

How Two Public School Districts Are Improving K-12 Education For Military Children

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Education

I write about education and getting kids ready for college or careers



In central Missouri, Knob Noster Public Schools and nearby Whiteman Air Force Base have formed a powerful partnership. Beyond strong classroom instruction, they prioritize access to specialized classes like Advanced Placement courses, as well as athletic programs and extracurricular activities like JROTC.

Members of the military who have school-age children move six to nine times before their kids finish high school. Most of those 1.2 million students attend schools around military installations, so they are exposed to the vagaries of U.S. education far more than their civilian counterparts. The education of military children can suffer as students are regularly put at a disadvantage of being either ahead of or behind their peers.

What is unfolding outside the gates of two Air Force bases, one in Montgomery, Alabama and the other in central Missouri, highlights how two communities are addressing education quality issues in ways that could help other regions with sizeable military populations. What's more, the solutions could also improve military readiness by ensuring service members are willing to stay in the military and relocate where they are needed most.

In Montgomery, the service is struggling to attract military families and faculty to take up residence in and around Maxwell Air Force Base, which is home to the service's Air University, a major education center for the service that provides a range of programs including graduate level study.

The reason is the area's struggling public schools. Some 34% of Montgomery County seniors in the 2016-2017 school year graduated without being college or career ready. The five regular high schools in the district had a combined average ACT score of 16, below the minimum score of 21 for enrollment at the University of Alabama. On the state's own education report card, 66% of the Montgomery public schools received grades of D or F, [according to the *Montgomery Advertiser*](#).

[Lt. Gen. Anthony Cotton](#), commander of Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, says that in 2017 more than 56% of airmen arrived at the Air War College in Montgomery without their families, with schools cited as the top reason for separation.

"The reality is, 'If my kids aren't happy, I'm not happy,' " Cotton said of the airmen mindset.

The Air Force is serious about finding solutions for service members so that they want to come to Maxwell. Service leaders and local officials have formed

an education task force and recently held their first summit to consider how to do this. Some of the ideas they are kicking around include improving the process for course selection and Advanced Placement classes that consider the fact that service members may not receive orders to move to the area that line up perfectly with school deadlines. Other ideas include providing additional school choice options for military families including charters schools.

Cotton [described the summit](#) as “the beginning of a long journey that will require the engagement of the entire community.”

Maxwell is pushing to tackle the problem with possible solutions that might also point the way for other military communities struggling with similar education quality issues. Similarly, another Air Force community some 750 miles away is working to ensure that public education gives Air Force families a reason to relocate.

Knob Noster Public Schools in central Missouri serves 1,700 students, 70% of whom have parents assigned to nearby Whiteman Air Force Base, home to the B-2 bomber fleet. Over the last several years, Air Force families have worked closely with district leaders to implement new programs that directly align to college and career workforce demands.

"We have experienced an exceptional partnership with our installation leadership, military families, Department of Defense and other vested partners over the last three years, which has significantly improved our schools," said Superintendent Jerrod Wheeler.

The school district applied for and won nearly \$3 million in Department of Defense-sponsored grants, all of which have dramatically expanded Advanced

Placement, STEM2, leadership, cybersecurity and virtual course offerings for students.

In one powerful example of the partnership between the schools and the base, the local high school's robotics team was asked by base leaders to work with pilots and engineers to [design a 3D-printed prototype switch](#) cover for the cockpit of the B-2 stealth bomber. After perfecting and testing the prototype, the students printed switch covers for the entire B-2 fleet and simulators.

The two Air Force bases are not carbon copies. They are in distinct regions of the U.S., and they have their own unique constraints and issues, so their solutions won't be identical. But the commonality is that they recognize the impact of local education quality on military families and the need to rally local officials to the cause.

In fact, those bases that become desirable outposts are typically ones that institutionalize a high degree of collaboration between the base and the school systems. A [recent report](#) by the Lexington Institute found that military children excelled when the school "district and base staff collaborate closely on all aspects of support for military-connected students, including ways to integrate base staff and leadership into teaching and learning, as well as extra-curricular activities."

Local K-12 education has the attention of the secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force. They [wrote to the nation's governors](#) last year saying that among the factors most frequently cited as drawbacks to military service include "the quality of schools available for their children."

The quality of public education is an issue for all parents, civilian and military alike. But if schools around installations are not performing well, there is an

added dimension for those in uniform and for U.S. policy makers concerned about military readiness and ensuring sufficient retention in the armed forces.