



DOD Domestic School System: Background and Issues

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) manages a federal school system that provides pre-kindergarten through grade 12 education, primarily for the children of active duty servicemembers living on military installations. In 2023, DODEA operated 160 schools globally, including 50 domestic schools across 17 installations and one virtual school. These schools employ nearly 12,000 staff for a student population of about 70,000. Military families have generally cited the availability of DOD schools as a positive quality-of-life issue. This report focuses only on DOD’s Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS).

Legislative Background

Since the early 1800s, commanders on military installations had established their own schools. In 1950, Congress consolidated the funding and operation of installation-run schools under the Office of Education – later the Department of Education (ED) as part of Section 6 of P.L. 81-874. Between 1950 and 1980 these *Section 6* schools were established in locales where (1) state laws prohibited tax revenues of the state or any political subdivision of the state to be expended for free public education of children residing on federal property; or (2) education systems within the local communities were judged unable to provide suitable free public education. Though the law did not define “suitable” education, some were established to provide a racially integrated schooling option for children of servicemembers (e.g., Maxwell Elementary School, Alabama). Others were established at installations in remote or sparsely populated locations. The 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act (P.L. 97-35) shifted funding responsibility for all DOD schools from ED to DOD. In 1994, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1995 (P.L. 103-337) replaced the Section 6 legislation and renamed the school system the Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS). During that time period, Congress sought to transfer control of many installation-based schools to local education authorities (LEAs; P.L. 99-167). Congress has periodically requested studies on the divestiture of the remaining DOD domestic schools to LEAs.

Authorities

Section 2164 of Title 10, United States Code, provides the statutory authority for the Secretary of Defense to enter into arrangements to provide for the elementary and secondary education for children of members of the Armed Forces and DOD civilian employees assigned domestically (to include any U.S. state, territory, commonwealth, or possession). Factors to be considered when determining whether to provide for domestic education include the extent to which 1) children are eligible for free public education in the local area adjacent to the military installation, and 2) the ability

of LEAs to provide an appropriate public school educational program for such children.

Impact Aid

Approximately 1.1 million school-aged children have at least one parent in the military, and nearly 80% of these children attend non-DDESS public schools off military bases. Since 1950 (P.L. 81-874), LEAs have been authorized to receive financial aid, called *Impact Aid* from ED for “federally connected students” enrolled in local public schools to compensate for a “substantial and continuing financial burden” resulting from federal activities. DOD administers an Impact Aid Program in addition to the ED program for LEAs that meet certain conditions. For more background on ED and DOD Impact Aid, please see CRS Report R45400, *Impact Aid, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: A Primer*.

Enrollment Eligibility

Dependent children of U.S. military and DOD civilian employees living on an installation with a DDESS school are eligible to attend that school tuition-free. Other dependent children of DOD military, federal civilian employees, and foreign militaries may be eligible for tuition-free enrollment under certain circumstances. Children of DOD contractors are not eligible to enroll. DDESS schools may accept dependent children of other non-DOD federal agency employees for tuition reimbursement by the agency; however, DDESS may not accept tuition from individuals. Tuition rates for domestic schools for the 2022-2023 school year were between \$22,000 and \$26,000, depending on the student’s grade.

DDESS Budget

The DDESS budget is supported by defense-wide Operation and Maintenance (O&M), Military Construction (MILCON), and Procurement appropriations. The O&M budget for DDESS includes items such as salaries, travel, contracts, supplies, and equipment. MILCON funds are typically appropriations for projects like new school construction or additions to existing schools.

Table I. DOD Domestic School O&M Funding
Current dollars in millions

	FY2022 (actual)	FY2023 (enacted)	FY2024 (request)
O&M	\$674.386	\$670.103	\$717.001

Source: DOD Comptroller, Budget Books

Note: O&M enacted funding for overseas DOD schools was \$1.236 billion for FY2023.

Student Performance

DODEA primarily measures student performance annually within the DOD school system using the TerraNova standardized test. DODEA also participates in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is a standards-based national test administered at grades 4, 8, and 12 in nine subject areas. With respect to NAEP testing outcomes, DODEA schools in the aggregate often perform at or above U.S. national averages and better than the states in which the DDESS schools are located (see **Table 2**). For more information on the NAEP and educational testing, please see CRS Report R45048, *Basic Concepts and Technical Considerations in Educational Assessment: A Primer*.

Table 2. Comparison of DODEA and State Public School Scores to National Scores on the NAEP
% of students at or above proficient, 2022

Jurisdiction	Grade 4 Math	Grade 4 Reading	Grade 8 Math	Grade 8 Reading
Alabama	27%	28%	19%	22%
Georgia	34%	32%	24%	31%
Kentucky	33%	32%	23%	29%
New York	28%	29%	28%	33%
North Carolina	35%	36%	26%	26%
South Carolina	34%	33%	22%	26%
Virginia	38%	32%	31%	31%
DODEA	51%	50%	41%	55%
Nation	35%	32%	26%	29%

Source: NAEP, *The Nation's Report Card*, 2022, <http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>.

Notes: States listed are those with military installations that support DDESS schools. DODEA figures include both domestic and overseas schools. State scores are for public schools only. Boxes shaded green indicate proficiency levels above national average, red boxes indicate proficiency levels below average and unshaded boxes indicate no statistically significant difference between state and national levels.

Issues for Congress

Status Quo v. Divestment Options

Some have questioned the continued need for DOD to own and operate domestic schools. Congress has considered a number of alternatives for funding and operating DOD domestic schools, including,

- closing all base schools and transferring students to LEAs;
- transferring operations to an existing LEA, with DOD maintaining some responsibility for facilities;
- establishing a new LEA covering the entire installation area (coterminous district); and
- converting DDESS schools into charter schools.

Proponents of divesting domestic schools and associated infrastructure argue that the operation of elementary and secondary schools is superfluous to DOD's core national security mission and creates unnecessary administrative overhead. Some note that average per-student costs at DDESS schools are significantly higher than per-student costs at schools operated by LEAs. In addition, some point to future costs to maintain and upgrade existing school infrastructure. Proponents of shuttering these schools or maintaining the buildings on DOD property but turning them over to LEA control argue that these options could result in substantial government savings.

Proponents of maintaining the status quo contend that DDESS schools improve quality of life and troop morale, and serve as a valuable retention incentive for military servicemembers with children. Some argue that DOD domestic schools are better-equipped to provide for the unique needs of military children, for example, providing educational/curriculum continuity for children who are subject to frequent moves. Some contend that LEAs may not have the resources, infrastructure, or administrative capacity to absorb all DDESS students and question whether LEAs would be able to provide the same level of programs and services as provided by DDESS. Military parents who now have the ability to serve on school boards at DDESS schools are concerned about losing the ability to influence school decision-making as their ability to serve on LEA school boards may be subject to local residency restrictions. Some state and local officials are concerned that federal resources (i.e., Impact Aid) would not be sufficient to offset the additional state and local outlays that might be required to support a new LEA or the transfer of DDESS schools to an existing LEA.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are independently operated, publicly funded public schools that are allowed to operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools. In 2008, the Tenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation recommended allowing military parents to form on-installation charter schools. There are currently eight charter schools operated on military installations. Proponents of charter schools on installations suggest that these schools might be more innovative and able to offer tailored services for military families. Issues that have been raised with these charter schools include installation security (e.g., access for civilian students), facility availability, lease requirements, financing, and limitations imposed by state laws.

Universal Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K)

The President's FY2024 Budget Request included a proposal for universal pre-kindergarten at all DODEA schools. This included \$66.45 million in requested funds to provide tuition-free, full-day prekindergarten to approximately 4,000 four-year-old children. Congress may consider whether to appropriate funds for this purpose.

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