



February 2021

# K-12 EDUCATION

## U.S. Military Families Generally Have the Same Schooling Options as Other Families and Consider Multiple Factors When Selecting Schools

Accessible Version



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

# GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-80](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Approximately 650,000 military dependent children in the U.S. face various challenges that may affect their schooling, according to DOD. For example, these children transfer schools up to nine times, on average, before high school graduation. Military families frequently cite education issues for their children as a drawback to military service, according to DOD.

GAO was asked to examine the schooling options available to school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers. This report describes (1) available schooling options for school-age military dependent children in the U.S.; and (2) military families' views on factors they consider and resources they use when making schooling decisions. GAO analyzed data on federal education, military installation locations, and commuting patterns to examine schooling options near military installations. GAO also conducted six discussion groups with a total of 40 parents of school-age military dependent children; and interviewed officials at nine military installations that were selected to reflect a range of factors such as availability of different types of schooling options, rural or urban designation, and geographic region. In addition, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and guidance, and interviewed officials from DOD, the Coast Guard, and representatives of national advocacy groups for military children.

View [GAO-21-80](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

February 2021

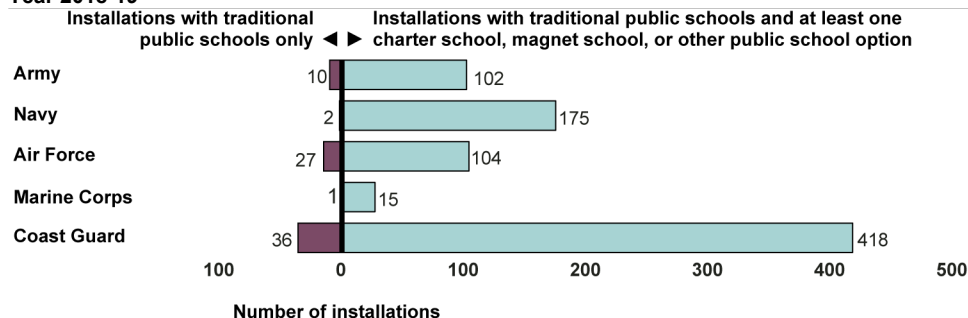
## K-12 EDUCATION

### U.S. Military Families Generally Have the Same Schooling Options as Other Families and Consider Multiple Factors When Selecting Schools

## What GAO Found

Traditional public schools were the most commonly available schooling option for military families near military installations, similar to schools available to U.S. families in general, according to GAO's analysis of Department of Education 2018-19 data. Over 90 percent of installations had at least one public schooling option nearby—such as a charter or magnet school—in addition to traditional public schools (see figure). Similar to U.S. schools in general, rural installations generally had fewer schooling options compared to their more highly populated urban counterparts. In addition, about one-half of the military installations GAO analyzed are in states that offer private school choice programs that provide eligible students with funding toward a non-public education. At least two of these states have private school choice programs specifically for military families.

**Public School Options within Average Commuting Distance of Military Installations, School Year 2018-19**



Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively. For the purposes of this report, the term "military installations" refers to the 890 DOD installations and Coast Guard units included in GAO's analysis.

Military families in GAO's review commonly reported considering housing options and school features when choosing schools for their children; however, they weighed these factors differently to meet their families' specific needs. For example, one reason parents said that they accepted a longer commute was to live in their preferred school district, while other parents said that they prioritized a shorter commute and increased family time over access to specific schools. Military families also reported considering academics, perceived safety, elective courses, and extracurricular activities. To inform their schooling decisions, most parents said that they rely heavily on their personal networks and social media.

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#### Abbreviations

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| CCD                | Common Core of Data  |
| Coast Guard        | U.S. Coast Guard   |
| COVID-19           | Coronavirus Disease 2019   |
| DOD                | Department of Defense  |
| DODEA              | Department of Defense Education Activity                               |
| Education          | Department of Education  |
| ESSA               | Every Student Succeeds Act   |
| Interstate Compact | Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for<br>Military Children |
| RUCA               | Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes                                       |

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February 4, 2021

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Education and Labor  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jim Banks  
House of Representatives

Approximately 650,000 military dependent children in the U.S. face various challenges that may affect their schooling, according to the Department of Defense (DOD).<sup>1</sup> Because active-duty servicemembers may move every few years to support a range of national security and military needs, their children transfer schools up to nine times, on average, before high school graduation.

Military families frequently cite education issues for their children as a drawback to military service, according to DOD.<sup>2</sup> A February 2020 Air Force announcement recognized the importance of schooling options to military families and its influence on their decision to continue to serve, by including an analysis of the quality of local schools near its military installations in its decision-making process for future basing decisions.

You asked us to examine the schooling options available to school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers. This report describes (1) the availability of schooling options for school-age military dependent children in the U.S. and (2) the views of military families on factors they consider and the resources they use when making schooling decisions. We focused on K-12 school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers from all four DOD military services (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) and the U.S. Coast Guard (Coast Guard). We did not include the Space Force because it was not operational at the time of our review. We use terms such as “military families” and “military dependent children” to

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Defense Education Activity, *Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for Defense Dependents’ Education (Update)* (March 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Offices of the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, *Memorandum for the National Governors Association* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 23, 2018).

refer to families and school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers.

To describe the availability of schooling options for military dependent children within all states and the District of Columbia, we analyzed the most recent data available at the time of our review. Specifically, we analyzed:

- DOD’s 2018 Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data and the Coast Guard’s 2019 unit location data to identify military installations in the U.S. We identified 436 DOD installations and 454 Coast Guard units.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this report, we use the term “military installation” to refer to both DOD installations and Coast Guard units.
- The Department of Agriculture’s 2010 Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (updated in 2019) to determine whether a military installation or unit was rural or urban.
- The Department of Transportation’s 2017 National Household Travel Survey to determine that the average commuting distance in rural and urban areas was 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively. We refer to these average commuting distances as being near military installations for the purposes of this report.

We used multiple data sources to determine the schooling options near military installations. To identify school districts, we analyzed the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2019 school district geospatial data. We then used the Department of Education’s (Education) 2018-19 Common Core of Data to determine the types of public schools (i.e., traditional public schools; charter schools; magnet schools; and other public school options, such as alternative and career and technical schools) available within those school districts. We assessed the reliability of the data from these multiple sources by reviewing related documentation and interviewing knowledgeable agency officials, and determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. We were unable to determine the private school options available near installations because

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<sup>3</sup>Given our focus on active-duty families, we excluded Reserve and National Guard units, recreational areas, recruiting offices, and target sites. For Coast Guard units, which are generally smaller and have fewer people than DOD installations, we considered all units with the same address as one unit. We also considered addresses that differed slightly—such as having a different building number but the same street, city, state, and zip code—as one unit. See appendix I for additional information.

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Education's data on private schools were not reliable for this purpose.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we analyzed the presence of private school choice programs, which provide options to help families fund private education. To identify states with private school choice programs—vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credit scholarship programs—we examined recently issued GAO reports on these programs.<sup>5</sup> We also reviewed information issued by EdChoice, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on school choice policies, to identify states that had implemented programs since the GAO reports were issued. We then reviewed those states' websites to determine whether the programs were operating as of the 2019-20 school year.<sup>6</sup>

To describe the views of military families on factors they consider and the sources of information they use when making schooling decisions for their dependent children, we selected a non-generalizable group of nine installations across all four DOD service branches and the Coast Guard to learn about military families' experiences.<sup>7</sup> At each installation, we interviewed officials who provide support services to families, such as school liaisons. We also conducted six discussion groups with a non-

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<sup>4</sup>In our previous work, we found that Education's Private School Universe Survey is based on a sample and captures only about one-half of the private schools in the nation. Furthermore, the broader list of private schools from which Education draws the Private School Universe Survey sample contained more than 10,000 entities that were not private schools. See GAO, *Public School Choice: Limited Options Available for Many American Indian and Alaska Native Students*, [GAO-19-226](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 24, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>See GAO, *Private School Choice: Accountability in State Tax Credit Scholarship Programs*, [GAO-19-664](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2019); and GAO, *Private School Choice: Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents Are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities*, [GAO-18-94](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>See EdChoice, School Choice in America Dashboard, February 4, 2020, <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america>, accessed September 30, 2020. EdChoice identified North Carolina's education savings account program, which was implemented in 2018 and after the data were collected for the GAO report on education savings accounts. We included the North Carolina program in this report. For additional information, see appendix I.

<sup>7</sup>The nine installations were: Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base (Alabama); Coast Guard Sector San Diego (California); Naval Base San Diego (California); Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms (California); Fort Benning (Georgia); Fort Leavenworth (Kansas); Joint Base Andrews (Maryland); Whiteman Air Force Base (Missouri); and Marine Corps Base Quantico (Virginia). We considered five factors in our selection of installations to obtain a range of installation types: (1) availability of different types of schooling options (public, private, and Department of Defense Education Activity), (2) rural or urban designation, (3) number of military dependent children, (4) geographic region, and (5) recommendations from military officials and national organizations advocating for the education of military dependent children.



generalizable sample of 40 parents, which included servicemembers and civilian spouses, across six of these installations. The parents who participated differed on several characteristics, including their number of years in the military, rank (officer or enlisted), and age and number of children. At three installations, we were not able to recruit a sufficient number of parents to conduct a discussion group, possibly related to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Instead, we interviewed four parents who responded from two of these installations.

For both objectives, we interviewed military officials from all four DOD service branches and the Coast Guard, as well as representatives from national organizations that advocate for the education of military dependent children, including the Military Child Education Coalition, the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, and the National Military Families Association. For more information on our objectives, scope, and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2019 to February 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### Types of Schools

Military dependent children may have access to several types of schools. Many of these schools are available to all children, and others are specifically for children who live on military installations.

**Public schools.** In general, all school-age children are assigned to a traditional public school, which are elementary and secondary schools that provide instruction and education services. Children are generally assigned to these schools based on where they live. Most public schools are located in the community, but as of 2018, approximately 150

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traditional public schools were located on military installations operated by local school districts.<sup>8</sup>

Many states allow students to choose a traditional public school other than their assigned school but within the same district (intra-district transfer) or a school in another district (inter-district transfer). Students who do not attend traditional public schools may attend charter schools, magnet schools, or other public school options:

- Charter schools provide education to eligible students under a specific charter granted by the state legislature or other appropriate authority.
- Magnet schools are designed to serve different purposes, such as attracting students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds for the purpose of reducing, preventing, or eliminating racial isolation. In some cases, magnet schools may also provide an academic or social focus on a particular theme, such as science and math, performing arts, gifted and talented, or foreign language.
- Other public school options include alternative and career and technical education schools. Alternative schools address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in traditional public schools. Career and technical education schools focus on providing formal preparation for semi-skilled, skilled, technical, or professional occupations for high school-age students who have opted to develop or expand their employment opportunities.

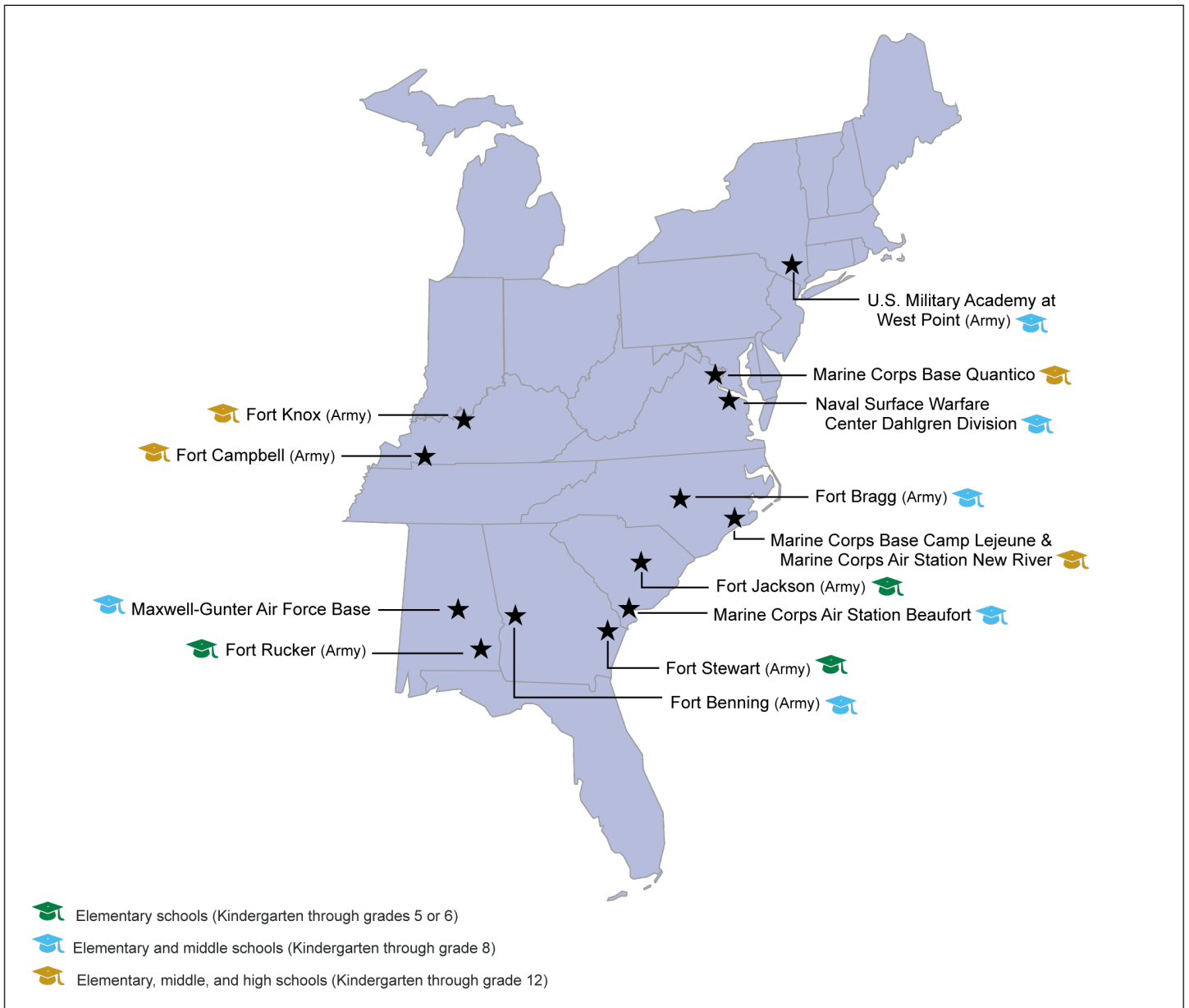
**Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Schools.**

DODEA is a DOD field activity that operates DOD's school system and is responsible for planning, directing, coordinating, and managing educational programs for military dependent children from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. As of July 2020, the majority of DODEA's 160 accredited schools were located on overseas installations, but DODEA also operated 45 schools on 13 installations across seven states. The majority (41) were elementary and middle schools, and almost three-quarters were located on Army installations (see fig. 1).

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<sup>8</sup>DOD, Office of Economic Adjustment, *2018 Public Schools on Military Installations Prioritized List* (Apr. 15, 2019).

**Figure 1: Installations with Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Schools, School Year 2019-20**



Source: GAO analysis of DODEA information. MapResources (map). | GAO-21-80

Note: Some elementary schools also offer preschool programs.

**Non-public schools.** In addition to public schools, families may choose private schools or may homeschool their children. Further, as of the 2019-20 school year, private school choice programs—vouchers, education

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savings accounts, and tax credit scholarships—were operating in 25 states and the District of Columbia to provide eligible students with funding toward a non-public education. Except for the federally funded District of Columbia voucher program, all of these programs are administered and funded by states.<sup>9</sup>

- **Vouchers.** Twelve states and the District of Columbia had voucher programs that allow families meeting certain criteria to use public funds to attend a private school.
- **Education savings accounts.** Five states had education savings account programs that typically use public funds to help parents pay for a broad set of educational expenses, such as private school tuition and fees, private tutoring, or education therapies.
- **Tax credit scholarships.** Seventeen states had tax credit scholarship programs that allow individuals or businesses to make donations that can fund scholarships for students to attend private elementary and secondary schools.<sup>10</sup>

**Homeschooling.** All states generally allow homeschooling though requirements vary. In some states, homeschooled students may participate in part-time public school courses or extracurricular activities, according to the Education Commission of the States, a nonpartisan organization that collects information on state education policies to assist policymakers.

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## Educational Supports for Military Families

The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (the Interstate Compact) and school liaisons provide support for military families as they transition between installations. The Interstate Compact addresses educational transition issues of military families such as eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation. Adopted by all states

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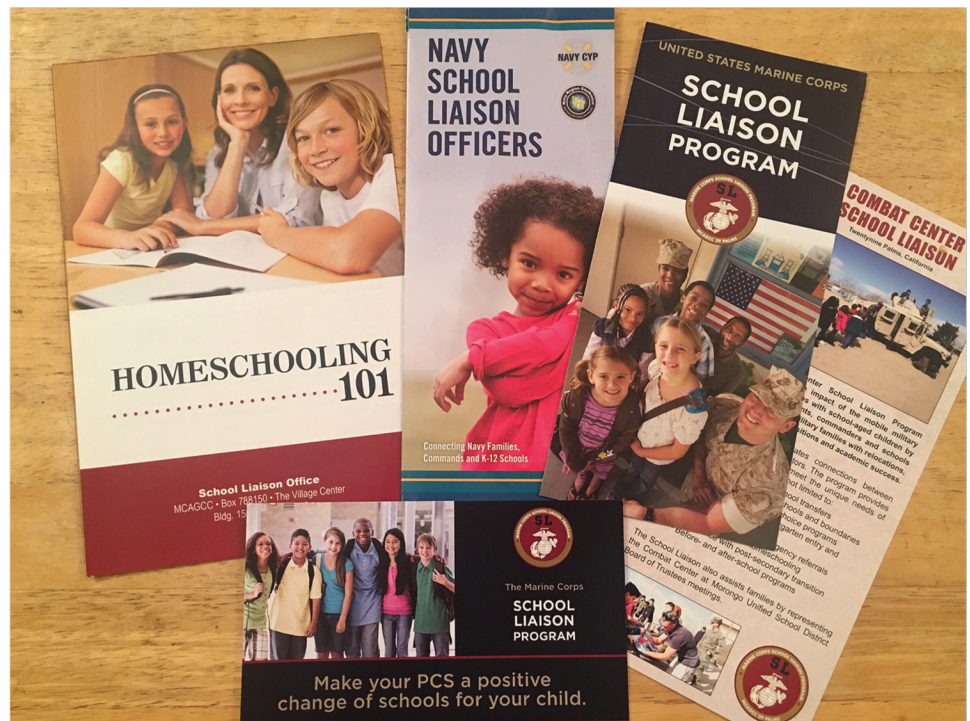
<sup>9</sup>The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was most recently authorized by the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act. Pub. L. No. 112-10, div. C, 125 Stat. 38, 199 (2011).

<sup>10</sup>We excluded Montana's tax credit scholarship program from our review because it was under judicial review and not operational during the 2019-20 school year. In June 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* that a state program, such as a tax credit program that provides public funds to allow students to attend private schools, cannot discriminate against religious schools under the Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution. *Espinoza v. Montana Dep't of Revenue*, 140 S. Ct. 2246 (2020).

and the District of Columbia, the Interstate Compact replaces varying individual state education policies that affect transitioning military dependent children and supports uniform treatment for these students as they transfer between school districts and states. For example, age requirements for kindergarten enrollment vary, so the Interstate Compact allows students to continue in kindergarten if they were enrolled in one state but do not meet the age requirement in another state. In addition, the Interstate Compact allows school districts to waive specific courses required for graduation if students completed similar courses in another district. The Interstate Compact applies only to public schools.

School liaisons serve as the primary DOD point of contact for school-related matters for military families. These liaisons provide parents with information on available schooling options and support for transitions, deployment, homeschooling, and special education. They also serve as the primary liaison between school districts, commanders, and military parents. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps each have their own School Liaison Program (see fig. 2). The Coast Guard's regional Family Resource Specialists help families with school-related issues.

Figure 2: Examples of School Liaison Program Brochures



Source: GAO. | GAO-21-80

## Traditional Public Schools Were Most Commonly Available to Military Families, with Fewer Choices Available in Rural Areas

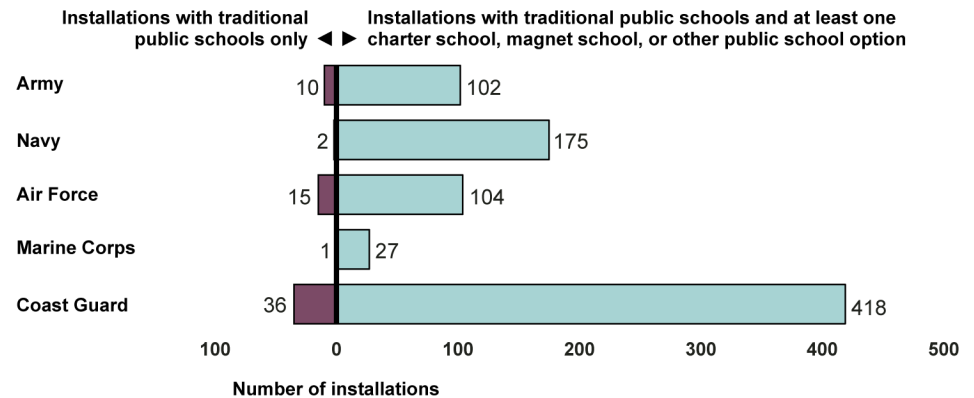
### Traditional Public Schools Were the Most Common Public School Option Available to Military Families

Traditional public schools were the most commonly available schooling option for military families near military installations, according to our analysis for school year 2018-19. Similar to schools available to U.S. families in general,<sup>11</sup> traditional public schools comprised a majority of

<sup>11</sup>See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *School Choice in the United States: 2019* (September 2019).

schooling options near most DOD installations (428 out of 436) and Coast Guard units (435 out of 454).<sup>12</sup> While traditional public schools were the most common option, they were rarely the only option. The large majority of military installations also had at least one charter school, magnet school, or other public school option nearby (see fig. 3).

**Figure 3: Public School Options within Average Commuting Distance of Military Installations, School Year 2018-19**



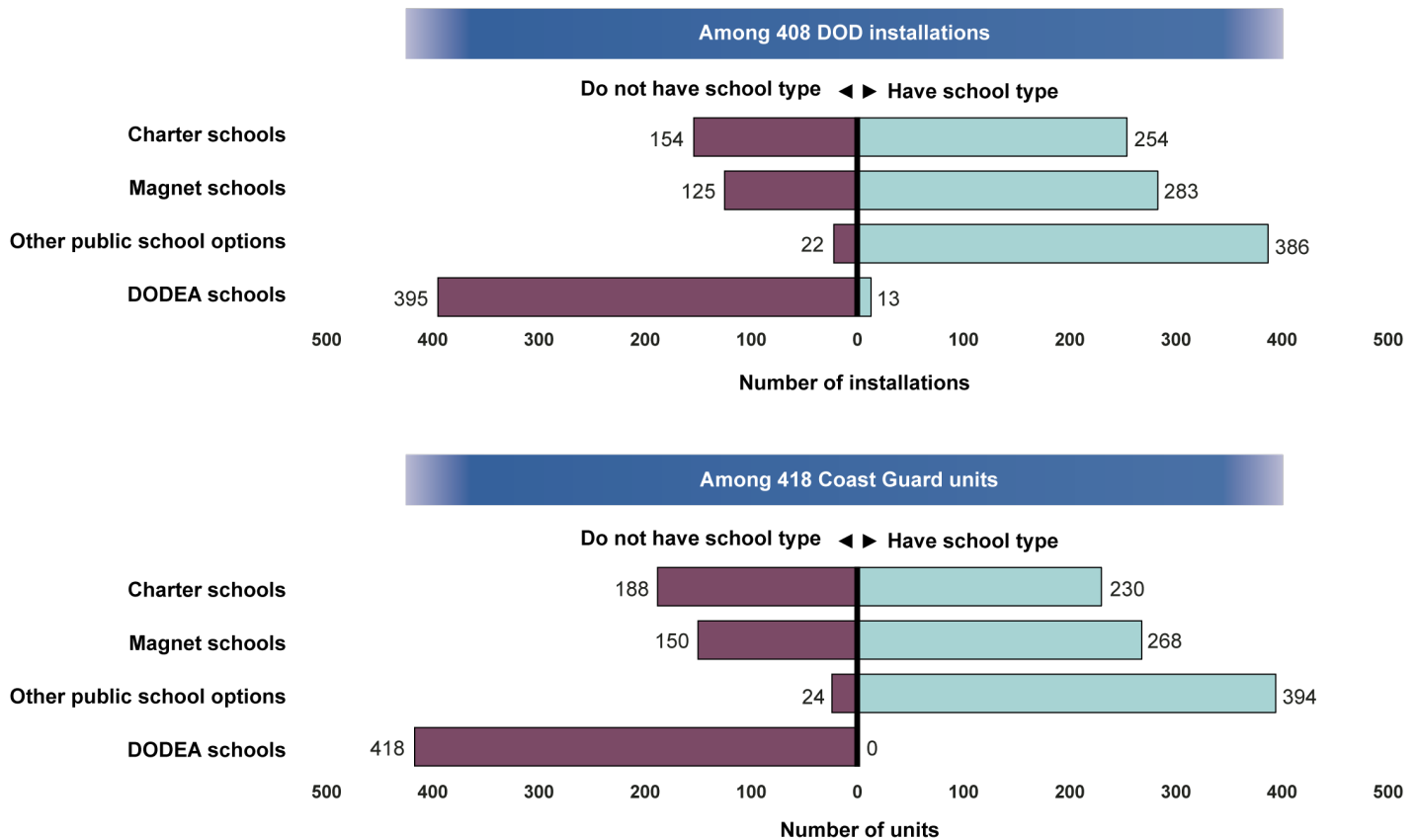
Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively. For the purposes of this report, the term "military installations" refers to the 890 DOD installations and Coast Guard units included in our analysis.

Among military installations with at least one option other than traditional public schools, the most common was other public school options, such as alternative and career and technical education schools. There were generally fewer military installations with a charter school option than a magnet school option (see fig. 4); however, this varied somewhat by service. There were fewer Army and Air Force installations and Coast Guard units with charter school options than magnet school options. However, for the Navy and Marine Corps, there were roughly equal numbers of installations with charter or magnet school options nearby (see app. II for nearby schooling options for each DOD service).

<sup>12</sup>For the purposes of this report, schooling options near military installations refer to the average commuting distances in rural and urban areas of 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively. For more information, see appendix I.

**Figure 4: Number of Military Installations with at Least One Schooling Option nearby Other Than a Traditional Public School, School Year 2018-19**



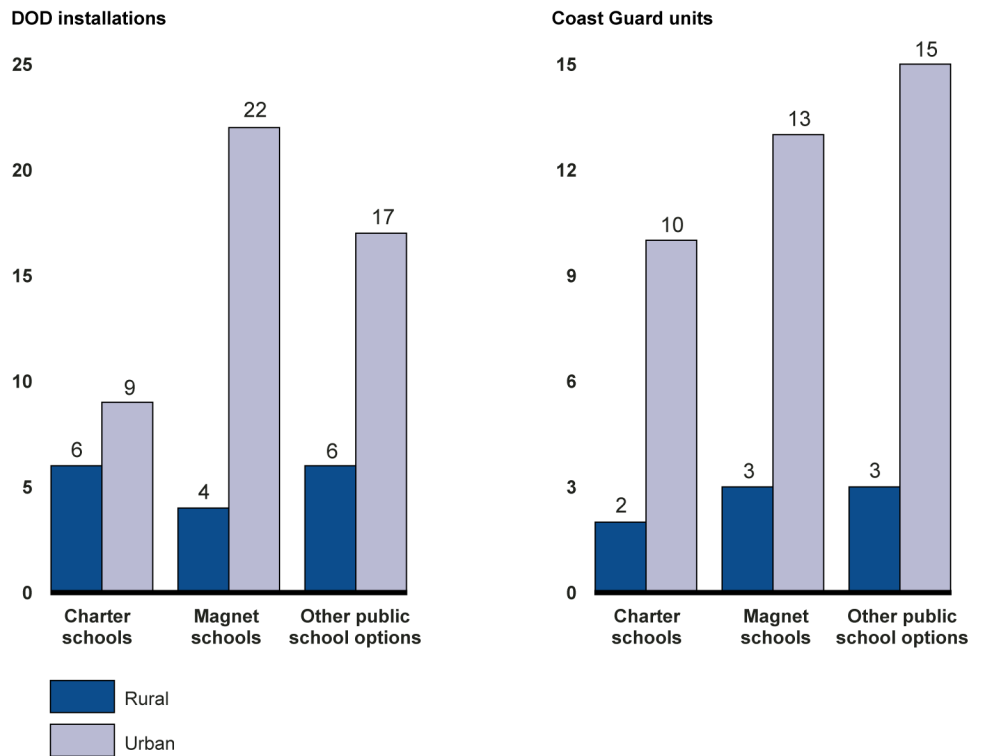
Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively. For the purposes of this report, the term "military installations" refers to both DOD installations and Coast Guard units.

Similar to U.S. schools in general, military installations in rural areas had fewer public schools and fewer types of public school options—including charter schools and magnet schools—nearby compared to installations in more highly populated urban areas (see fig. 5). Rural DOD installations and Coast Guard units had a median of 88 and 32 schools nearby, respectively, while urban DOD installations and Coast Guard units had a median of 289 and 186 schools, respectively. In addition, the majority of DOD installations and one-half of Coast Guard units that had only traditional public schools nearby, were rural.



**Figure 5: Median Number of Charter, Magnet, and Other Public School Options near Rural and Urban DOD Installations and Coast Guard Units, School Year 2018-19**



Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey, and 2010 Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes data as updated in 2019. | GAO-21-80

Note: Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter, or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively.

## Specific Requirements for Certain Schools and Programs May Affect Availability

**DODEA schools.** According to relevant federal law and DOD guidance, generally only military dependent children who live on the installation in "permanent living quarters" are eligible to attend DODEA schools in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> As such, families cannot generally attend DODEA schools if they

<sup>13</sup>10 U.S.C. § 2164(a)(1). Department of Defense Instruction 1342.26, *Eligibility Requirements for Minor Dependents to Attend Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS)* (Mar. 4, 1997).

choose to live off the installation or are assigned to installations where housing is full. In some cases, however, DOD has expanded the definition of “permanent living quarters” to allow certain military dependent children to attend DODEA schools. For example, in 2019, to accommodate families with short-term assignments to a specific location, the Air Force designated its installation campground as permanent living quarters so that families living there could attend DODEA schools. Officials at this installation said they are also working to allow families living off the installation to attend DODEA schools in response to families’ concerns about the quality of local public schools.

**Charter and magnet schools.** Families may rule out these options due to application deadlines and space limitations. Even though a charter school may have space available, children may need to meet certain residency requirements to apply, such as living within the relevant school district boundaries or—for charter schools located on an installation—having a parent assigned to the installation. If applications exceed available space, charter schools generally conduct a lottery to determine who may attend.

Local school districts handle these application deadlines differently, according to installation officials. For example, officials at two installations said application deadlines pose challenges for families, but their local schools cannot make exceptions for military families who move after the deadline. Officials at one of these installations said that servicemembers typically receive assignments in the spring, but the local magnet school requires families to apply in winter—about 1 to 2 months before receiving their assignment—for the following school year. To address this timing issue, installation officials coordinated with school district officials to add a second application window for all families during the summer. At an installation with a charter school on base, officials said that the local school district controls the application process and was unwilling to make exceptions for military families who miss the deadline.<sup>14</sup>

**State private school choice programs.** Over one-half (229) of the 436 DOD installations and 48 percent (216) of the 454 Coast Guard units we analyzed are located in the 25 states and the District of Columbia that offer private school choice programs. Five of these states—Florida,

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<sup>14</sup>For our prior work on charter schools located on military installations, see GAO, *Charter Schools: Guidance Needed for Military Base Schools on Startup and Operational Issues*, [GAO-13-67](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2013).

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Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia—are in areas with a particularly large military presence, according to our analysis and a DOD report.<sup>15</sup> At least two states—Arizona and Florida—have private school choice policy provisions that are specific to military families. For example, Arizona’s educational savings account program was originally developed for students with special needs, but the state later expanded the program to other groups, including children of active-duty servicemembers. Florida allows eligible children of active-duty servicemembers to participate in its McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program by waiving certain Florida residency and attendance requirements.

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## Military Families in Our Review Considered Housing Options and School Features When Choosing Schools, and Often Relied on Personal Networks for Information

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### Housing and School Features Were Key Factors That Influenced Schooling Decisions

Military families considered multiple factors—including commuting distance, academics, and perceived safety—when choosing schools for their children, according to parents in our discussion groups, and installation officials and representatives of advocacy groups we interviewed. Parents in our discussion groups considered similar factors when making their decisions, but weighed them differently to meet their families’ needs.<sup>16</sup>

#### Housing Considerations

In all of our discussion groups, parents said housing decisions played a large role in determining where their children attended school, but how parents weighed possible trade-offs between their housing choices and

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<sup>15</sup>Department of Defense Education Activity, *Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for Defense Dependents’ Education (Update)* (March 2015).

<sup>16</sup>To report on perspectives that were commonly shared across multiple discussion groups, we quantified them as follows: “all” discussion groups represents six groups, “most” discussion groups represents four or five groups, and “some” discussion groups represents two or three groups. We did not seek consensus or agreement among all discussion group participants on a given topic.

schooling options differed. For example, one reason parents chose to live farther from the installation was to enroll their children in a specific school district. Others prioritized the location of desirable housing, which then determined their schooling options.

**Commuting distance.** In most discussion groups, parents said they also considered the effect that choosing a certain school would have on the length of their commute to work at an installation, but differed in how they prioritized this factor. For example, one reason parents said they accepted a longer commute was to live in their preferred school district, while other parents said that they prioritized a shorter commute and increased family time over access to specific schools. In addition, parents considered whether schools provided transportation and how bus schedules (e.g., long bus rides) would affect their children. Parents also said they considered the need to travel between different schools if they had multiple children.

**Housing waitlists.** In some discussion groups, parents said waitlists for installation housing affected whether they could enroll in DODEA schools or specific public schools serving the installation. Officials at two installations said if families on housing waitlists want to enroll their children in the DODEA or public school on the installation, there are steps they can take. For example, one official said families can apply for non-resident enrollment to attend the public schools on the installation. An official at a different installation said families can enroll in the DODEA school if the housing office expects the family to receive installation housing within 90 days.

**Comments from Parents of Military Dependent Children on Choosing Housing at Urban Installations**

"You have to make a decision, are we going to live somewhere based on schools or are we going to live somewhere based on a commute."

"And we looked at moving him off base this year, but...for the school that he would go to, it's a 30-minute drive for us. Between my wife going through her student teaching and then my job, we can't meet the commute."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-21-80

**Cost of housing.** In some discussion groups, parents said the cost of housing, both on and off the installation, was a primary factor in deciding where to live, which subsequently affected their schooling options. For example, one parent chose to live on the installation because it was more

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affordable and he could send his child to a DODEA school. Another parent preferred to live off the installation to have access to a specific school district, but there was limited rental housing available and the family could not afford to purchase housing.

### School Features

In all of our discussion groups, parents said they considered how the features of various schooling options would meet their families' needs, for example, by providing continuity with their children's previous schools' curriculum. In addition, installation officials told us that parents often seek information about common issues, such as academics, safety, military culture, elective courses, and extracurricular activities.

**Academics.** In all discussion groups, parents said they considered academics, including course offerings, when making schooling decisions. For example, parents said they considered whether science and technology courses were part of the curriculum. Another parent chose a magnet school because it offered communications courses that aligned with the child's interests. Officials at two installations also said parents look for Advanced Placement courses.

Parents also said they sought continuity with courses their children were enrolled in at previous locations, such as foreign language courses, but they were not always able to maintain this continuity because course content can vary across schools, districts, and states. A goal of the Interstate Compact is to help address some curriculum and policy differences across states, but it is not designed to address every specific situation military dependent children may encounter. For example, if students move before or during a school year, the Interstate Compact rules require schools to place students on the basis of the courses they were enrolled in at their previous school, if available. However, children may have to repeat certain course material or catch up on content because of differences in similar courses across states. For example, one parent had a child who struggled with a transition to a school in a new state because the schools in the two states taught math concepts in a different order. As a result, the student had to repeat course material on some concepts and missed learning about other concepts. To ensure continuity in their children's learning, military families may also choose to homeschool, according to installation officials and representatives of advocacy organizations.

**Comment from a Parent of Military Dependent Children on Curriculum Continuity**

"The other big thing that we noticed since we've been here is the area [we moved] from, basically the curriculum is exactly opposite. So what they're teaching now in the second half of the year is what they just got taught where we were at...in the first half of the year. So they're either missing a whole six months' section of work or we're trying to re-catch them up on our own at home."

Source: GAO discussion group. | GAO-21-80

Parents also said they considered how class or school sizes might affect their children's overall academic experiences. For example, parents found that small schools offered fewer courses and had fewer teachers from which to choose. Other parents preferred the smaller class sizes so their children would be more engaged in the classroom.

Parents said they considered school ratings and test scores as part of their decision. Installation officials said that test scores are important to parents, but these measures do not necessarily correlate to which school is best for a family because it depends on each individual student's needs.

**Perceived safety.** In most discussion groups, parents identified safety as a factor in their schooling decisions, and officials at seven installations also said safety is important to families. Parents said they chose schools where they felt their children would be safe, such as a school on the installation or one with specific security features. Other parents said they were aware of violent incidents or bullying at certain schools—sometimes aimed at military children, according to an installation official—and this influenced their decisions.

**Comment from a Parent of Military Dependent Children on School Safety**

"At their school now, you have to stand at the front door, you have to ring the bell. They have a camera. They can see through the door. If they don't know who you are, you [have] to hold your ID up to the door to get in the front office and things like that. So that's another thing that we have to look at is school security."

Source: GAO discussion group | GAO-21-80

**Military culture.** In most discussion groups, parents said they sought schools that had a military culture connection because, for example, this

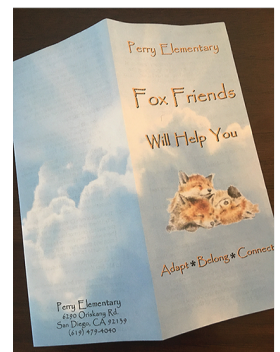
helped ease their children's transition. In addition, parents said they liked DODEA schools or schools with large populations of military dependent children because their children would have teachers and classmates who understand the challenges associated with military life, such as moving frequently and having parents who deploy. According to representatives of advocacy organizations, schools with large populations of military dependent children may also offer specific resources for these children, such as dedicated counselors or support programs (see text box). For example, in one discussion group, a parent liked that the school offered weekly counseling sessions for military dependent children to talk about these challenges.

#### School Support Programs for Military Dependent Children

School support programs connect military dependent children with one another and support them through challenges associated with military life, such as frequent moves and parental deployment, according to school officials and representatives of advocacy groups. For example, one elementary school pairs new students with a buddy who gives them a school tour and checks in with them at recess and lunch.

Another elementary school runs a support group specifically for students whose parents are deployed. The school counselor and parent volunteers coordinate activities, like bowling and movies, and help students communicate with their deployed parents. For example, children make holiday presents to send to their parents.

In addition to school-run programs, school liaisons at two installations told us they help administer support programs for military dependent children at local schools. For example, the Navy, in coordination with an outside organization, sponsors a program that aims to support military dependent children during transitions and help them build resiliency skills.



Source: GAO interviews and school flyer. | GAO-21-80

**Elective courses and extracurricular activities.** In most of our discussion groups, parents said they considered other school programs, such as elective courses and extracurricular activities, in their decision-making. For example, parents identified the availability of art and music programs or sports teams as an important factor. Installation officials and representatives of advocacy organizations echoed the importance of extracurricular activities in making schooling decisions and said that sports are particularly important to high school students interested in college athletic scholarships. For example at two installations where the local school did not offer specific sports programs important to families, one installation official said parents may choose to send their children elsewhere, and the other installation official said some families had turned down assignments to that installation.

Recognizing the importance of sports to students, officials at a third installation said they coordinated with the local school district to change a policy to expand military students' access to sports at certain schools. Previously, the policy required all students who enrolled from another

school district to wait a full school year to play sports, but the new policy allowed military dependent children to play immediately. In addition to elective courses and extracurricular activities, some families consider other school programs, such as special needs services (see text box).

**Families of Children with Special Needs May Consider Additional School Factors**

In our discussion groups, parents of children with special needs said they considered some of the same factors as other parents, such as academics and safety. For example, parents of children with special needs said they looked for relevant curriculum or experienced teachers. Another parent said that safety was an important factor in the family's decision because of concerns that their child would be bullied in certain school settings. In addition to these common factors, parents said they considered other support services for special needs and, in some cases, children may receive a service in one state that they are ineligible for in their new state, according to installation officials. Military families who frequently move across states may experience inconsistencies in the special needs services available to their children because federal law allows states some flexibility in establishing eligibility criteria. Further, installation officials noted that, in their experience, some special needs services may not be as widely available in small or rural public school districts.

Source: GAO analyses of discussion groups with parents of military dependent children, interviews with military officials, and federal laws. | GAO-21-80

**Comments from Parents of Military Dependent Children on Cost of Non-public Education**

"We looked at private schools, and for us, \$15,000 or \$16,000, that was almost exactly half of our income a year, and it was not feasible at all. And homeschooling for two children, we still spend \$3,000 just on the curriculum, not the supplies, not field trips, none of the above, just the curriculum."

"We did consider homeschool...but it was the cost-benefit analysis of [my wife] going to be back as a full time nurse, or be a stay at home [parent]."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-21-80

**Cost and flexibility of non-public education.** In most discussion groups, parents said they weighed the costs associated with private school or homeschooling. One parent chose to prioritize budgeting for private school and forgo other purchases. Other parents said they did not consider private schools to be an option because of the cost. Parents who considered homeschooling said they also thought about associated costs, such as buying instructional materials or losing income because one parent is out of the workforce. According to installation officials and representatives of advocacy organizations, private schools or homeschooling may be more accessible to families of officers and senior enlisted members due to their higher income. Representatives of advocacy organizations said that homeschooling is a popular option with military families because it allows them to schedule breaks around an



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active-duty parent's work or deployment schedule or relocations that do not align with local school calendars. For example, one parent chose to homeschool because the family moved after the beginning of the school year and did not know the length of the new assignment.

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### Most Military Families in Our Review Primarily Relied on Personal Networks for Information about Schools, and Had Mixed Experiences with School Liaisons

In all of our discussion groups, parents said they primarily relied on their own research to inform their schooling decisions by using a variety of resources, including personal networks and online sources. For example, parents received information from friends and military family groups on social media or from military families previously stationed at the installation. Parents and installation officials said they approach information on social media carefully, though, and are aware that they do not represent the experiences of all families. In all discussion groups, parents said they also conducted online research of their schooling options and used information from third-party websites that review and rate schools. However, installation officials said these third-party websites sometimes include outdated or inaccurate information based on a few families' experiences. Officials at four installations said they instead refer families to state school report cards—which include information on test scores and high school graduation rates—for accurate and current information.<sup>17</sup> Parents said they also reviewed official school district and individual school websites and reached out directly to schools for information and tours.

In some discussion groups, parents also discussed challenges they faced in researching schools due to timing issues. For example, one parent said there was insufficient time to research schools because the family

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<sup>17</sup>The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted on December 10, 2015, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Pub. L. No. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27 (1965), as amended by Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015). ESSA requires states to collect and report assessment data for students with a parent who is a member of the Armed Forces as a distinct subgroup in annual state and local report cards. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(h)(1)(C)(ii) and (h)(2)(C). In September 2019, Education issued guidance stating that, consistent with statutory requirements, annual state and local report cards must be posted annually on school districts' and state education departments' websites. See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(h)(1)(A)-(B) and (h)(2)(A)-(B). States and local school districts have discretion regarding when to issue these report cards each year, and the availability of current information may vary.

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received its assignment less than 3 weeks before needing to move. Therefore, this parent initially chose to homeschool until they could enroll their child in a school that met their needs. Another parent who moved from overseas to a domestic assignment said that the time difference made it difficult to contact schools for information.

In all discussion groups, parents had mixed experiences using school liaisons to help make decisions about their children's schools.<sup>18</sup> For example, one parent said that the school liaison was a helpful resource for information on the application process for a local charter school. However, another parent was unaware of the school liaison as a resource, and a third was aware of the liaison but preferred to get information through personal networks.

The school liaisons we spoke with said that most families generally do not reach out to them for support, although they employ various strategies to increase families' awareness of the program. Even if families are aware of the program, school liaisons said that some families prefer to use their personal networks or may choose not to contact a school liaison, particularly if they were previously stationed at the installation. School liaisons said that families who contact them may do so regarding specific situations, such as children with special needs. To increase families' awareness of the program, school liaisons said they employ various strategies such as participating in installation orientation briefings or posting resources on social media platforms. Two school liaisons said they also help connect families to school liaisons at new installations when families are being transferred. Last, to better reach families, officials at one installation said they co-located the school liaison office with other family and housing services for a one-stop-shopping approach.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this product to DOD and the Department of Homeland Security for review and comment. DOD and the Department of Homeland Security told us that they had no comments on the draft report.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate

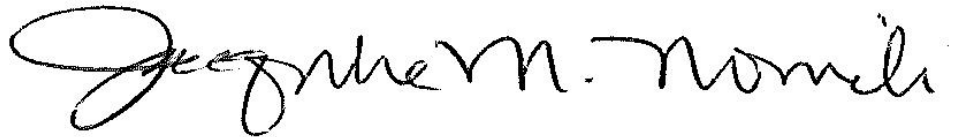
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<sup>18</sup>Coast Guard families stationed on or near a DOD installation can access the local DOD school liaison resources, according to Coast Guard officials.

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congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jacqueline M. Nowicki". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jacqueline" written in a large, flowing script, followed by "M." and "Nowicki".

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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## Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

In this report, we described (1) the availability of schooling options for school-age military dependent children in the U.S.; and (2) the views of military families on factors they consider and resources they use when making schooling decisions. We focused on K-12 school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers from the four Department of Defense (DOD) service branches—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps—as well as the U.S. Coast Guard (Coast Guard). We did not include the Space Force in our review because it was not operational at the time of our review. Terms such as “military families” and “military dependent children” refer to families and school-age dependents of active-duty servicemembers.

To conduct this work, we analyzed data to examine schooling options for military dependent children, conducted discussion groups with their parents, and interviewed officials at select military installations. In addition, we interviewed officials from DOD and the individual service branches; the Coast Guard; the Department of Education (Education); and representatives of national advocacy groups for military children. We also reviewed relevant federal laws and guidance related to schooling options for military families. We assessed the reliability of the data we used by reviewing related documentation and interviewing knowledgeable officials and determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

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### Analysis of Public School Options

To examine the public school options for military dependent children in all states and the District of Columbia, we analyzed Education’s national-level data on K-12 public schools from the Common Core of Data (CCD) for school year 2018-19, the most recent available. Education’s National Center for Education Statistics administers the CCD survey annually to collect a range of data from state educational agencies on all public schools and districts in the nation. These data include information on school characteristics (e.g., school type, such as traditional public school, charter school, etc.).

### Identification of School Districts near Military Installations

We identified school districts that were either completely or partially within the average commuting distance of DOD military installations and Coast Guard units. To identify the locations of DOD installations, we used DOD's Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data for 2018 (the most recent available at the time of our review). Given our focus on active-duty servicemembers, we excluded Reserve and National Guard units, recreational areas, recruiting offices, and target sites. Our analysis included 436 DOD installations. To determine the locations of Coast Guard units, we received a list of the physical locations of Coast Guard units from Coast Guard officials. We considered Coast Guard units with the same address (same street, city, state, and zip code) or with the same address but a different building number, as one unit. We took these steps to ensure the data were comparable with the DOD data, which were provided by installation rather than by individual unit. Our analysis included 454 Coast Guard units.

We then analyzed the school districts that were within the average commuting distance of installations and units. We defined the average commuting distance in rural and urban areas as 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively, by using the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey—the most recent available—to estimate the distances between people's homes and work locations.<sup>1</sup>

To identify the school districts that were either completely or partially within the average commuting distance of installations and units, we combined the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 school district geospatial data with installations from DOD's Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data and our list of the physical locations of Coast Guard units.<sup>2</sup> We then used Education's CCD to determine the public schooling options within these districts.

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<sup>1</sup>The National Household Travel Survey is the authoritative source on the travel behavior of the American public. It is the only source of national data that allows the analysis of trends in personal and household travel.

<sup>2</sup>We used 2019 U.S. Census Bureau Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing (TIGER) school district shapefiles, which are geospatial data describing school district boundaries, to align with the 2018-2019 CCD. We used all districts included in the shapefiles and added any school districts in Education's data that did not appear in the shapefiles.

We further compared public school options in rural and urban areas. To classify installations and units as rural or urban, we used the Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCA) that classify U.S. census tracts using measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting. We classified installations and units as rural where at least 50 percent of land area was rural, and the remaining installations and units as urban.<sup>3</sup> Of 436 DOD installations, 142 were rural and 294 were urban. Within 454 Coast Guard units, 137 were rural and 317 were urban.

#### Analysis of Public School Types and Statuses

The CCD reports data on public schools by both type and status. By type, schools are categorized as regular public schools, special education schools, career and technical education schools, or alternative/other schools based on the school's curriculum or population served (see table 1).

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<sup>3</sup>For the purposes of this report, we defined "rural" as areas identified as rural by the Department of Agriculture's RUCA. The Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service's 2010 RUCA data, as updated in 2019, incorporates census tract commuting patterns and other measures of "rurality" in addition to population density.

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**Table 1: Department of Education’s Common Core of Data Definitions of Public School Types, School Year 2018-19**

| Public school type             | Definition   |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Regular school                 | A public elementary or secondary school providing instruction and education services that does not focus primarily on special education, career and technical education, or alternative education.   |
| Special education school       | A public elementary or secondary school that focuses primarily on special education—including instruction for any of the following students with: autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, and other health impairments—and that adapts curriculum, materials, or instruction for students served. |
| Career and technical education | A public elementary or secondary school that focuses primarily on providing formal preparation for semi-skilled, skilled, technical, or professional occupations for high school-age students who have opted to develop or expand their employment opportunities, often in lieu of preparing for college entry.  |
| Alternative/other school       | A public elementary or secondary school that (1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school; (2) provides nontraditional education; (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or (4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or career and technical education.  |

Source: Department of Education, Common Core of Data. | GAO-21-80

Schools can have more than one status. These statuses include charter school, magnet school, and virtual school, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see table 2).

Table 2: Department of Education’s Common Core of Data Definitions of Public School Statuses, School Year 2018-19

| Public school status | Definition  |
|----------------------|---|
| Charter school       | A school that provides free public elementary or secondary education to eligible students under a specific charter granted by the state legislature or other appropriate authority, and is designated by such authority to be a charter school.   |
| Magnet school        | A school specially designed to attract students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds for the purpose of reducing, preventing, or eliminating racial isolation (50 percent or more minority enrollment); and/or to provide an academic or social focus on a particular theme (e.g., science and math, performing arts, gifted and talented, or foreign language). |
| Virtual school       | A public school that exclusively or primarily offers instruction in which students and teachers are separated by time and/or location, and interaction occurs via computers or other electronic devices.  |

Source: Department of Education, Common Core of Data. | GAO-21-80

Note: We excluded virtual schools from our analysis because they are not location-dependent. Because the CCD reports public school data in two ways, we sorted schools based on a combination of both school types and statuses to develop distinct categories for our analysis (see table 3). For reporting purposes, we used the term “traditional public school” in place of “regular school” to be consistent with our prior reports on K-12 education issues that analyzed the CCD and other Education datasets. We use the term “other public school options” to refer to school types other than traditional public, charter, and magnet schools. These other public schools options include alternative and career and technical education schools.



**Table 3: Public School Types Used in Analysis of the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD), School Year 2018-19**

| GAO category                | CCD school type  | CCD school status  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Traditional public school   | Regular  | None   |
| Charter school              | Regular  | Charter school status only or both charter and magnet status |
| Magnet school               | Regular  | Magnet school status only                                    |
| Other public school options | Career and technical education, alternative/other, or special education school | Any status or combination of statuses                        |

Source: Department of Education, Common Core of Data and GAO. | GAO-21-80

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## Analysis of DOD and Private School Options

In addition to mapping public school options, we identified installations with Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools and states with private school choice programs, such as vouchers and tax credits. To determine the location of DODEA schools, we reviewed DODEA documentation and interviewed DODEA officials. We were unable to determine the private school options available near installations because Education's data on private schools are not reliable for this purpose.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we analyzed the presence of private school choice programs that provide options to help families fund private education. To identify states with these programs, we reviewed our prior work on private school choice and information issued by EdChoice, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on school choice policies.<sup>5</sup> We reviewed EdChoice's information to identify states that had implemented programs since the GAO reports were issued. We then reviewed those states' websites to determine whether the programs were operating as of the 2019-20 school year.

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## Discussion Groups with Parents of Military Dependent Children and Interviews with Officials at Selected Installations

To examine the views of military families on factors they consider and resources they use when making schooling decisions for their dependent children, we selected a non-generalizable sample of nine installations across all four DOD service branches and the Coast Guard to learn about

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<sup>4</sup>In our previous work we found that Education's Private School Universe Survey is based on a sample and captures only about one-half of the private schools in the nation. Furthermore, the broader list of private schools from which Education draws the Private School Universe Survey sample contained more than 10,000 entities that were not private schools. See GAO, *Public School Choice: Limited Options Available for Many American Indian and Alaska Native Students*, [GAO-19-226](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 24, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>See GAO, *Private School Choice: Accountability in State Tax Credit Scholarship Programs*, [GAO-19-664](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2019); and GAO, *Private School Choice: Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents Are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities*, [GAO-18-94](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2017). See EdChoice, School Choice in America Dashboard, February 4, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020. <http://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america>. EdChoice identified North Carolina's education savings account program, which was implemented in 2018 and after the data were collected for the GAO report on education savings accounts. We included the North Carolina program in this report.

military families' experiences.<sup>6</sup> We considered five factors in our selection of installations: (1) availability of different types of schooling options (public, private, and DODEA), (2) rural or urban designation, (3) number of military dependent children, (4) geographic region, and (5) recommendations from military officials and national organizations advocating for the education of military dependent children. At each installation, we interviewed officials who provide support services to these families, such as DOD school liaisons and Coast Guard Health, Safety, and Work-Life staff. When possible, we also interviewed officials from a local school or district.

To solicit participants for our discussion groups, we requested that school liaisons or other installation officials distribute a letter to parents to inform them of our request. Parents interested in participating responded to us directly. At one installation, we received responses from more parents than we could accommodate, so we conducted a random selection from a list of interested parents.

We conducted discussion groups with a non-generalizable sample of 40 parents, which included servicemembers and civilian spouses, across six of the selected installations.<sup>7</sup> The parents who participated differed on several characteristics, including their number of years in the military, rank (officer or enlisted), and age and number of children. While the participants in these groups included parents who selected a variety of schooling options, the number of participants and groups were very small relative to the total number of military families. Their comments are not intended to represent all military families. At three installations, we were not able to recruit a sufficient number of parents to conduct a discussion group, possibly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we interviewed four parents who responded from two of these installations. For methodological consistency, we collected information from these

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<sup>6</sup>The nine installations were: Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base (Alabama); Coast Guard Sector San Diego (California); Naval Base San Diego (California); Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms (California); Fort Benning (Georgia); Fort Leavenworth (Kansas); Joint Base Andrews (Maryland); Whiteman Air Force Base (Missouri); and Marine Corps Base Quantico (Virginia).

<sup>7</sup>We conducted discussion groups in person at installations in California, Maryland, and Virginia. We conducted discussion groups by videoconference at installations in Alabama and Georgia because of impacts to government operations related to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

interviews, but we did not incorporate responses from the individual interviews in our discussion group analysis.

During each discussion group, we used a prepared script to ask participants to describe their thoughts on the schooling options available in their area and the factors they considered when deciding where to enroll their children. We also asked them how they were made aware of the available schooling options, and what could have better helped them make decisions. We pretested our script with parents at two installations prior to the first discussion group. Our first four discussion groups were conducted prior to K-12 schools closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, to ensure consistency across all discussion groups, we asked participants in groups that we conducted in June 2020 (i.e., after many schools moved to distance learning due to COVID-19) to respond about their experiences before the pandemic.

To characterize parents' views throughout this report, we defined modifiers (e.g. "most") to quantify the views presented by discussion groups as follows:

- "all" discussion groups represents six groups,
- "most" discussion groups represents four or five groups, and
- "some" discussion groups represents two or three groups.<sup>8</sup>

### Additional Interviews

Finally, we conducted interviews with military officials and advocacy organizations. We spoke with officials from DODEA and service-level School Liaison Program representatives from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. The Coast Guard does not have a School Liaison Program, so we spoke with other relevant officials from the Coast Guard. In addition, we met with representatives from national organizations that advocate for the education of military dependent children, including the Collaborative for Student Success, Military Child Education Coalition, Military Impacted Schools Association, Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, Military Officers Association of America, National Association of Federally Impacted Schools, and the National Military

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<sup>8</sup>While we report our findings by the number of discussion groups in which a topic was discussed, it does not necessarily mean that there was a consensus or agreement among all discussion group participants on a given topic. Instead, we report perspectives that were commonly shared across multiple discussion groups.

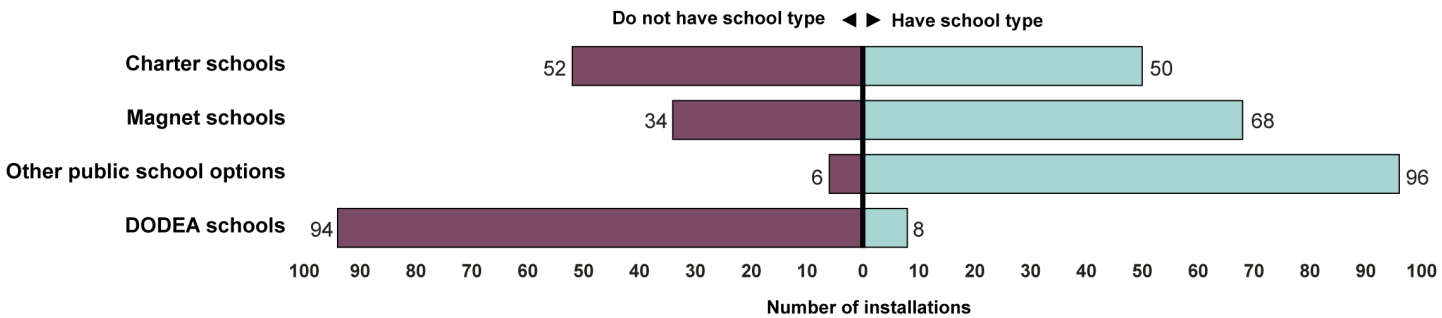
Family Association. We also met with EdChoice, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on school choice policies.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2019 to February 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

# Appendix II: Schooling Options near Military Installations by Department of Defense Service Branches

This appendix contains additional information about charter and magnet schools, other public school options, and Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools near Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps installations.

Figure 6: Number of Army Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19

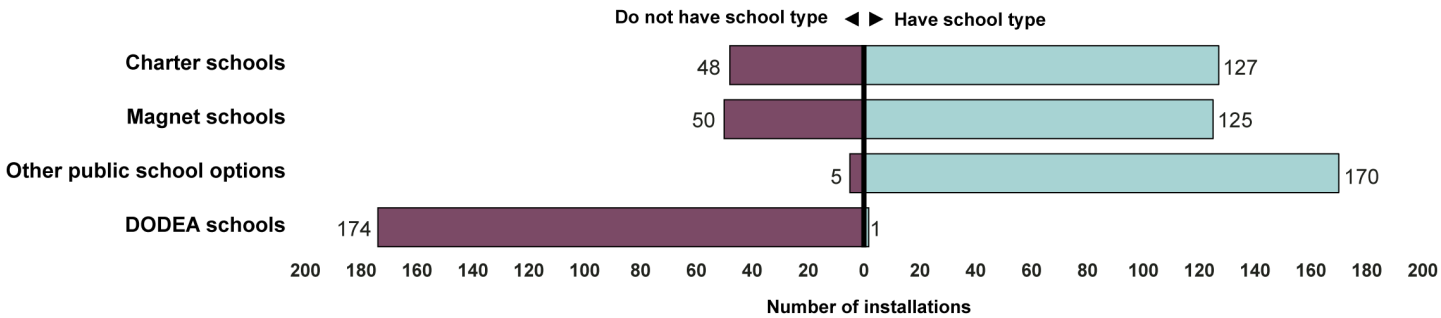


Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: There are 102 Army installations with at least one charter school, magnet school, other public school option, or DODEA school within average commuting distance. Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter, or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively.

Appendix II: Schooling Options near Military Installations by Department of Defense Service Branches

Figure 7: Number of Navy Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19

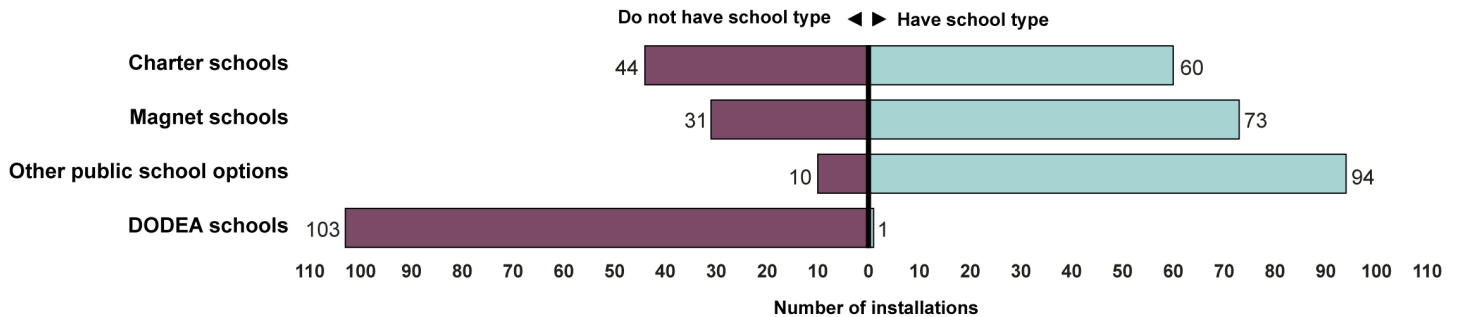


Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: There are 175 Navy installations with at least one charter school, magnet school, other public school option, or DODEA school within average commuting distance. Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter, or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively.

Appendix II: Schooling Options near Military Installations by Department of Defense Service Branches

**Figure 8: Number of Air Force Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19**



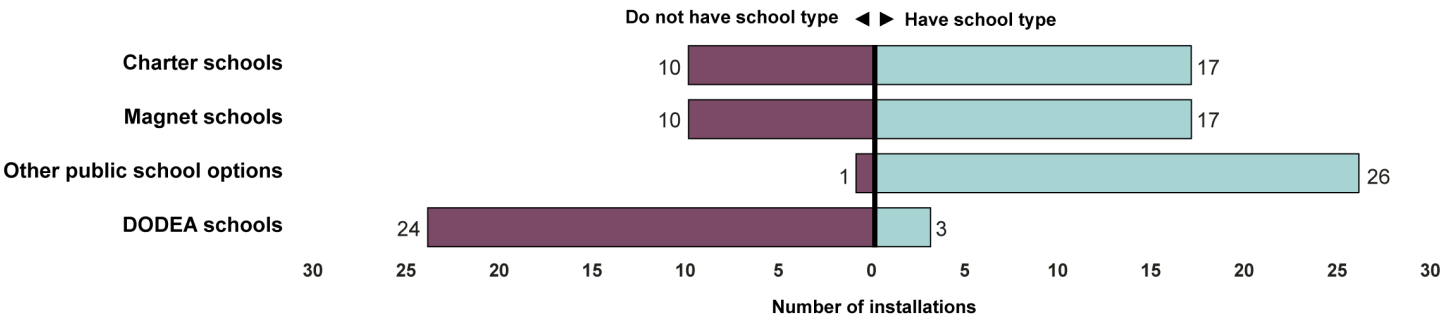
Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: There are 104 Air Force installations with at least one charter school, magnet school, other public school option, or DODEA school within average commuting distance. Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively.



Appendix II: Schooling Options near Military Installations by Department of Defense Service Branches

Figure 9: Number of Marine Corps Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19



Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

Note: There are 27 Marine Corps installations with at least one charter school, magnet school, other public school option, or DODEA school within average commuting distance. Other public school options include alternative and career and technical schools, as well as other public schools that are not traditional, charter or magnet schools. Schooling options near military installations are within average commuting distance. According to GAO's analysis of the Department of Transportation's 2017 National Household Travel Survey, the average commuting distance for rural and urban areas is 20 miles and 16 miles, respectively.

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## Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

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### GAO Contact

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov)

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### Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Amy Anderson (Assistant Director), Grace Cho (Analyst in Charge), and Caroline DeCelles made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were Christina Bixby, Mindy Bowman, Elizabeth Calderon, Sherwin Chapman, Sherri Doughty, Brian Egger, Nagla'a El-Hodiri, Scott Hiromoto, Dawn Hoff, Sheila R. McCoy, John Mingus, Mimi Nguyen, Stacy Ouellette, Monica Savoy, Almeta Spencer, Walter Vance, David Watsula, and Alex Winograd.

# Appendix IV: Accessible Data

## Data Tables

**Accessible Data for Public School Options within Average Commuting Distance of Military Installations, School Year 2018-19**

| Category     | Installations with traditional public schools only (number of installations) | Installations with traditional public schools and at least one charter school, magnet school, or other public school option (number of installations) |
|--------------|--|---|
| Army         | 10   | 102   |
| Navy         | 2  | 175   |
| Air Force    | 15   | 104   |
| Marine Corps | 1  | 27  |
| Coast Guard  | 36   | 418   |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

| Accessible Data for Figure 1: Installations with Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Schools, School Year 2019-20 |  |
|--|--|
| Category   | Installations with Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Schools  |
| Elementary schools (Kindergarten through grades 5 or 6)  | Fort Rucker (Army), Fort Jackson (Army), Fort Stewart (Army)   |
| Elementary and middle schools (Kindergarten through grade 8)   | U.S. Military Academy at West Point (Army), Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Fort Bragg (Army), Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, Fort Benning (Army), Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base |
| Elementary, middle, and high schools (Kindergarten through grade 12)   | Marine Corps Base Quantico, Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune & Marine Corps Air Station New River, Fort Knox (Army), Fort Campbell (Army)  |

Source: GAO analysis of DODEA information. MapResources (map). | GAO-21-80

**Accessible Data for Figure 3: Public School Options within Average Commuting Distance of Military Installations, School Year 2018-19**

| Category     | Installations with traditional public schools only (number of installations) | Installations with traditional public schools and at least one charter school, magnet school, or other public school option (number of installations) |
|--------------|--|---|
| Army         | 10   | 102   |
| Navy         | 2  | 175   |
| Air Force    | 15   | 104   |
| Marine Corps | 1  | 27  |
| Coast Guard  | 36   | 418   |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

**Accessible Data for Figure 4: Number of Military Installations with at Least One Schooling Option nearby Other Than a Traditional Public School, School Year 2018-19**

**Among 408 DOD installations**

| Category                    | Do not have school type<br>(number of installations) | Have school type (number<br>of installations) |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Charter schools             | 154  | 254   |
| Magnet schools              | 125  | 283   |
| Other public school options | 22   | 386   |
| DODEA schools               | 395  | 13  |

**Among 418 Coast Guard units**

| Category                    | Do not have school type<br>(number of units) | Have school type (number<br>of units) |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Charter schools             | 188  | 230                                   |
| Magnet schools              | 150  | 268                                   |
| Other public school options | 24   | 394                                   |
| DODEA schools               | 418  | 0                                     |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

**Accessible Data for Figure 5: Median Number of Charter, Magnet, and Other Public School Options near Rural and Urban DOD Installations and Coast Guard Units, School Year 2018-19**

| n/a                         | DOD installations |       | Coast Guard units |       |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
| Category                    | Rural             | Urban | Rural             | Urban |
| Charter schools             | 6                 | 9     | 2                 | 10    |
| Magnet schools              | 4                 | 22    | 3                 | 13    |
| Other public school options | 6                 | 17    | 3                 | 15    |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Location Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey, and 2010 Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes data as updated in 2019. | GAO-21-80



| Accessible Data for Figure 6: Number of Army Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19 |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Category   | Do not have school type (number of installations) | Have school type (number of installations) |
| Charter schools  | 52  | 50   |
| Magnet schools   | 34  | 68   |
| Other public school options  | 6   | 96   |
| DODEA schools  | 94  | 8  |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

**Accessible Data for Figure 7: Number of Navy Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19**

| Category                    | Do not have school type<br>(Number of installations) | Have school type<br>(Number of installations) |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Charter schools             | 48   | 127   |
| Magnet schools              | 50   | 125   |
| Other public school options | 5  | 170   |
| DODEA schools               | 174  | 1   |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

**Accessible Data for Figure 8: Number of Air Force Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19**

| Category                    | Do not have school type<br>(number of installations) | Have school type (number<br>of installations) |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Charter schools             | 44   | 60  |
| Magnet schools              | 31   | 73  |
| Other public school options | 10   | 94  |
| DODEA schools               | 103  | 1   |

Source: : GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

| Accessible Data for Figure 9: Number of Marine Corps Installations with at Least One Charter School, Magnet School, Other Public School Option, or DODEA School within Average Commuting Distance, School Year 2018-19 |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Category   | Do not have school type (number of installations) | Have school type (number of installations) |
| Charter schools  | 10  | 17   |
| Magnet schools   | 10  | 17   |
| Other public school options  | 1   | 26   |
| DODEA schools  | 24  | 3  |

Source: GAO analysis of 2018-19 Department of Education, Common Core of Data, 2018 Department of Defense Military Installations, Ranges, and Training Areas data, and 2017 Department of Transportation National Household Travel Survey. | GAO-21-80

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