

‘Quick Wins’ On Big Problems Helping Some Military Communities

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Education

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



U.S Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein talks to Association of Defense Communities President Joe Driskill about the state of the Air Force during a National Summit with military community leaders in June 2019. WILL NOONAN, ASSOCIATION OF DEFENSE COMMUNITIES

“If the military wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one.” That’s the poorly conceived, flatly delivered, overused punch-phrase to dismiss deeper discussion on real military quality-of-life issues.

The reality is that thousands of service members do have families – with about 1.2 million kids in tow as they crisscross the country to the next posting.

Among the most important needs for a growing family is a quality K-12 education for their children, something that can be difficult to achieve given the constant moves. Many service members who are also parents of school-age children are drawing a line in the sand. They are letting leaders know that they are not willing to sacrifice the education of their children for national service.

The Air Force's top officer, Gen. David Goldfein, stressed this point to local leaders from defense communities around the country concerned about the viability of their military bases during a summit in June. [Goldfein said](#) that “as we make future basing decisions...we're going to start at some of those quality of life issues because of retention. Airmen are not going to stay in the United States Air Force if I'm moving them between school systems that are all over the map” in terms of quality. As if to underline the point, he added that local investment in school quality around bases “are resources well invested.”

I've discussed previously how one [community](#) – Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala., – is living this problem right now. The K-12 school quality issue is so pressing that the Air Force is struggling to recruit faculty and families to take assignments at Air University, one of Maxwell's most significant components. The recruitment challenges have arisen despite the university's reputation as one of the service's most important intellectual and leadership development centers.

Military-connected kids around Maxwell attend various public school systems in that tri-county region, and some of the schools perform quite well. But others, like Montgomery County Public Schools, are struggling and the root causes for poor school quality run long and deep. Teacher recruitment and training, budget shortfalls and political fighting all undermine the system's

ability to provide the best opportunity possible for kids to get a good shot at college and a career.

For those kinds of entrenched problems, the solutions are certainly long-term. But for Air University, the implications are very much near-term. The university must fill student and faculty billets with high-quality personnel to continue making the institution a productive and valuable military resource. They need to ensure that incoming military families have quality school options. They need to find “quick wins” while also supporting the community’s push toward larger systemic improvements.

Brian Selmeski, chair of Air University’s public K-12 education working group, acknowledges the two tracks.

“Public schools belong to their communities, and only they can ensure long-term solutions that will benefit all children,” [Selmeski said](#). “We aim to be a catalyst and facilitator for that process. Simultaneously, we are pursuing near-term efforts to provide military-affiliated families with more high-quality public educational options for their children.”

Some quick wins are emerging in unique ways. For example, “out-of-district” policies allowing students living on base at Maxwell to attend schools in surrounding communities are a great near-term solution but have had an unintended consequence. Initially, students exercising that policy were ineligible to play on their sports teams for one-year. For kids transitioning from out-of-state schools where they thrived athletically, that can be unacceptable and even devastating for families.

The “overlapping school zone,” another near-term solution negotiated by local superintendents and the Alabama High School Athletic Association emerged

as a fix to the eligibility issue. The agreement allows students residing on-base at Maxwell to maintain athletic eligibility with whatever school they attend. In this case, a quick win (out-of-district enrollment) created an unintended negative consequence (loss of athletic eligibility), which resulted in another quick win (overlapping school zone).

Maxwell is exploring other quick wins. They include expanding enrollment at the on-base Defense Department-sponsored school to families not living on the base and expanding application deadlines for area magnet high schools to accommodate for military families who may arrive after the application cycle ends.

Selmeski adds that improved communications also are playing a big role in helping address K-12 problems. Maxwell and community leaders recently held a symposium with more than two hundred local educators and state leaders to discuss the nuts and bolts of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. The compact allows for uniform treatment of military children as they transfer between school districts in different states.

Some changes aren't as simple as they initially look. For example, allowing off-base military families access to the on-base school requires modifications to federal legislation, which lays out eligibility to schools on bases. Still, the community and Maxwell are making headway.

“The efforts and progress we have seen from all the local school districts in improving educational options speaks to the tremendous desire for success across the region,” said Col. Patrick Carley, commander of the 42nd Air Base Wing at Maxwell.

Lt. Gen. Anthony Cotton, commander of Air University, deserves high praise for shining a light on the relationship between national security and local K-12 education. But for this promising effort to have a fair shot at success, the commitment must carry on well beyond Cotton's tenure.

It requires the community to stay engaged and address longstanding problems with schools. Local communities with military installations have a lot at stake—the economic engine provided by military facilities—and they have an incentive to get it right. The fervent hope is that Maxwell will provide a blueprint that can be emulated across the country.