

Davenport made it clear that he heard Soldiers' complaints about SSD — one of the messages aired during the town hall's breaks even highlighted some — and that he and the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy are committed to improving PME.

“Let me just tell you the feedback I've received from the Soldiers: We have to make sure that the material in there makes sense, that it's tied to something,” he said. “And I think that the work that USASMA's done of making sure the SSDs prepare you for what you're going to see in the brick-and-mortar, but more importantly now the way they've designed our Structured Self-Development is it's tied back” to previous and future courses.

SSD “has to make sense,” Davenport continued.

“It can't just be the spot where we put all mandatory training; it has to be built in to follow a progressive, sequential manner tied to our PME to be effective,” he said. “But we're going to have to maintain SSDs. SSDs will be around in our Army. As a matter of fact, we'll go to six. Every level of PME will have an SSD.”

The changes to SSD mirror the changes to NCOs' required PME, such as ALC, SLC and the new Master Leader Course. Those courses will soon incorporate a common core of instruction.

“A lot of work has gone into the design of it,” Davenport said. “Not only the content of it, with the common core. Common core is six subjects that we're going to start in the Basic Leader Course. It's progressive and sequential; we're going to build skills and knowledge all the way up to the Executive Leader Course. We kind of already mentioned how the SSDs are going to tie the brick-and-mortar to the distance learning. What I'm very excited about is the rigor that is going to be applied to our NCO PME — academic rigor.

“If you want to see a great example of it, I ran into a noncommissioned officer who just went through the Master Leader Course,” he said, mentioning a guest entry on his blog at tradocnews.org. “And truly the Master Leader Course is where all these ideas were exercised, to validate to see if we could spread it out in our PME.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Defreese, USASMA's commandant, said the first blocks of SSD instruction will be foundational and the later blocks will lead directly into brick-and-mortar coursework.

“If they're exposed to something in SSD1, they'll talk about it in BLC,” he said. “It not only pulls from the one before, but it also leads into the next level of SSD.

“That's the whole continuum, not just the SSDs. As we're redoing the Basic Leader Course and we're now doing the Advanced Leader Course and Senior Leader Course common core curriculum, it will be sequential and progressive across the entirety of the NCOPDS. ... They will be linked for the first time in our history.”

Capacity

Among the first questions Davenport fielded pertained to capacity and requirement waivers for Army Reserve Soldiers.

“It doesn’t matter what component you belong to. The STEP policy of Select, Train, Educate and Promote applies to all three components,” he said. “You must go to PME prior to being promoted to that grade. I don’t know the particulars, but we have absolutely no issue with capacity. I hope the people in the back will make a hashtag that says #TRADOCHasCapacity to get Soldiers to school.

“What we are seeing is that we’re still having a deferment problem even with the deferment policy that we have in place,” Davenport continued. “We just need to make sure that Soldiers are ready to go to school, and if they can’t go to school, to let us know as soon as possible so that we can get other Soldiers to the school.”

Since the last town hall in March, Davenport said TRADOC has established both a deferment policy and a priority list for PME. Soldiers in danger of not being promoted and those backlogged in their PME have top priorities, but Soldiers who just want to get ahead on their schooling have opportunities, too.

In reply to a question about Advanced Leader Course opportunities for low-density MOSs, Jeff Wells, TRADOC chief of plans and Training Operations Management Activity plans officer, said TOMA was working with Human Resources Command to offer courses regularly for all three components and was looking at using mobile training teams to boost PME opportunities at sites other than the centers of excellence.

The commenter said ALC classes in his MOS were only offered three or four times a year and were often scheduled near the beginning of the year, creating a delay for Soldiers.

Another commenter wondered if TRADOC had plans to improve availability for the functional Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course — which was surprise to the panelists, because the organizers of the course don’t perceive any problems with capacity.

Defreese and Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins, USASMA’s deputy commandant, suggested issues at specific installations might cause some backups in BSNCOG availability.

Defreese noted that with the course’s video teletraining, or VTT, model, availability at USASMA is rarely a problem. However, installation commanders are responsible for providing an on-site assistant instructor, so backlogs can occur at specific posts.

And Huggins noted that even with seats available overall, organizations preparing to deploy can cause surges in BSNCOG enrollment at particular installations.

Functional courses

In addition to BSNCO, Davenport brought up another valuable functional course, the Senior Enlisted Joint Professional Military Education Course Levels 1 and 2. The town hall even featured a special message from Command Sgt. Maj. John W. Troxell, Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, about how important exposure to joint operations can be.

“The current operational environment points to all future conflicts being transregional, multidomain and multifunctional,” he said in a prerecorded message. “That means it’s a joint and multinational fight. Because of what this will require of our noncommissioned officers, we must expand their development to produce joint enlisted leaders with broader leadership capabilities.

“That’s where senior joint professional military education comes in,” he continued. “SEJPME 1 and 2 are designed to complement the current [NCO education] continuum by exposing enlisted leaders to joint education and giving them the tools to operate and supervise effectively as part of our future joint force. With enlisted leaders holistically developed to function confidently and competently in a joint environment, our military will continue to have the decisive advantage against any adversary in this increasingly complex world.”

Level 2 is necessary to be a student in the Sergeants Major Course.

Although Level 1 is not a requirement, Defreese said, “I think it’s probably important, because we have put a joint portion in the Master Leader Course and there will be some joint exposure in the Senior Leader Course, so it’s probably relevant to have the Phase 1 before you go to the Senior Leader Course.”

Huggins added, “We’re in a smaller military across the board, so we are going to work with all our brothers and sisters out there in the different services, and so being exposed to them earlier I think makes transitioning easier when you fall under a joint command. We have a lot of JTFs out there and there are plenty of Soldiers who don’t know what that means.”

Fast-trackers?

Because the STEP system requires a Soldier to complete each block of instruction before he or she can be promoted, one commenter wondered whether it was possible for high-speed Soldiers to get promoted quickly.

Davenport pointed out that the “S” in “STEP” stands for “Select.”

“STEP is not automatic promotions,” he said. “It’s about recognizing — the ‘S’ is ‘select’ — those Soldiers who have demonstrated potential and performance and character to be recommended for promotion. So there’s always an opportunity to move ahead. It still requires

the SSDs to be completed and [you to] be fit, ready to go to school once you go on that standing promotion list.”

He did say the Army is considering moving pin-on dates to ensure Soldiers have time to get through their PME requirements in time to get branch-qualified and be competitive for the next level.

Priority 1 Soldiers

A commenter asked about Soldiers who are eligible for promotion except for the PME requirement. Aubrey Butts, director of the Institute for NCO Professional Development, said the Army is working to get those Soldiers into the required courses.

“They are Priority 1 people, and what we do is we offer them the chance to go to school up front,” Butts said. “And, probably, the next part of that question is what if they don’t go? When they arrive in the primary zone and they have not completed the necessary PME, they are probably boarded and eliminated from the Army.”

Davenport added, “This is always a tough question about who is responsible for making sure a sergeant gets to go to school. First and foremost, it’s the Soldier. The way that ATAARS is set up now, they get a notice and depending on the hierarchy that’s established within the ATAARS system, unit leadership gets notified that Davenport needs to go to school. ...”

“They all have received their opportunity to attend PME, and they are on notice that this is their last shot to go or they will be non-PME compliant and subject to the various [Qualitative Service Program] programs that we have going in our Army.”

A commenter followed up with a question about deployed Soldiers and whether they would be allowed waivers. Davenport said the Army is trying to avoid the scenario by using mobile training teams or asking Soldiers to attend courses earlier.

The school systems of the active-duty Army, the National Guard and the Army Reserve are also being combined to allow Soldiers more opportunities to go to a course any time it’s offered, said Troy L. Nattress, plans officer for TOMA. For instance, if active Army and the National Guard each teach a course four times a year, now any Soldier has eight opportunities to attend.

Nattress said, “That can really help these Soldiers get to school, get promoted and then return to their units and support the Army’s readiness.”