Old Dominion University

Department of Defense Education Activity: The Future of Norfolk School Systems

Alice Johns

[ajohn059@odu.edu](mailto:ajohn059@odu.edu)

Professor Laura Buchholz

November, 21 2018

DODEA is a broad topic, so there needs to be a better explanation of what DODEA really is because not many people know what this agency is and or does. DODEA, Department of Defense Activity Education is an agency that manages schools for military families and their children to pursue their education overseas in American schools on military bases. This system is essential to all countries with military bases because it helps the military children get the best education. In my experience, it was the best education I ever got as a child.

I chose to talk about this system because I believe DODEA can benefit the Norfolk school system with it’s different curriculum, standards and teaching methods.

“What makes DODEA schools remarkable is what the staff has managed to do in terms of student performance, which is all the more impressive considering that only about 40 percent of the students finish the academic year in the same school where they started. About 80 percent of DODEA graduates on to college, compared with the 67 percent nationwide”. (Joiner, 2003). The quote makes sense of how beneficial DoDDs schools can be towards all its’ students and it made a huge impact in my life. Being to living overseas, apart of DoDDs (Department of Defense Dependents Schools) was the most indescribable experience for a military child in Italy. To make this topic more interesting and easier to understand what DODEA is about, I have interviewed two people who I believe can shed some light on their experiences in DoDDs.

My first interviewee is Kyara Nieves. She’s an Army wife of a Marine spouse. They have two children who are always traveling for new deployments. I asked her the first question, “How was your overall experience being in DoDDs”? Kyara answered, “It was good. I liked it better than when I attended regular public school state side”. I can agree with her on this statement because being in a DoDDs school can really change your whole perspective on the way you learn things. I then asked was, “Would you say it’s different compared to the US? How so?”. Her response, “Yes it’s very different. I believe because DODDS can be considered private schools and in terms generally smaller than public stateside schools, you get a lot of one on one with teachers and extra help that you may not get stateside”. Kyara attended the same unit school I did, when I was living overseas in Turkey. This school was the only source of education on the base of Incirlik for military and civilian children. Most of teachers had civilian housing off-base, and their children got to the attend the unit school. To better put what I am saying in perspective, Incirlik Unit School was more or less a small private school. It had incredible educators, amazing academic programs and different sports that anyone could join. The last question was “As a parent in the military, do you believe your children would benefit better from DoDDs or in an American school system?”. Kyara responded, “Yes I do believe my daughter would benefit from a DoDDs school system due to the lesser amount of kids. Teachers can focus on helping individual students with subjects they struggle in on a more personal level and the make child feel like their struggle doesn’t go unnoticed”. To further explain Kyara’s statement, I am in agreement when she says that teachers helps individual students with subjects they struggle in. My research can’t back this up because every school is different but I can speak from personal experience. My teachers in Turkey were considered the best educators in DoDDs so I got taught by the best. My worst subjects were math and science and because of Mrs. Matar and Mrs. Nguyen, I became better in both those subjects. An experience I can remember, was taking chemistry with Mrs. Matar and I didn’t pass the first test, so I remember her and I sitting down at seminar (DoDDs version of study hall), and we went over all the problems I missed and she helped me better understand the different formulas, methods and how to apply them. It was very one-on one, hands on learning and she said I could always come to her seminar whenever I needed help. The teachers are always there, but so are the administration. I remember my first at IUS, Incirlik Unit School and I didn’t know anyone or anything about what was going on. The first people I see were the principal and the head counselor. They started asking me questions, “Are you new to IUS?” “Can we help you?” and I answered yes. They started telling me about how the school works, where the different grades are and it’s like to be at IUS. It was a big family looking out for one another and taking care of all the students.

Speaking of my teachers, the second person I interviewed was my Spanish teacher from when I was in Turkey. She was kind to write about her experiences while being a teacher in DoDDs. Mrs. Revis talked about a lot during her interview with me, but I want to talk about the main topics, which were about the the students’ flexibility, inclusivity, always wanting to keep learning, and always commuting but still in contact. Mrs. Revis and her husband, were high school DoDDs teachers, but Incirlik Unit School closed down a few years ago and so they both retired. Mrs. Revis was my favorite educator because of her compassion towards all her students and in her teaching, but also her big heart.

Flexibility   
“Students tend to have a lot of this. Of course, there are those who show stress of change, but for the most part, I saw a great deal of resilience inbuilt in each student. They seem to “roll with the punches” and absorb change readily”. I agree with Mrs. Revis’ statement because from the perspective of military brat, it’s all about adapting. You can either choose to love where you are stationed at, for however long that may be, or choose to not like it and be miserable the entire deployment. I chose to adapt and make friends the summer I got there, that way I knew some friendly faces for when school started.

Inclusivity

“These students did NOT waste time making friends or trying to fit in. Within days of arrival to a new post, they seemed to easily fit in their new environment, while weeks before I witnessed others eagerly awaiting their arrival. The hype about a new arrival was evident in the classroom with: “Are they coming today?” “Have they gotten here yet?” “Are there any boys in our grade level?” “Any girls?” Always with an interest in their interest: “Will they be part of our team?” I loved seeing this inclusivity. Cliques did exist, but seemed to be very accepting of new people”. Inclusivity was more of a thing in the high school because it was all about the cliques and if you knew the right person to hang out with. The cliques were a mix of different students. It was something I never thought would exist in high school, but you would see all these different students eating lunch with each other. (Musicians, athletes and nerds all at one table) My clique, you could say, we were the outcasts of the school. We didn’t belong to any specific group but that was okay. I am still very good friends with them after five years. When I started my senior year in the US, I didn’t belong to any clique because I was the new kid. The only person I would always hang out with was my boyfriend Jordan, now spouse.

No Excuse Learning

“I was witness to this March 2003, during TerraNova testing. Everyone knew that within that week, everyone was going to have to evacuate, as there was the rumor (or real knowledge) that the US was going to invade Iraq. Everyone had their NEO read (“What is that?” uttered the newbies who had not experienced a quick evac). Sure enough, having tested the last group of students, they were loaded into massive planes and hauled out of there by that evening, back to the US. As teachers, we were so worried about the testing results, since the students and all the families were under such duress. When we got the results, go figure that they were the highest in the district! Imagine that! Students did not allow even a massive evac to affect their grades. I was so proud of that moment!” After I read her quote on this topic, I was speechless. In the US, I can speak from personal experience that if there was a state of emergency or evacuation, the students wouldn’t even focus on their SATS or SOLs because of so much stress they are under, I know I wasn’t in my right mind to study and or worry about these big tests.   
Parting is such sweet sorrow… but

“ Students seemed to have accept parting from each other, come 2.5 years later… or even less! But, though there were the tears, hugs, sniffles, and the blues, students accepted this and looked forward to a future reunion. They would compare where their possible next post would be and if they might be together again. It was particularly difficult for “romantic” relationships. I did see and still know a few 9th graders that parted and ended married years later! Such a joy to see that distance, time and such didn’t break their bond!” I have a great example when it comes to this. I have a friend that went to Incirlik Unit School when I did, only she was a year younger than me. She was a freshman when I was a sophomore. She then moved to Germany, then Texas after she graduated high school. Years later, she ends up a few hours from where my parents live in Dallas and we reconnected. In comparison to the my senior year, I didn’t bother to keep in contact with anyone from my class because I didn’t know them.   
Mrs. Revis’ words of wisdom shed some light from when she was a teacher in DoDDs, and also what she saw when her students were apart of Incirlik Unit School (IUS). The reason I asked for this interview was because I wanted to know what her experience was through her eyes. She is who I want to be when I grow up and I can’t thank her enough for inspiring me for finding my passion.

To press on with the topic of DODEA, there is a point I want to make of how different DoDDs is compared to an American school system. DoDDs is a system that is controlled by the Department of Defense which helps school systems in American military bases give the best education to all the students.

“Children of military families often move between regular public schools and those in the DoDEA system, changing schools as many as six times over their academic careers. Nearly 1.2 million school-aged children have a parent serving as an active-duty member of the U.S. Armed Forces, and the vast majority are enrolled in U.S. public schools.” (Richmond, 2015). This quote makes a good point of explaining how many military children move during their lifetime, how many of them end up in civilian schools rather than DoDDs. This is based on an experience I had growing up in Italy. My father got stationed in Aviano, which is a military base with an American school. I had the choice of going to school on-base or to the civilian one. I chose the Italian school and I knew I made the right choice. This topic is important for me to talk about because I know studying in the DoDDs system can change the person and their perspective, whereas growing up in the states, it makes the person closed-minded, never leaving their comfort zone and the norm.

DODEA works with the US as an ally, especially when it comes to education for military children, and this system is called the Interstate Compact on Education Opportunity for Military Children.

“The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (ICEOMC) is the largest ongoing school reform effort aimed at military-connected public schools in all 50 states and U.S. territories. The purpose of the ICEOMC is to reduce and/or eliminate “barriers to educational success” for children from military families as they transition between schools and across state lines.” (Esqueda, Astor, DePedro, 2012). This quote from the article fascinated me because I had no idea that the US had their own form of “DODEA” within their territories. Military children are at a risk when it comes to education because they are constantly changing schools, never staying for the full year or they never got to learn the material. It is essential that ICEOMC does their part for these families. (I.e, embassy, government, military bases and forts, small civilian bases that are apart of the military).

The standard testing in DODEA is different than how Norfolk schools operate, an example is that DoDDs gives the TerraNova and NAEP tests, which measure the students’ strengths, abilities and difficulties. The SOLs measure a students’ academic knowledge in various subjects that aren’t necessary to be tested on. “The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) does not provide scores for individual students or schools; instead, it offers results regarding subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences, and school environment for populations of students” (Kanellis, 2013).

The TerraNova is the next standard test taken in DoDDs. It works based on how well the students’ abilities are and where they stand in the percentile. It doesn’t measure how smart they are and how many subjects they know based on how the SOLs do.

“Overall, DoDEA's Grade 3 through Grade 11 students scored substantially higher than the national average (50th percentile) in all subject areas (Reading, Language, Math, Science and Social Studies). On 39 of the 45 subtests, DoDEA students scored 10 to 26 percentile points above the national average. Students scored 5 to 9 percentile points above the national average on the remaining 6 subtests.” (*International Educator,* 2009).

The last point I want to make is how Norfolk Public schools work, in comparison to DODEA. In the article, “*Path to Excellence*”, the author talks about how a retired Superintendent John Simpson made a huge change to the Norfolk public school system.

“Simpson was determined to change performance first by changing the school culture, working to create a common curriculum and collaboration.” (Zavadsky, 2006).

Superintendent Simpson has a vision of what he wanted the district to focus on more clearly than others. The first thing he appointed was that the teachers and administrators focus on higher-quality instruction; “schools become communities of learners who engage in collegial planning, sharing, collaboration, and weekly professional development” (Zavadsky, 2006), that the teachers and principals be engaged in a data-driven selection to focus on how to better teach the students and that the teachers shall use more technology in the classroom. “The expectations were translated into specific district goals, which committees of district stakeholders further defined through subject-specific strands. These committees detailed what world-class learning would look like in terms of powerful literacy and mathematics.” (Zavadsky, 2006). Norfolk Public Schools has some really great schools in the area (Academy for Discovery at Lakewood, which is an IB League school and hard to get into), but then Norfolk also has some urban schools, which mean they can’t afford the best technology, textbooks or even good food for the cafeteria. Norfolk is a great area in Virginia, because of how many military gets ported, shipped or deployed there and for these children, military or not, they deserve the best education possible. To sum up the majority of my research on DODEA and how Norfolk schools works, they are similar in both ways when it comes to teaching methods and classroom management but different in the Common Core and Standardized Tests. In conclusion, I believe Norfolk can benefit from DODEA’s “Common Core” Standards by applying to their curriculum within the next few years and it can benefit the students in the future.

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