

Something You May Not Expect Is Impacting Military Readiness

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



U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Anthony Cotton, commander and president of Air University, speaks about the mission of AU and the university's role in the River Region, during a K-12 Education Summit at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., Jan. 9, 2019. The summit included leaders from local school districts, universities, Maxwell Air Force Base, the Alabama National Guard and several other organizations, and focused on building a dialogue among stakeholders to enhance and improve education opportunities throughout the River Region.

Consider this scenario encountered by military service members.

You're serving at the Pentagon. Your children are thriving in their northern Virginia public schools—some of the best in the country. You are ordered to a

new job that is important to both the needs of the military and your career, but the public schools surrounding that base available to you are suffering and simply can't put your children on the same path for college or career.

What do you do? Do you send your children to those public schools that have been taken over by the state because of low performance? Do you assume the financial burden of private schools? Do you homeschool? Do you let your children continue in their current schools and fulfill that assignment alone? Or do you leave military service because you refuse to put your family in that situation?

Unfortunately, in some communities and for many service members this scenario is very real.

And the military is taking notice.

In a [letter](#) to the National Governor's Association, the military service secretaries for the Departments of the Army, Air Force and Navy asked that the nation's governors pay specific attention to school quality, among other key issues.

Why? Because the military knows that this is an increasingly important issue to military families, and they are competing for talent just like any other government or private organization.

The Air Force, for instance, is highly aware of the connection between local education and military readiness and is showing a strong interest in the degree to which public schools and districts are supporting the unique educational needs of military-connected children.

Heather Pittman, program and management analyst for the Air Force Strategic Basing initiative told me, “Military members report that their children’s educational opportunities influence their decision to continue serving. To address these concerns, the Air Force worked with subject matter experts and developed criteria and a framework, rooted in authoritative data, to assess pre-kindergarten through 12th grade public education. The intent is to collaborate with communities to improve schools near Air Force installations.”

But service members won’t wait around until a school district improves. When schools struggle or have difficulty transitioning military-connected students from one region to the next, military personnel often elect to spare their families from that hardship—either by serving alone at a duty station or leaving military service altogether. In one recent example, the Air Force is having trouble recruiting faculty and Air Force families to take assignments at Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, in large part because of school issues in the Montgomery, Alabama area.

The Air Force is serious about finding solutions so that personnel and their families want to come to Maxwell. Service leaders and local officials have formed an education task force to work closely with the community on solutions. Ideas include changing the process for course selection and Advanced Placement classes to better accommodate the unpredictable timing faced by military families.

Terry Roller, Chief Administrative Officer at the Alabama Department of Education notes, “What you’re seeing in the Montgomery Public School system is a very complex situation that has built up over decades. Leaner budgets, teacher shortages, a tough local economy have all compounded the

problem. The last thing we want to do is give Air University a reason to leave. We're hopeful that by working closely with them—and the entire community—we can find solutions to create robust educational opportunities for all students.”

It's encouraging to know that officials from two military communities— in Montgomery and Hampton Roads, Virginia—will be discussing how they are addressing local education issues at an [upcoming summit](#) in Washington, D.C. Both are tackling the problem with possible solutions that could point the way for other military communities.

Military bases provide huge economic gain for local communities. While many bases have been shuttered since the close of the Cold War, dealing a blow to regional economies, Maxwell and Hampton Roads could provide education-related lessons learned for communities across the country seeking to ensure that their local bases stay put.