

Getting the kids ready

More than 275 flag officers have taken the challenge of getting schools to turn out military-worthy students

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NORFOLK, Va. -- The Battleship Wisconsin in Norfolk was host to three retired flag officers who took time out of their schedules to impart important information affecting children in the United States today and call on law makers to take ownership of America's future, Feb. 2.

The two former Air Force generals and the former Coast Guard admiral were part of more than 275 flag level officers that have joined the non-profit group called "Mission: Readiness." Mission: Readiness seeks to educate policymakers in order to expand high-quality early childhood education programs, increase access to healthier food at school and improve the quality and quantity of Physical Education.

Research done by Dr. Curtis L. Gilroy, Director, Accession Policy, in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, showed that 75 percent of adults from the ages of 17 - 24 in the U.S. today are ineligible for military service. The statistics pointed to three main culprits of this ineligibility: obesity, criminal records or lack of a high school education.

The statistics are dire enough for Air Force Gen. Richard E. Hawley (ret.), Coast Guard Adm. James M. Loy (ret.) and Air Force Major Gen. David M. Edgington (ret.) to visit Norfolk to speak and push the point home. These retired senior leaders feel that, in the long run, this may hurt the military and America.

"Those high rates are not only regrettable for those young people who are unable to enlist and gain the benefits from public service in our military - the workouts, the discipline, the pride that comes with the awareness of self - but also weakens the military's ability to train and maintain a strong military to keep America safe," said Hawley.

"We certainly want the people to be able to join the service, and be eligible to do so, and we want to be able to hold to those people throughout their career," said Loy.

"I think this goes beyond the military service," said Edgington. "We need to increase our education levels and reduce criminal levels if we are going to succeed as a nation."

Part of the reason are the subjects that are being favored, said one member of the Mission Readiness program.

"I think we have a great shortage of qualified people for jobs in the United States. Our educational system has developed poets instead of engineers," said U.S. Marine Lt. Gen. Jack W. Klimp (ret.). "It may be we need to develop poet-engineers. In the six years since I retired, I have worked in drug rehabilitation and have seen a number of young people whose opportunities in this world are limited because of their lack of education."

And the training levels of forces have gone up as well.

"The challenges that we present to these kids today are much more challenging. Think about what these young Soldiers and Marines go through every day in Afghanistan. They are dealing with a different culture and it is important that they be good ambassadors. As they approach the people, they have to understand that culture. That is asking a lot of a young person and we do it all the time," said Hawley.

"The technological advances that every platform on all five of our services utilize, demands a sophistication level that we can begin to breed by an investment in Pre-kindergarten," said Loy.

"I grew up in a home with a mother who was a school teacher, a father who was a business man, and they spent a lot of time with my brother and I teaching us to read," said Edgington. "It was a great environment and I had a lot of advantages. A lot of the young people today don't have any advantages, and pre-school can help overcome some of that deficit."

This means that the school systems will have to change to become more competitive with the rest of the worlds educational environments.

"We are trying to understand what is needed for Virginia's children, for America's children. The children need the early education skills. It helps a lot for children to get that leg-up and start school - ready to learn," said Amy Dawson Taggart, the Mission: Readiness National Director.

And all in all, this is the future of America.

"Who wouldn't think that, the qualification of America's youth to sustain the legacy that we are leaving behind as leaders of the military, isn't something we should dedicate our post-military careers to supporting," said Edgington.

For more information on Mission: Readiness, visit www.missionreadiness.org.