



# Defense Primer: DODEA Domestic School System

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) manages federally funded, domestic and overseas school systems that provide pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through grade 12 education, primarily for the children of active duty servicemembers living on military installations. Note that the Department of Defense (DOD), is “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025, and is using Department of War Education Activity (DOWEA) as a secondary designation for DODEA. DODEA’s Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESSs) program operates 53 schools across 7 states, the Territory of Guam, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and enrolls approximately 22,000 students. DDESS also manages “Special Arrangement contracts” with local education authorities (LEAs) in Delaware, Massachusetts, New York, and Puerto Rico.

## 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. 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 military schools from ED to the Department of Defense. 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. During that era, Congress sought to transfer control of many installation-based schools to LEAs (P.L. 99-167). Congress has periodically requested studies on the divestiture of DOD domestic schools.

## Authorities

Section 2164 of Title 10, *United States Code*, provides the authority for the Secretary of Defense to enter into arrangements to provide for 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).

Under Section 2164 of Title 10, 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.

## Eligibility

Dependent children of U.S. military and DOD civilian employees living on an installation with a DDESS school are eligible to attend tuition-free. The FY2025 NDAA (P.L. 118-159 §§592 -595), authorized a pilot program to provide space-available enrollment for dependents of full-time, active duty servicemembers assigned to, but not resident on, installations with a DDESS school. The FY2025 NDAA also expanded eligibility for enrollment in DOD’s virtual school to home-schooled students in grades 1-12. Other dependent children of deceased U.S. military, federal civilian employees, and foreign militaries may be eligible for tuition-free enrollment under certain circumstances.

## 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 appropriations provide for projects like new school construction or additions to existing schools.

**Table 1. DDESS O&M Funding**  
Current dollars

	<b>FY2025 (actual)</b>	<b>FY2026 (enacted)</b>	<b>FY2027 (request)</b>
O&M	\$695,888,000	\$700,112,000	\$707,079,000

**Source:** DOD Comptroller, Budget Books.

The FY2027 President’s budget request also includes \$869.5 million in mandatory spending for a “School Choice Voucher” initiative to provide \$15,500 per student to eligible families “to access higher performing schools when local options are insufficient.”

## Impact Aid

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has previously reported that 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. 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, see CRS Report R45400, *Impact Aid, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: A Primer*.

### Public Schools on Installations

There are approximately 160 non-DDESS public schools on military installations. These include traditional public schools operated by LEAs as well as charter schools (independently operated, publicly funded schools). DODEA (DOWEA) reports that there are ten charter schools on military installations. Non-DOD schools on installations may serve both military and civilian students and are eligible for Impact Aid funds and other funding and technical assistance through the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation’s Public Schools on Military Installations program.

### Student Performance

DODEA primarily measures student performance annually within the DOD school system through College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) summative assessments. 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 students in the aggregate often score higher than the U.S. national averages and have a higher portion of students demonstrating proficiency than the states in which the DDESS schools are located (see **Table 2**). For more on the NAEP and educational testing, 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, 2024

Jurisdiction	Grade 4 Math	Grade 4 Reading	Grade 8 Math	Grade 8 Reading
<b>Nation</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>29%</b>
DODEA	54%	48%	41%	53%
Alabama	37%	28%	18%	21%
Georgia	38%	30%	24%	31%
Kentucky	38%	33%	24%	29%
New York	37%	31%	26%	31%
N. Carolina	41%	30%	31%	27%
S. Carolina	40%	32%	24%	26%
Virginia	40%	31%	29%	29%

**Source:** NAEP, *The Nation’s Report Card*, 2024.

**Notes:** States listed are those with DDESS schools on military installations (Puerto Rico and Guam are not included). DODEA figures include both domestic and overseas schools. State data include public schools only. Average score comparisons are represented through shading; green indicates the state has average scores above national average, red indicates scores below average, and unshaded indicates no statistically significant difference between state and national average scores.

## Issues for Congress

### Status Quo v. Divestment Options

Some have questioned whether DOD should fund and operate domestic schools. Policy analysts have studied alternatives to the status quo for funding and operating DOD domestic schools, including (1) closing all base schools and transferring students to LEAs; (2) transferring operations to an existing LEA, with DOD maintaining some responsibility for facilities; (3) establishing a new LEA covering the entire installation area (coterminous district); (4) converting DDESS schools into charter schools; and (5) contracting with an educational management organization to operate the entire system.

Proponents of divesting domestic schools and associated infrastructure have argued that the operation of elementary and secondary schools is not essential to DOD’s core national security mission and creates unnecessary administrative overhead or overlaps with other agency missions. Some have pointed to estimates of significantly higher per-student costs for DOD to operate DDESS schools relative to costs at schools operated by domestic LEAs. Proponents have argued that shuttering on-base schools or transferring them to LEA control could result in substantial government savings.

Proponents of maintaining the status quo have contended that DDESS schools improve servicemember quality of life and serve as a retention incentive for military families with children. Some have argued that DOD schools are better-equipped to provide for the unique needs of military children (e.g., providing curriculum continuity for children who are subject to frequent moves). Some have contended 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 quality of programs and services as DDESS. In addition, military parents may have reduced influence on LEA school policies as their eligibility to serve on LEA school boards may be subject to local residency restrictions. Some state and local officials have expressed concern 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/students to an existing LEA.

The FY2026 NDAA (P.L. 119-60) includes a provision (Section 585) that limits DOD actions that close or transfer operations to an LEA for existing DDESS programs. The law (codified under 10 U.S.C. §2164d) also limits DOD’s ability to reduce enrollment by 20% or more, “significantly” reduce existing DDESS services, or terminate teachers under conditions other than those specified in the law.

### Other Issues

Other areas of congressional and stakeholder interest include parental rights and mandatory disclosure of certain information, changes to curriculum, access to library materials, and resources for children with special needs.

**Kristy N. Kamarck**, Specialist in Military Personnel

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