

A Look Inside DoDEA

Meeting the educational needs of the military child

By Janine Boldrin

Around the globe, United States military personnel and civilian personnel of the Department of Defense (DoD) depend on the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) to plan, direct, coordinate and manage their child's education.

DoDEA is comprised of two school systems that serve more than 84,000 students: the DoD Dependents Schools (DoDDS), which consists of 128 overseas schools, and the DoD Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS), which consists of 63 domestic schools.

With the stress of deployments and frequent moves, the children who attend DoDEA schools have unique challenges that the school system must address. To meet those challenges, DoDEA has ramped up their efforts to bring positive changes into the classroom of the military child through frequent evaluation of their organization and the implementation of new programs.

Unique concerns

The average child in a military family will move approximately six to nine times during their school-age years. To meet this challenge, DoDEA has been focused on creating consistency within its system as children transition between DoDEA schools, along with working with local communities to learn best practices and discuss how they can better serve the children of military families.



Roughly 80,000 students from military families attend DoDEA schools around the world.
Photo courtesy of DoDEA

"Wherever (military families) go, they are going to find consistency in the educational opportunities for their child," said Charles Toth, Principal Deputy Director and Associate Director for Education for DoDEA, when discussing students transitioning between DoDEA schools.

According to Toth, DoDEA has been focused on a comprehensive review of its operations and has formed task groups to look at various functions within the organization. As part of that effort, there has been an emphasis on bringing consistency to the overall structure and educational programs within DoDEA.

"It is a constant effort that we try to become transparent for our military members and dependents," said

Bruce Jeter, Area Director for DoDEA Americas Schools. "We try to make sure that our curriculum is similar. That doesn't mean they are on the same chapter or page, but for the most part, we try to sequence our course work so our kids don't lose out."

Jeter, who grew up in a military family and has children who attended DoDEA schools, has experienced firsthand what military families face when it comes to the challenge of transitioning students from school to school.

"If we are sequencing differently, (military children) could miss out on some important information and learning. When we become transparent, it allows our families to gain

from that as they PCS from installation to installation," said Jeter. Complementing their continuing efforts to make smoother transitions, DoDEA is also striving to meet the needs of students whose family members may be deployed.

"Each of our schools has a counselor who is there to support all of the children, but particularly they pay attention to children whose parents are deployed," said Dell McMullen, Superintendent of the Georgia/Alabama DDESS District. "Those children are invited to join a deployment group."

McMullen said that the deployment groups allow for both structured and unstructured contact between counselors and students. Through these interactions, counselors pay attention for changes with the children, in particular if there has been a change in their attendance, academics and how they are getting along with others.

"Our children are resilient, however they have needs like other children," said McMullen. "There is no doubt that a long war impacts our children so as resilient as they are, there is still an impact."

Evaluating Performance

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which is commonly called "The Nation's Report Card" is used when statistically comparing DoDEA schools to their civilian counterparts. NAEP is administered to all fourth and eighth grades within the DoDEA system. In 2009, DoDEA schools collectively scored above the average national score of their public school counterparts for the reading assessment part of the NAEP.

Additionally, parents can view the web based Annual School Report Card (SRC) which was created in response for more accountability to parents on how their child's school was performing. In an online statement, Toth stressed the importance of parents using the SRC tool to become familiar with a school to which their child will be transitioning.

"Our parents appreciate that we have standard information," said McMullen. "I share our scores with them and let them see that our students score above the national average. I share with them how we focus on using this data on achieving our academic goals each year and how that focus results in improved student achievement."

Continuous improvement

Over the past several years, DoDEA has implemented a comprehensive

review of operations around the organization. As part of that review, task groups were formed to look at DoDEA functions and have made ongoing recommendations for improvements that they hope will benefit their students.

Toth said there are a lot of different ways DoDEA gathers information, but the task groups are on the forefront of recommendations to the director.

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"This has been the most exciting time of my professional career," said Toth. "What we have been doing over the past three years, it's just been awesome the change we've undertaken to provide a world-class education for military kids."

According to Toth, some of the recent changes that DoDEA has undergone to improve the quality of education they provide include a reduction in the student-to-teacher ratio in kindergarten classrooms from the previous ratio of 29:1 to 18:1 with a full-time aide in each classroom. Based on feedback from their schools on such things as facilities and space, 19 schools are able to implement the new ratio for the 2010-11 school year.

"We've (also) been engaged in a study of math reform to assure our parents

and students that our math program is aligned with the best math programs across the United States," said Toth. "And the literacy task group is looking at a comprehensive K through 12 literacy program."

In addition to recommendations by their task groups, DoDEA has made changes based on their biannual district wide customer satisfaction surveys. During the 2008-09 survey, DoDEA found dissatisfaction from parents and students in the area of counseling services.

Advanced Placement (AP) programs were also identified through the customer satisfaction survey as an area parents and students were unhappy with, Toth said. He continued by saying that DoDEA responded by implementing suggestions made for improving these areas.

"We want to make sure that high school students have access to AP courses. Whether we can do it face to face or virtually or through distance learning," said Jeter. "My own daughter left Seoul, Korea with us to move to North Carolina during high school. She finished out that year virtually by continuing the courses she was taking overseas."

For the 2010-11 school year, DoDEA unveiled their new Virtual School, a distance learning program with fully accredited courses designed to meet the needs of children who are physically displaced from being able to take desired courses, transitioning between schools or having difficulty with scheduling conflicts.

Connecting with parents

While surveys allow parents to express areas of concern within their child's school, the leadership at DoDEA continues to ask parents to be a part of their child's education.

"No matter where the kids are located, it is imperative that the parents are included in the educational process," said Jeter. "If there is something great or something not great going on, the

Educating Through Understanding

The approximately 8,700 educators within DoDEA come from a wide variety of backgrounds that includes spouses of service members, veterans, and those who simply enjoy the prospect of moving and teaching around the world.

"By far, the vast majority who work for us come to us because they appreciate the ability to move which allows them to understand our military members," said Jeter. "They have moved and understand the stress of moving. They do rotate overseas. But our teachers are more alike than different from their counterparts (in the civilian system)."

McMullen recently did a study in her own district that showed just under one-quarter of the teachers were military spouses along with ten percent being veterans.

"You have spouses (who) come and go, they bring a wealth of knowledge. Then you have teachers from outside the gate (who) bring longevity," said McMullen. "You want to have a balance in your workforce."

parents need to make us aware of it."

He continued by saying that most of the issues DoDEA solves come from grassroots efforts.

"We try to take some of the stress away for parents by making sure their kids are getting a good education and are being taken care of," said Jeter. And DoDEA takes their mission to heart. "We are genuinely interested in your child," said McMullen. "We appreciate our military families. We know the sacrifice that you are making." ●

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Partnering With Local Civilian Schools

According to DoDEA's Educational Partnership Branch, less than 10 percent of the 1.2 million children of military service members attend DoD schools. Because of this, partnering with local public schools is essential to ensuring a continuity and quality of education for military families.

The Educational Partnership Branch reaches out to local civilian schools to provide quality education, seamless transition and deployment support to military students, in addition to issuing grants that benefit student achievement.

In 2009, \$56 million was awarded to military connected public schools in an effort to enhance the education of military students. In 2010, approximately \$20 million is expected to be awarded by DoDEA to promote student achievement at schools impacted by military force structure changes.