

School's In!

Finding the Best Education for Your Child When You Relocate

By Kay Daly

The average military child moves six to nine times between kindergarten and high school graduation — and each move brings a new set of challenges for military parents who want the best education for their children.

To ensure the perfect educational fit for your child when you relocate, be prepared to take some action and plan ahead. Follow these tips to find the best school for your child.



Step 1: Know Your Options

From schools on the base to school in the home, you have a lot of options to choose from. To find the best fit, start by learning what's available.

Public Schools

Your local public school offers a free education to all children living in the area, paid for by taxpayer funds. The benefits of public schooling include price (free) and location (most public school students attend a school in their neighborhood).

The public school system also includes other options:

Charter Schools offer innovative, flexible programs designed to meet the needs of the surrounding community, such as at-risk students or liberal-arts concentration. They operate independently from the local school district, but are accountable to parents and students. Charter schools are open to all students, but due to space limitations, enrollment may be determined by lottery.

To enhance the educational experience of students with particular interests or talents, **magnet schools** are organized around particular subjects or themes, such as science or the arts. Prospective students may be required to demonstrate special knowledge or skills, and enrollment capacity may be limited.

Department of Defense Schools

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) operates more than 220 public schools committed to providing a high-quality education for children who live on military bases.

In addition to offering an education on par with public schools, DoDEA schools are uniquely responsive to the circumstances of military children, such as frequent relocation and the stress of deployment. DoDEA teachers are prepared to handle these special circumstances, and the student body offers a like-minded community that shares experiences common to military families. DoDEA schools also offer special counseling and peer groups for children whose parents are deployed.

Private Schools

Private schools do not receive public funds and are supported by tuition paid directly by parents and families. Private schools can offer a variety of benefits, including smaller class size and individual attention, as well as attention to topics not treated in public schools, such as religion. Some private schools may offer an alternative learning environment, such as the child-driven teaching style of Montessori.

Non-Traditional Options

Increasingly, military families have taken advantage of non-traditional education options that offer greater flexibility, continuity, and stability. These include:

Home Schooling: Using curriculum that can be obtained online, from the community, and in some cases from the local DoDEA school, home schooling parents guide their children's education. The high degree of parental involvement may deter some families, but for many, home schooling is both educationally and personally enriching.

Distance Learning: Distance learning provides older students with coursework that may not be available after relocation. Like home schooling, distance learning allows families to control the continuity of education despite frequent moves. A variety of organizations and schools offer distance learning programs. (See "School Choice Resources.")

Step 2: Know What You Want

Next, think through what you and your child want most out of an education. Be sure to consider:

Your child's needs: Does your child work better in a structured environment or in an environment that allows more freedom? Does your child need one-on-one attention? Does your child have special learning needs?

Your child's learning style: Does your child learn best by seeing, by listening, or through hands-on activities? Does your child prefer to learn individually, or in a group?

Preferred location and environment: What are your plans for transportation? Does your neighborhood offer a child-friendly environment? Do you want to consider a boarding school?

Step 3: Do Your Research

Finally, you'll need to learn more about each school you're considering. Online services such as www.greatschools.net or www.schoolmatters.com provide information about test scores, class size, attendance, and student demographics.

Also, schedule a visit, make an appointment to speak with the principal, or attend parent fairs and school open houses. Find out what teachers think of their schools, and observe how students interact. Ask about:

Curriculum: Does the school have a strong program in core academic subjects? What additional courses are offered? Does the school offer enrichment for gifted students and support for special needs students?

Teaching philosophy: Does the school take a particular approach to teaching? How large are the classes? What is the homework policy?

Academic performance: How do the school's test scores compare nationally? Have scores risen or declined recently? What percentage of students matriculate?

School atmosphere: Is the school safe? What is the disciplinary policy? What extracurricular activities are offered? What facilities are available (library, gym, computer lab, etc.)?

Start by educating yourself, and you'll soon find the best school for your child!

10 Things to Look for in a School

- High expectations
- Busy students
- Great teachers
- Great principal
- Vibrant parent-teacher organization
- Children are neither invisible nor scared to be at school
- Gut reaction that this is the school for your child
- Rigorous curriculum
- Families like yours are welcome, and their concerns are acknowledged
- You are satisfied with the school's results on standardized tests and school report cards

Source: Minnesota Department of Education, Office of Choice and Innovation

School Choice Resources

Guides for School Selection

“Choosing a School for Your Child”

<http://www.ed.gov/parents/schools/find/choose/index.html>
Department of Education workbook designed to help parents select the best school.

“Military Students on the Move: A Toolkit for Military Parents”

http://www.militarystudent.dod.mil/ParentsToolkit_0406.pdf
Includes a section on the “Essentials of School Choice.”

Finding and Comparing Schools

National Center for Education Statistics

<http://www.nces.ed.gov/globallocator/>
A national school locator.

GreatSchools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>
Compare schools’ test scores, teachers’ credentials, and parent reviews. Full information available with subscription.

Public Schools

SchoolMatters

<http://www.schoolmatters.com/>
Comparative data about public schools.

U.S. Charter Schools

<http://www.uscharterschools.org/>
Information and a directory of charter schools.

Magnet Schools of America

<http://www.magnet.edu/>
Information and listings of magnet schools nationwide.

Department of Defense Schools

Department of Defense Education Activity

<http://www.dodea.edu/>
Information about DoDEA schools.

Private Schools

National Association of Independent Schools

<http://www.nais.org/>
Search for private schools and learn about admissions and financial aid.

Non-Traditional Options

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support

<http://www.dantes.doded.mil>
Directory of high school distance learning programs.

Virtual High School

<http://www.govhs.org/>
A non-profit organization offering for-credit high school courses.

Advanced Academics

<http://www2.advancedacademics.com/>
An accredited online curriculum service for high school students.

You Can Home School

<http://www.youcanhomeschool.org>
Resources provide by the Home School Legal Defense Association.

