's about ideas, collaboration, and giving students space to lead."* She credits the district's MFLC coordinator with offering guidance and encouragement.

Carroll's experience illustrates that a well-supported S2S program does not require a large budget, it requires a shared commitment, creative partnerships, and a belief in student leadership. This layered collaborative approach makes the program more resilient and responsive to both student and community needs.

Conclusion

Carroll High School represents a model of an S2S program that can thrive with strong student leadership and support from school and district administrators, even with a new S2S sponsor, limited formal MCEC training, or significant funding. With strong student ownership and leadership at its core, S2S has become a valued part of the school's culture and a model for others to follow.

- **Leverage Informal Support Networks to Navigate Leadership Transitions.** When a new sponsor steps into the S2S leadership role, ensure they are connected early with informal support partners. These touchpoints build confidence, reduce isolation, and create a safety net during the learning curve.
- **Encourage Student Leadership to Sustain Program Momentum.** Empower returning student leaders to take the lead during transition, no matter the cause. Prioritize continuity by encouraging students to document practices, mentor peers, and take ownership of events.
- **Position S2S as a Core Element of School Culture.** Garner visible support from school and district leadership by inviting them to student-led events that highlight program impact.

Encourage leaders to champion the program publicly as a means for engraining it in school culture.

Conclusion

The second-year evaluation of the S2S program confirms findings from the formative year-one evaluation. The S2S program continues to demonstrate meaningful and lasting impact across diverse school contexts. Although funding structures were a focus of this second-year study, they did not appear to affect the quality of program delivery or the strength of program impact. This conclusion draws from the three distinct case studies presented above, surfacing cross-cutting themes.

At their core, the case studies in this evaluation demonstrate that the S2S program can be successfully tailored to meet the needs of a wide range of schools. Each case study adapted the S2S program to a unique school context while remaining aligned with the MCEC S2S core goals of welcoming new students, promoting inclusion, supporting educational opportunities, and building connections through service. Whether in a well-established high school program, a middle school preparing to close, or a school with a new sponsor, S2S provided a flexible framework that allowed student leaders and adult sponsors to shape and tailor how the program is implemented to fit their communities. While MCEC considers how to maintain S2S training and keep schools current, it is encouraging to note that even limited training can go a long way.

Encouragingly these findings suggest that S2S does not require high levels of funding or external resources to succeed. Access to MCEC's supplementary training materials, informal guidance from regional coordinators, and school cultures that value student leadership were enough to establish and maintain strong programming. As MCEC considers how to continue equipping schools with timely training and support, this evaluation underscores that even limited access to resources, when paired with committed leadership, can lead to successful and sustainable implementation.

Program Outcomes

The adaptability of the programming brought about varying tangible outcomes in each school environment explored above. But overarching thematic analysis revealed three crucial program outcomes, upon which future sustainability can be built.

- **Impact on Broader School Culture.** In each case, S2S shaped a more inclusive welcoming school culture. Student leaders described how S2S gave them a sense of responsibility to care for new students and foster kindness among peers. Adult sponsors noted that S2S contributed to a school environment rooted in empathy, belonging, and student empowerment.
- **Making New Students Feel Welcome.** At the heart of each S2S program, was a shared commitment to welcoming new students, particularly those with military ties. The structure and visibility of S2S offered new students a safe entry point into school life while allowing existing students to develop their leadership skills through service and mentorship.
- **Family Engagement.** Each school created meaningful opportunities for families, particularly military-connected families, to connect with school life. Through student-led events and authentic communication, S2S served as a bridge between families and the school. This aligns with broader national research highlighting the importance of family engagement in supporting student achievement and emotional well-being.

These outcomes confirm that the S2S program is achieving its intended goals, as outlined in the logic model in Appendix A. The program promotes student leadership, strengthens peer connections, and supports successful transitions, which culminate in a strengthened school culture. These case studies

demonstrate that the S2S program helps shape a positive school culture and fosters meaningful connections with military families. Regardless of funding levels, schools with committed leadership and engaged students have successfully sustained S2S programs in a range of school settings.

Perception of Limited Budgets

Of key interest to the MCEC team were discussions around the impacts and influences of varying funding levels. What stands out across all three case studies is the remarkable dedication of staff and students, despite limited financial resources. These case studies highlight how S2S programs have thrived on modest budgets, relying instead on meaningful support systems. The most impactful forms of support included committed adult sponsors, active student leaders, and strong administrative backing. In Alabama, the indirect guidance provided by regional MCEC staff also played a quiet but essential role in sustaining program momentum. Nevertheless, the individual program sponsors did not recognize differences between their funding and that of other schools or programs. Varying levels of support were simply part of their programmatic reality. Without a basis for comparison, the funding differences had little impact on practical program implementation.

Together, these examples show that S2S can be a sustainable, low-cost model for schools aiming to strengthen student belonging, encourage leadership, and deepen family engagement. These elements, in turn, help create conditions for strong academic outcomes.

From these case studies, five key recommendations arise for consideration by the MCEC team. These recommendations are framed to strategically support program expansion, sustainability, and streamlining.

1. **Capture and Share Promising Practices.** Collect and share materials like orientation agendas, selection rubrics, and fundraising ideas with other S2S schools. Such materials and ideas can be showcased as exemplars in training and implementation guides. Highlight the benefit of these tools on all students and the school's broader culture.
2. **Normalize Resourcefulness and Provide Targeted Technical Assistance.** Recognize that many programs operate without external funding. Offer technical assistance that highlights low-cost practices and community partnerships. Frame club-based fundraising and creative sustainability ideas as core competencies, not stopgaps.
3. **Invest in Passionate Leadership.** Identify and support adult sponsors with lived experiences or deep empathy for military-connected students. Their leadership creates authentic, culturally responsive programming.
4. **Leverage District-Level Advocacy.** Seek visible support from school district leadership to elevate programs, celebrate student leaders, and inspire replication across other campuses.
5. **Focus on Relational Support Over Funding.** Encourage collaboration and idea-sharing between the sponsor and school- or district-level staff. While financial resources are helpful, relationship-based support often provides greater long-term sustainability and resilience.

Appendix A: S2S Logic Model

Activities	Outputs	Short Term Outcomes	Medium Term Outcomes
MCEC S2S Program • Student 2 Student® (S2STM) training • Trainers • Resources/supplies • Research- based training curriculum **S2S Program Post- Training Support** • Resources and Club support • Monthly "Just Saying" Newsletter • School Planning Calendar • Monthly activity recommendations • Month of Military Child Tool Kit **Ongoing Evaluation** • Post-training survey • Student Report • MFAN external evaluation support **MCEC Enhancements** • MCEC 360 Summits • Global Training • Three optional leadership programs • S2S™ Teams of the Year **School and Community (parents/sponsors)** • Intentional recruitment of student attendees and adult sponsors • Substitute teachers • Buses/transportation • Time and space to implement S2S Clubs and Month of the Military Child activities	• # research articles incorporated into training curriculum • # training sessions • # schools/ year • # leader/sponsors trained • # returning leaders • # student-led tours • # participants who engage in (further) leadership opportunities • # activities throughout the year • # S2S Clubs • # S2S team growth • # service projects	***Reactions*** • Participants enjoy the experience and provide positive word of mouth • Participants feel inspired and motivated to implement new strategies ***Learning*** • Participants learn how to make other students feel welcome • Participants learn the challenges faced by students as they transition in/out of school • Participants can identify the six building blocks (core values) of S2S	***Use/Behavior*** • Participants apply the six building blocks (core values) of S2S. • Participants implement strategies from training to engage new students in serving the school and community. • Participants grow the S2S team and recruit new members • Participants are more purposeful in how they welcome the students • Participants develop leadership skills and intrapersonal skills • Participants can identify personal skills needed to implement and sustain a successful S2S program using leadership, team building, and communication skills ***Impact*** • Parents observe positive changes in S2S participants. • Sponsors disseminate information to other school staff • Sponsors start or continue to support a S2S club • Principal buy-in • New students experience positive peer-to-peer interactions • New students feel welcome and are more familiar with campus • New students develop a sense of belonging
Expected Impact			
100% Acceptance: Respect for EVERY student no matter their differences. Improved school culture (culture of inclusion, attitudes towards school, feelings of inclusion) Improved academic performance (attendance, grades)			

*In this document, individuals who attend S2S Training are referred to as S2S Participants (Adult Sponsors and Student Attendees)

Interview Guide for School Administrators

1. S2S Program Implementation
- How is the S2S program implemented in your school?
- Tell me about how the program is supported.
- How does the level of financial support affect program implementation at your school?

2. Impact on Youth
- What changes, if any, have you observed in students participating in the S2S program?
- How has the S2S program affected new and transitioning students' sense of belonging?

3. Impact on Parents
- How do parents perceive the impact of the S2S program?
- Have you received any feedback from parents regarding their children's adjustment to the school?

4. School Culture
- What factors contribute to school leadership and staff buy-in for the S2S program?

5. Recommendations
- What improvements would you recommend for enhancing the S2S program?

Interview Guide for Parents of S2S Participants
1. Understanding the Program
- How would you describe your understanding of the S2S program at your child's school?
- What has your child shared with you about their experience in S2S?
- Have you noticed any events, meetings, or school activities related to the program?

2. Impact on Your Child
- In what ways, if any, has the program helped your child make friends or feel more connected at school?
- Have you seen any changes in your child's confidence, leadership, or social skills since joining the program?

3. Impact on You as a Parent
- Tell me about any impacts you think the S2S program has had on you as a parent in terms of being connected to the school or supported during your child's transition.

Interview Guide for S2S Sponsors
1. S2S Program Implementation
- Could you describe how the S2S program is implemented in your school?
- What are the participants' general reactions to the S2S program?
- How does the level of financial support (strong, moderate, limited) impact program delivery?

2. Impact on Youth

- How do you believe the program influences students' leadership development and social skills?
- How has the program affected the sense of belonging for new and transitioning students?
- Could you provide examples of how the program has helped specific students?

3. Impact on Parents
- What feedback have you received from parents about the program?
- Do parents report any changes in their children's adjustment to school?

4. School Culture and Alignment with National Standards
- How do you think the S2S program impacts your school culture?

5. Recommendations
- Do you have recommendations to improve the S2S program's effectiveness?

Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. Overview of the S2S Program
- Tell me about your experience with S2S. How would you explain it to someone who is learning about the program for the first time?
- What do you think is the best part of being in the S2S program?
-

2. Suggestions for Improvement
- What would make the program better or more fun for students?

3. Support for New Students
- How do you think the S2S program helps new students when they come to your school?
- Have you seen it make a difference for someone?

4. Personal Impact
- How has being part of S2S affected you personally?