

July 22, 2025

## Defense Primer: DOD Dependents Overseas Schools (DODDS)

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) manages 161 schools in 11 foreign countries, seven states, Guam, Puerto Rico, and a virtual school. DODEA organizes these schools in two separate but similar systems:

- the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DODDS) system, authorized under 20 U.S.C. §§926 et seq., and
- the Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary School (DDESS) system, authorized under 10 U.S.C. §2164 (see CRS In Focus IF10335, *Defense Primer: DOD Domestic School System*).

DODDS serves children of military personnel stationed outside of the United States and its territories, and operates 107 schools and one virtual school, with an enrollment of about 45,000 students (see **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**).

### Background

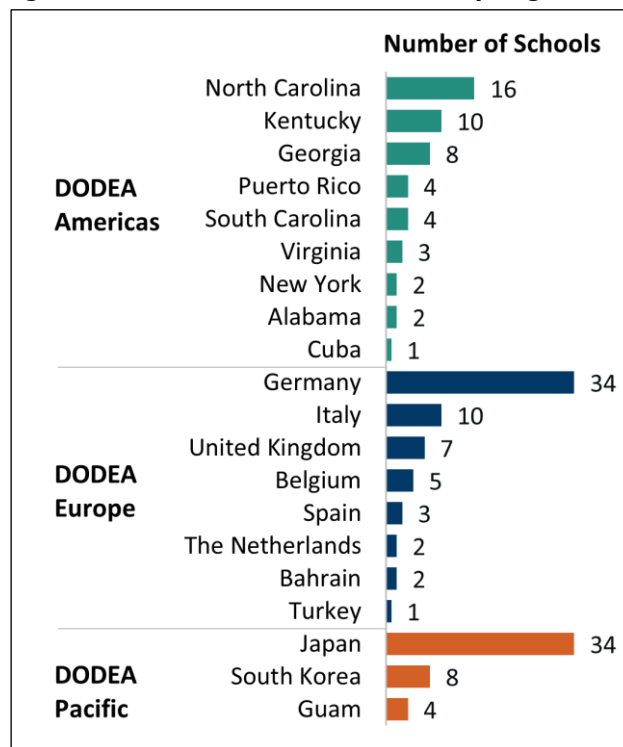
The origins of DODDS system can be traced back to the post-World War II (WWII) era. According to DODEA, “At the end of the war, there was no precedent to follow for establishing and operating dependents schools in foreign occupied countries and quite often, parents organized small schools.” For example, prior to WWII, such schools were established in the Philippines (1918) and in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (1936).

By the end of the 1940s, the Army, Navy, and Air Force separately operated almost 100 schools around the world. In 1959, Congress passed the Defense Department Overseas Teachers Pay and Personnel Practices Act (P.L. 86-91) requiring DOD to prescribe regulations for teacher compensation and benefits, conditions for employment, and other matters relevant to DOD’s overseas schools.

In January 1964, the Secretary of Defense reorganized the overseas school system by placing the responsibility for all schools within a given geographic area on one service branch with oversight by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower. Thus, the Department of the Army was made responsible for academic administration in Europe, the Navy for schools in the Atlantic, and the Air Force for schools in the Pacific.

In 1978, Title XIV of P.L. 95-561, the Defense Dependents’ Education Act of 1978, established the Defense Dependents’ Education System (DDES). This legislation required the Secretary of Defense to provide to eligible overseas dependents a “free,” “high quality,” public education. DOD renamed the DDES as the Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DODDS) in 1979.

**Figure 1. Number of DODEA Schools, by Region**



Source: DODEA, 2025.

Note: Virtual school not included in graphic.

### Operations, Staffing, and Funding

Under 20 U.S.C. §931, the Secretary of Defense has the authority to issue regulations for overseas schools, to include educational goals and objectives, curricula standards, professional standards and certification criteria for DODDS employees, and arrangements for logistical support, among other matters, to “ensure the efficient organization and operation” of the system.

#### Staffing

Most DODDS school employees are federal civilians and subject to civil service authorities under Title 5 of the *U.S. Code*. To determine whether teacher qualifications meet DODEA standards, its Licensure Unit “will evaluate State teaching certificates and transcripts before final job offers are made.”

#### Budget

Defense-wide Operation and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations provide the DODDS budget. The DODDS budget includes salaries for the estimated 6,600 staff, as well as supplies and equipment. DODDS also may get funding from other accounts, such as Procurement and Military Construction.

**Table I. DODDS O&M Funding**

Current dollars in thousands

	FY2024 (actual)	FY2025 (enacted)	FY2026 (request)
O&M	\$1,246,809	\$1,262,306	\$1,319,786

**Source:** DOD FY2026 budget estimates, DOD Dependents Education Activity account.

### Enrollment Eligibility

Those primarily eligible for enrollment in DODDS include dependents (minor children) of (1) active duty servicemembers, (2) full-time DOD civilian employees, and (3) locally hired U.S. citizens or U.S. nationals (see 20 U.S.C. §§923, 923a and 932 and DODEA Administrative Instruction 1344.01). These dependents and certain dependents of foreign military allies are eligible for *space-required, tuition-free* enrollment per DODEA regulations. Other federally connected children may be eligible to enroll on a *space-available, tuition-paying* or *tuition-free* basis. Federally connected eligibility includes minor dependents of federal (non-DOD) employees, contractors, host-nation and third-country military or diplomatic personnel, and non-command sponsored personnel. Non-federally connected children are generally eligible in the lowest

priority category and may include dependents of U.S. citizen expatriates and foreign nationals, under some conditions.

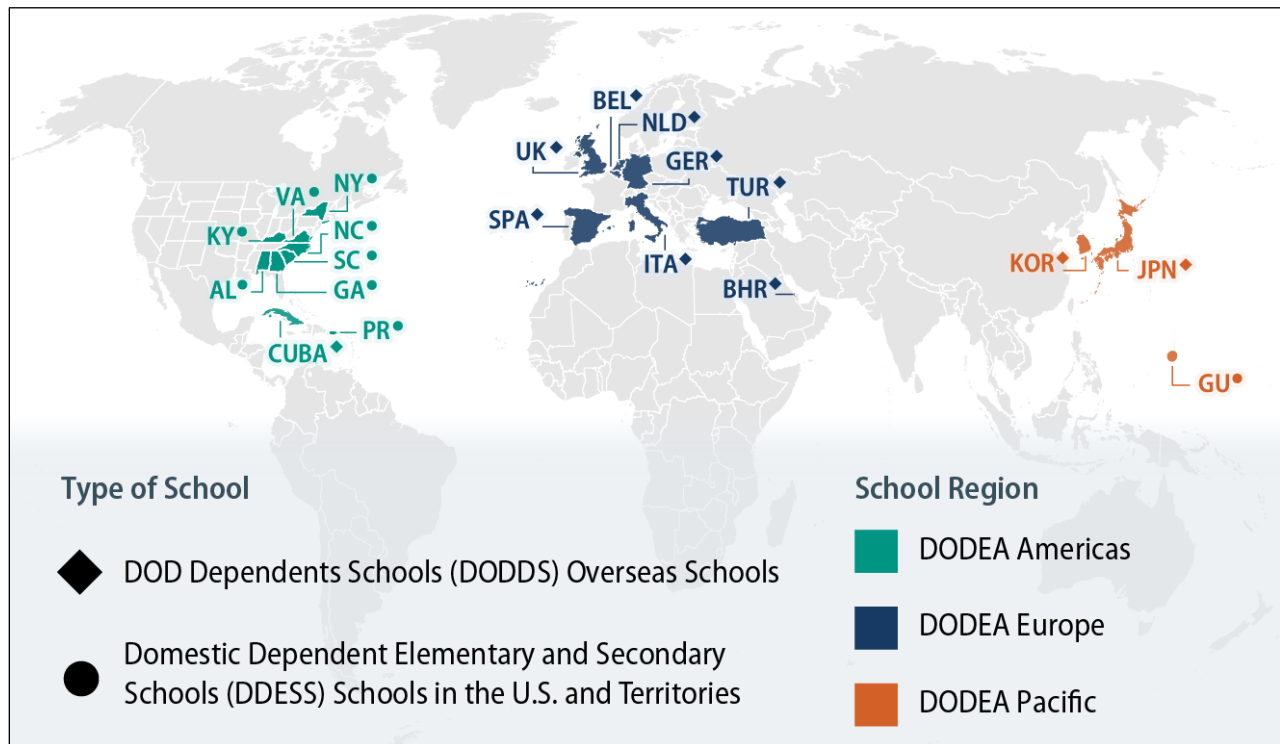
### Non-DOD Schools Program (NDSP)

DOD is authorized by 20 U.S.C. §926(b) to provide financial support for dependents attending non-DOD schools when there is not an available DODEA school in overseas locations (see DODEA Administrative Instruction 5035.01). Per these regulations, this benefit is available only to command-sponsored dependents. This DODEA guidance permits fee assistance with established rates for (1) school at post; (2) school away from post; (3) home study, private instruction (PI), and virtual school (VS); or (4) special needs education.

### Oversight

Under 20 U.S.C. §930, the DODEA Director “may from time to time, but not more frequently than once a year, provide for a comprehensive study of the entire defense dependents’ education system.” The law requires transmittal of this report to Congress along with recommendations for legislation and funding. Congress might consider whether the periodicity and scope of this reporting requirement provides for adequate oversight.

**Figure 2. DODEA Domestic and Overseas Schools**



**Source:** CRS graphic derived from DODEA sources.

**Note:** DODDS also manages the DODEA Virtual High School.

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