



# The Relentless Improver

## The U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) School System

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By Rafael Heller

### **NCEE Case Studies of High-performing Education Systems**

For more than 30 years, NCEE has made it a priority to identify and learn from the highest-performing school systems in the United States and around the world.

# System at a Glance

## Structure of schools

DoDEA offers pre-k to grade 12. There is also a DoDEA virtual high school, that students can enroll in to take supplemental classes, summer classes, or classes during transitions when students relocate.

## Standards and Curriculum

DoDEA uses its own College and Career Ready standards (CCRS) for grades K-12. It has standards in English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, Social Studies, and World Languages.

## Governance

DoDEA schools are federally operated and funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. There are three geographic regions, each of which has its own Center for Instructional Leadership.

## Assessment

DoDEA students take CCRS summative assessments in math in grades 3-8, Algebra 1 and 2, and Geometry in high school, and ELA in grades 3-8 and 10. There are required interim and formative assessments in math and ELA.

## Key Stats

### Enrollment

~66,000 students

### Personnel

~8,000 teachers

### Schools/Districts

8 districts

160 schools

### Student Race/Ethnicity

White: 42%

Hispanic/Latinx: 25%

Black/African American: 24%

Asian American, Pacific Islander: 8%

### Student Socio-economic Background

Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 28%

### Students in Special Education

Americas: 24%

Europe: 12%

Pacific: 12%

Visit <https://www.dodea.edu> for more information.

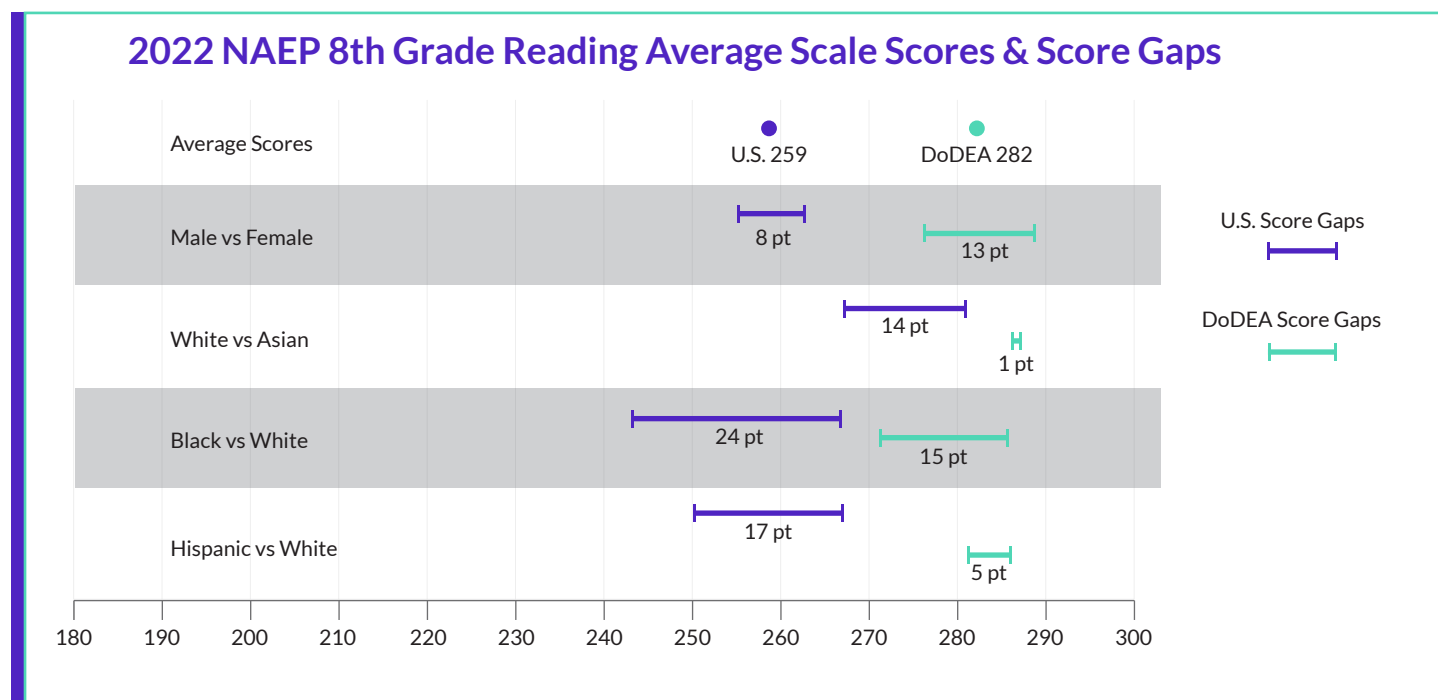
## Introduction

Every few years, the U.S. Department of Education releases new findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card), providing the latest snapshot of American elementary, middle, and high school students' proficiency in reading, mathematics, science, and other subjects. When it comes to the highest-performing state school systems, there tend to be few surprises: children from Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Minnesota, and a handful of other relatively affluent states almost always post the highest NAEP scores.

In recent years, one of the top performers on the NAEP hasn't been a state school system at all, but rather the Department of Defense

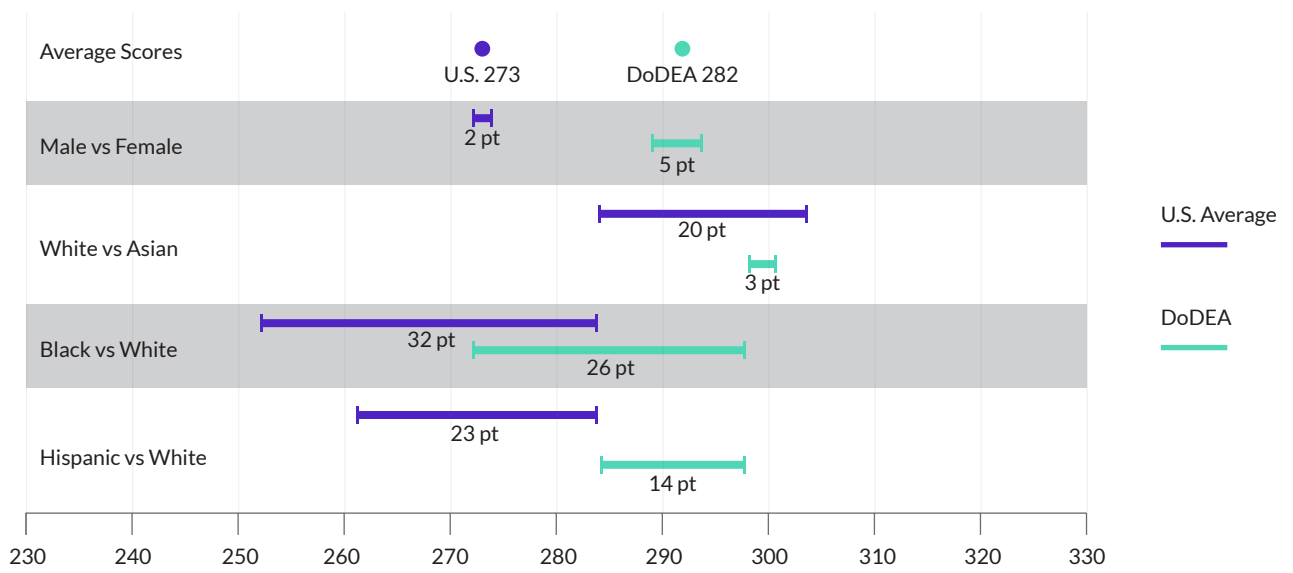
Education Activity (DoDEA), which serves students whose families live on military bases in the United States and overseas. A longtime top performer in reading, DoDEA has also become a top performer in math over the past decade.

In fact, DoDEA outscored every state on the 2022 NAEP at both of the grade levels (4th and 8th grade) and in both of the subjects (reading and math) assessed that year. Further, it did so by wide margins; it showed the most progress in closing longstanding achievement gaps between White students and their Black and Hispanic classmates; and it was the only school system to see its scores hold steady, and even rise somewhat, during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Reading Assessment.

## 2022 NAEP 8th Grade Math Average Scale Scores & Score Gaps



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Math Assessment.

What explains the strong performance of DoDEA's students? It's a particularly interesting question as the DoDEA serve a diverse student population and one without the high family incomes or levels of education that many strong performing schools have.

Journalists and pundits have offered various theories: Perhaps these students have an edge in the classroom because they've been raised in a military culture that stresses order and discipline (Levey, 2022). Maybe their scores reflect the material benefits of living on a military base, such as guaranteed housing, healthcare, and pre-school programs (Mervosh, 2023). Maybe the credit should go to DoDEA's experienced teaching force, high-quality curriculum, and student supports (Pope, 2022), or to the efficiency and effectiveness with which DoDEA manages its resources (Cowen, 2022).

However, as the Harvard education scholar Martin West suggested to the *New York*

*Times*, if we really want to know why these students performed so well on the NAEP, then we'll need to put aside the speculation and invite researchers to take a closer look: "If the Department of Defense schools were a state," he noted, "we would all be traveling there to figure out what's going on" (Mervosh, 2023).

In fact, that's precisely what researchers did 25 years ago.

In the late 1990s, DoDEA participated in NAEP for the very first time, and back then, just as now, its students posted surprisingly strong scores, including the top score on reading and writing proficiency for 8th grade, prompting observers to wonder what might explain their success. In turn, the Department of Defense commissioned a pair of studies looking into DoDEA's academic performance (Wright et al., 2000; Anderson et al., 2000), and the National Education Goals Panel commissioned another, funding a

team of Vanderbilt University researchers to travel to various DoDEA schools to see what was going on (Smrekar et al., 2001).

All three studies concluded that the available evidence wasn't sufficient to explain why DoDEA's students had performed so well on the NAEP. The data, they said, simply don't allow researchers to determine how much of the credit for these students' academic success should go to their schools and how much of it can be attributed to their family backgrounds, their exposure to military culture, and the advantages associated with living on a military base. Further, given how frequently military families tend to relocate, many of the students who attended a DoDEA school in 4th and 8th grade (when NAEP measured their academic proficiency) likely attended regular public schools for some or all of their time in grades K–3 and 5–7, making it even harder to gauge the extent to which their scores should be attributed to their time in DoDEA schools.

What the researchers (specifically the team from Vanderbilt) did find, however, was that DoDEA stood out as a particularly well-run school system, notable for its clarity of mission; coherent and well-communicated policies; careful use of data to inform its decision-making; effective use of resources; smart investments in high-quality staff development and support; close attention to student and community needs; high academic expectations for every student; and an organizational “commitment to public education that is material and symbolic and that is visible and responsive to parents” (Smrekar et al., 2001).

Those who know this school system best continue to echo those findings today.

While it remains impossible to say precisely which factors deserve the most credit for its impressive performance on NAEP, it is clear that DoDEA continues to be exceptionally well-run, and has taken an extraordinarily disciplined, patient, and systematic approach to school improvement.

## The History of DoDEA

The roots of the Defense Department's school system go back to the War of 1812, when Congress allocated funding for the education of military dependents. But the system really took shape just after the Second World War, with the expansion of U.S. military bases in Europe and Asia, as well as the decision to open schools on bases in the Southeastern U.S., rather than rely on the region's then-segregated public schools (Walling, 1985).

The system grew to be quite large during the Cold War—by the 1980s, for example, it enrolled almost 150,000 students across 270 schools. But since then, and owing to the military's gradual consolidation and closure of many of its installations in both the United States and overseas, DoDEA has downsized. Today, it serves a little more than 66,000 students at 160 schools, enrolling roughly 10% of all school-aged military dependents. (For the most part, DoDEA schools are available only to children who live on the bases where those schools exist; most children of active-duty personnel attend regular public schools.)

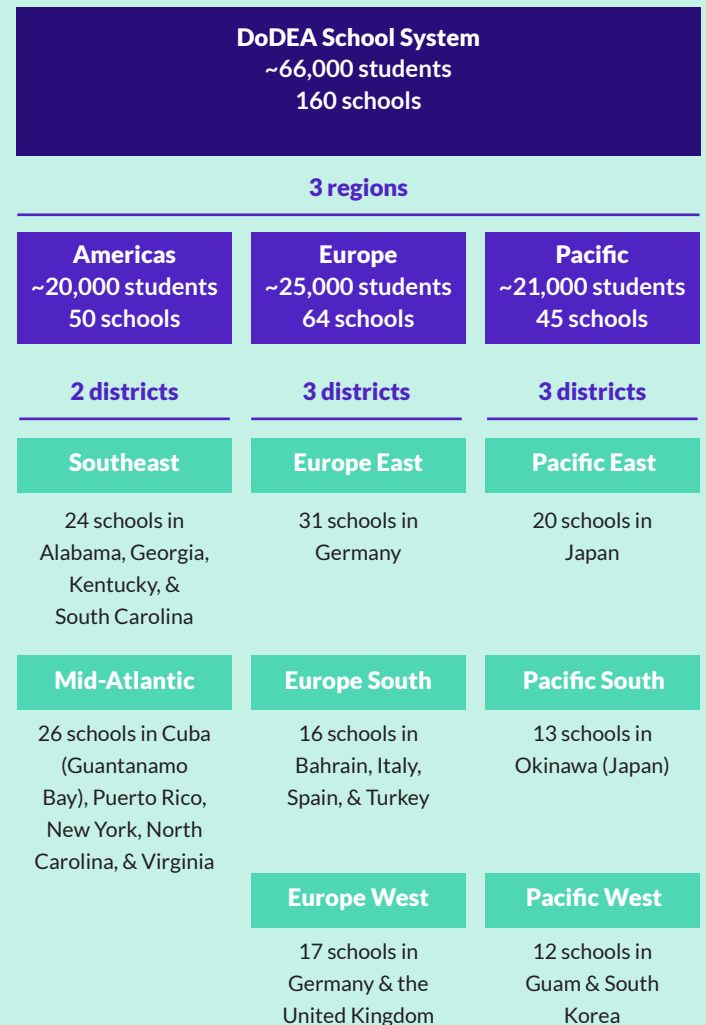
## What makes DoDEA unique?

In most respects, the DoDEA schools have always resembled regular public schools. They teach the same academic subjects as other schools, relying on, more or less, the same kinds of teaching strategies, instructional materials, lesson plans, and classroom activities, and there's nothing unusual about their curriculum, staffing patterns, academic schedules, or everyday school routines. At first glance, DoDEA schools in Germany and Guam look much the same as regular public schools in Galveston and Green Bay.

That is, whatever might explain DoDEA's high NAEP scores, it isn't because the system has adopted a "transformative" or "break-the-mold" school design. If anything, it adheres closely to the familiar "grammar of schooling," as David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) famously termed it, referring to all the familiar features of K–12 education that Americans have long taken for granted, everything from morning recess and all-school assemblies to age-graded classrooms, end-of-semester exams, and graduation requirements based on the accumulation of course credits.

However while everyday life in DoDEA schools looks much the same as it does in other school systems, DoDEA operates under some distinct conditions:

### Map of DoDEA System





## Self-governance

Each of the military branches operated its own schools until 1976, when Congress decided to place those schools under a single umbrella. While lawmakers considered putting the new system under the authority of the U.S. Department of Education, they ultimately chose to house it within the Defense Department, a decision that ended up having important consequences for DoDEA's governance, organizational culture, strategic planning, budgeting, and more (Bartell et al., 1983).

No doubt influenced by its location within a military chain of command, DoDEA has always been a very centralized system, with its Alexandria, VA-based Headquarters (often likened to a state education agency) taking the lead on all significant policy decisions. The precise balance among

accountability measures, reporting requirements, and school improvement strategies, but DoDEA did not. While other systems labored to primarily meet externally defined goals and benchmarks, DoDEA continued to assess its own strengths and weaknesses and define its own priorities for school improvement.

Moreover, DoDEA's independence from state-level authority has largely sheltered it from the various political pressures that tend to bear upon regular public school systems. DoDEA schools have elected school boards and parent councils, but those bodies act in an advisory capacity only, and final decision-making authority over budgeting, personnel, and other topics rests with principals, superintendents, and staff at Headquarters. Certainly, one might argue that elected officials play vitally important roles in public education, providing much-

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central, regional, and local decision-making has shifted somewhat over time. But in recent years, the balance of power has tilted decisively toward the central office, allowing it to create more consistent policies and practices throughout what could easily, given the size of its geographic footprint, become a scattered and uneven system.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, the decision to place DoDEA within the Defense Department became even more consequential: every other public school system became subject to the federal government's stringent

needed supervision over school system finances, hiring, purchasing, standards-setting, and much more. But whatever the risks involved in exempting DoDEA from these kinds of public oversight, DoDEA has enjoyed some benefits as well: it hasn't had to contend with the partisan, intrusive, and often dysfunctional behavior of many boards, legislatures, mayors, and governors.

It bears pointing out, too, that NCLB, by holding schools accountable for their year-to-year progress, only reinforced the practice, widespread in public school systems, of creating and attempting to

implement a new strategic plan every year or two. By contrast, the longstanding practice in DoDEA (perhaps influenced by the military's approach to management) has been to operate on five-year plans (Kingston, 2002). Thus, once Headquarters announces a new strategic direction, they can roll it out on a realistic timeframe, allowing for staff to learn about new policies and practices; air their concerns; get the professional development, support, and resources they need to implement those practices successfully; assess their progress, and make adjustments as needed.

### A highly mobile student population

Dating back to the 1940s, the leaders of Defense Department schools have been acutely aware that military life creates a distinct challenge for the children of active-duty personnel, in that they must contend with frequent family relocations. On average, military dependents change schools every 2–3 years, often having to do so mid-year, and often having to switch between the DoDEA system and the regular public schools.

relatively new crisis to which they are now struggling to respond. By contrast, the DoDEA school system is designed around this very feature, and mobility is seen as a normal part of their students' experience, one that the system can help manage successfully — as the Vanderbilt researchers noted over two decades ago, the DoDEA schools consider “high mobility ‘a way of life’ rather than an intractable problem” (Smrekar & Owens, 2003, p. 175).

This isn't to say that it's easy for these students to relocate every few years but that the school system has, over many decades, made it a priority to help them do so as smoothly as possible. For example, DoDEA ensures that students' records are forwarded quickly to their new school; it offers distance learning to allow them to continue taking a subject that their new school doesn't offer; it keeps schools fully staffed with counselors and psychologists who check in proactively with new students; and it ensures that new students are allowed to join the same teams, clubs, and extracurriculars that they participated in at their old school. Perhaps most importantly, system leaders try to

*The concern about [frequent family relocations] also helps to explain why DoDEA has always hewed closely to the familiar grammar of K–12 schooling.*

Over the last two decades, high rates of mobility have become increasingly common throughout the U.S. public school system (Welsh, 2017), making it no longer unusual that the DoDEA schools see roughly 30 percent of their students come and go every year. For most districts, though, skyrocketing rates of student mobility represent a

ensure that all DoDEA schools follow the same curriculum at roughly the same pace, so that students can easily continue their previous course of study after they switch from one DoDEA school to another.

The concern about student mobility also helps to explain why DoDEA has always hewed closely to the familiar grammar of



K–12 schooling. Not only does the system strive to align curriculum, instruction, services, and supports among DoDEA schools, but it also tries to minimize the culture shock students experience when transferring between DoDEA and regular public schools. (If DoDEA were to adopt radically new and idiosyncratic approaches to instruction, grading, scheduling, staffing, and the like, then those transitions would only become more difficult.)

### Close collaboration among schools, families, and community services agencies

While DoDEA has always paid special attention to the challenges associated with student mobility, its concern for student and family well-being goes well beyond that in ways that blur the boundaries that typically separate school systems from local government and community agencies.

children), to reenlist (Clever & Segal, 2013).

Within a military base community, then, a school is not a singular institution responsible only for children’s academic success. Rather, the school belongs to and connects with a larger network of support and services including pre-school and after-school programs, recreation centers, libraries, transportation systems, clinics, and hospitals. Thus, while school principals are not, from an organizational standpoint, *answerable* to their local base commander (akin to the mayor of the community), they do, as a matter of practice, work with them very closely out of a strong sense of shared responsibility for children and families.

That helps explain why researchers have long observed exceptionally high levels of attendance at parent-teacher conferences in DoDEA schools (Smrekar et al., 2001)—as far as base commanders are concerned,

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To understand why, it’s important to know that the military has long viewed the well-being of service-members’ families as a force-readiness issue: one can’t expect soldiers to stay fully engaged in their work, and perhaps go to war, if they’re worried about their children’s health, safety, and education. Further, since 1973, when the military converted to an all-volunteer force, it has been even more willing to invest in the quality of schooling on base communities, both to help persuade new recruits to join the service and to convince them, as they get older (and perhaps get married and have

the conference is the soldier’s “place of duty” at that time, preempting other work responsibilities. Similarly, if a student is struggling emotionally because a parent is away on a long and possibly dangerous deployment, it isn’t up to the school social worker alone to provide support. School staff know they can count on, and are expected to work in partnership with, the base’s School Liaison Officers and Military Life Family Counselors.

In short, and as the sociologist Robert Hauser (2020) has argued, DoDEA and

its partner military bases can accurately be described as operating, in concert, the nation’s most extensive network of full-service community schools, providing all four of the key elements that the research into this approach identifies as essential to its success: “integrated student supports... expanded learning time...family and community engagement...and collaborative leadership” (Maier et al., 2017).

Not only do the DoDEA schools work closely with their base commanders to ensure children and families’ well-being but—and in large part because they do so—DoDEA does not face the levels of child neglect, family trauma, stress, violence, drug addiction, and other chronic problems that many other school systems face, particularly in areas characterized by high levels of concentrated poverty.

Military children are significantly more likely to live in two-parent households than their

peers outside the military, and they can count on at least one parent to hold a steady job. Judging by their salaries alone, many of those parents are “low-income” (and roughly 25–30 percent of DoDEA students qualify for free and/or reduced-price lunch). In some ways, however, they enjoy an enviable middle-class life, given that their benefits include pre- and after-school programs, health care, and housing in a safe, secure, and racially integrated base community. (Rates of socio-economic neighborhood integration are somewhat lower, given that officers and enlisted personnel tend to be given differing housing options; however, DoDEA schools tend to be well-integrated in both respects.)

All of this is to say that the DoDEA schools do not often encounter the kind of profound social and economic dysfunction that weighs on many public schools. Moreover, DoDEA parents who serve in the military can be assumed to have met their entrance

### 2022 NAEP: Percent of Students Performing at Each Level

8th Grade Math		Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
	U.S. National	40%	35%	19%	7%
	DoDEA	18%	41%	30%	11%
8th Grade Reading	U.S. National	32%	39%	26%	3%
	DoDEA	10%	36%	48%	7%

Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Math and Reading Assessments.

requirements (including at least a high school diploma) and passed regular performance reviews, which suggests that they have met at least baseline standards of academic and workplace proficiency, putting them in a strong position to help their children perform well in school. In short, very few of DoDEA's students come from severely stressed homes or neighborhoods, or from families with few educational resources. Thus, it should be no surprise that DoDEA's most recent NAEP scores showed relatively few of its students to be performing at the lowest ("below basic") level in reading and math. As tends to be the case in relatively well-resourced schools and districts, the vast majority of DoDEA's students meet or surpass basic academic standards.

### Ample funding for teachers, staff, classroom materials, and other resources

Thanks, again, to the decision to house the school system within the Defense Department, DoDEA has always enjoyed robust funding (though it's worth noting that the system isn't eligible for some important sources of supplemental funding—such as Title I, state grants, and private grants—that often round out local public-school budgets). Given the military's abiding interest in ensuring the well-being of children and families living on its bases around the world, it has consistently provided sufficient resources to ensure that DoDEA's offices and schools are supplied with the personnel, materials, technology, tools, and professional development they need to do their work effectively.

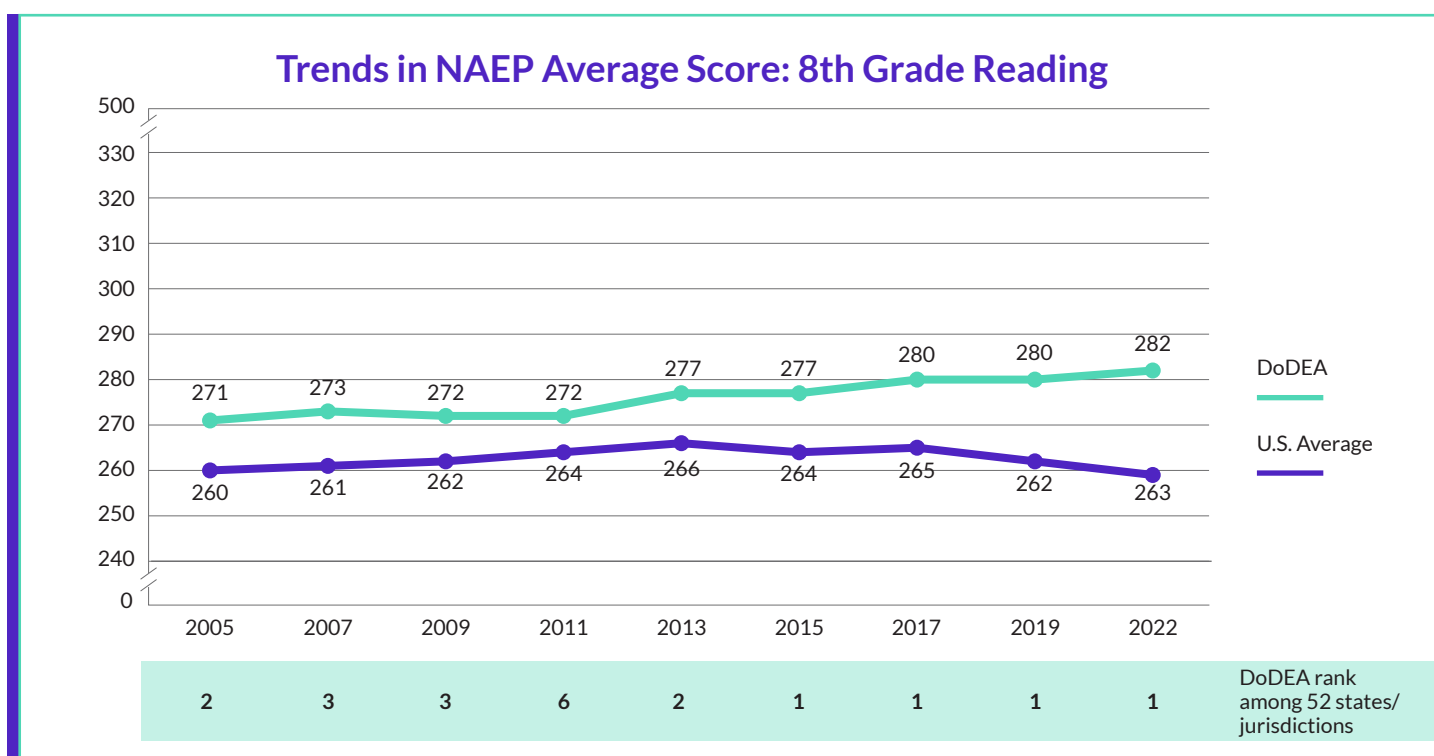
For instance, while many U.S. school systems lack adequate numbers of counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, librarians, and other staff, DoDEA schools tend to be well staffed in these roles. DoDEA provides consistently high levels of funding for teacher mentoring programs, release time to participate in professional learning communities, and opportunities to attend professional conferences. The buildings, computers, and other equipment in DoDEA schools tend to be top-notch, even state-of-the-art. And because budgets are attached to five-year plans, schools and districts can be confident that they won't suddenly run out of resources mid-stream. For instance, they can be certain that if they launch a new after-school program, they won't see their staff lines cut two years later, and if they purchase a new courseware package, they won't lose their funding for IT support shortly after they've installed the program.

Additionally, DoDEA teacher salaries and benefits tend to rank on the high end, nationally (thanks, in part, to a 1959 Congressional bill requiring that salaries in Defense Department schools be comparable to those in the relatively well-paid Washington, DC, public schools; Derrick, 1960). And for all of these reasons—fully-staffed schools, excellent resources, well-funded professional development programs, competitive salaries, and more—teacher morale tends to be quite high as well, and attrition tends to be lower than in most public school systems. As a longtime member of the team that accredits DoDEA's schools remarked in a recent interview:

“ Sure, you can find people who aren’t happy. But, overall, working in DoDEA is pretty attractive. Salaries are good, housing is free, you have opportunities to live overseas, and from the start you’re put in an environment that gives you great chances to become a great teacher. As a new teacher, you get an instructional coach as well as a sponsor, who helps with settling into the community and dealing with logistics. You get to work in a well-run school with engaged students, great colleagues, all the reasons you can think of to stay.

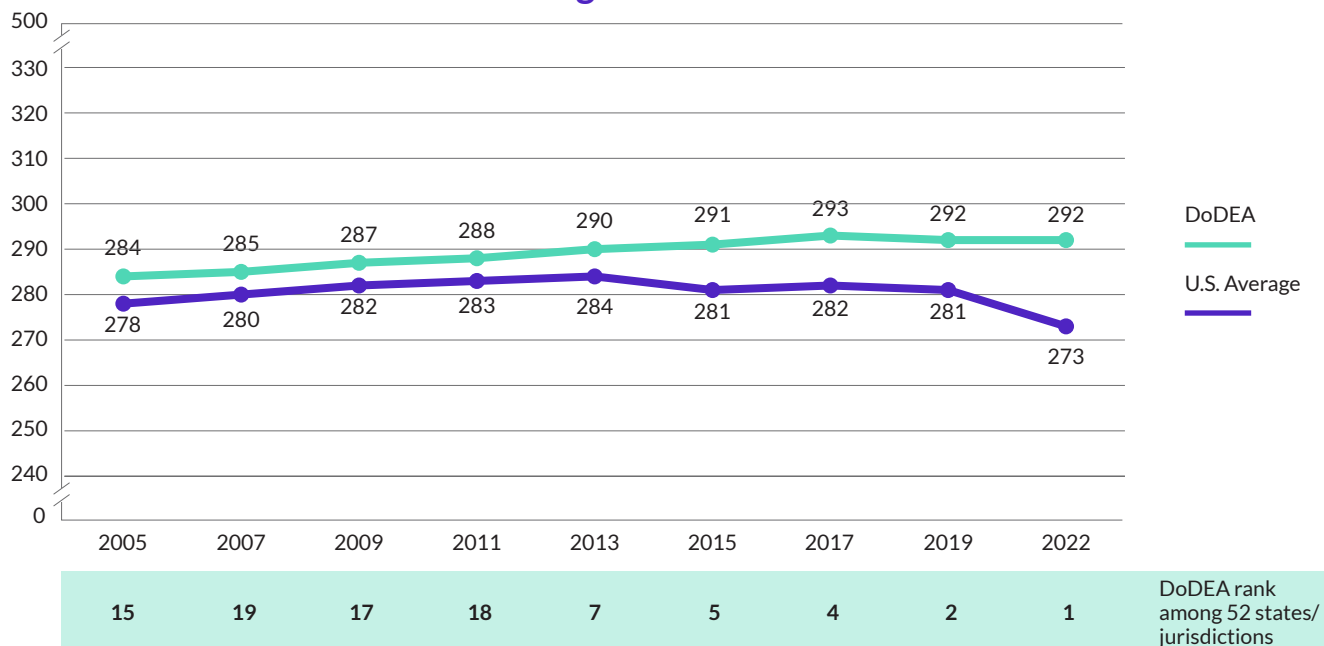
People often joke that the one thing DoDEA teachers don’t have is a good exit strategy. Where else would you rather go? ”

Perhaps it’s no surprise, then, that DoDEA’s teachers have long stood out as being significantly more experienced than their counterparts in regular public schools, as being much more likely to hold certification in the subjects they teach, and as having graduated from more selective colleges and universities (Wright et al., 2001).



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Reading Assessment.

## Trends in NAEP Average Score: 8th Grade Math



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2022 Math Assessment.

## From good to great? A decade of improvement

According to Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, DoDEA's new Director (Chief Academic Officer at the time of these interviews, and formerly an administrator and superintendent in Hartford, CT, and other public school systems), she and her colleagues at DoDEA headquarters are under no illusion that high NAEP scores, on their own, can tell us much about the quality of the teaching and learning that goes on in DoDEA schools. She knows full well that high test scores can easily be explained just by pointing to the system's many advantages—disciplined students, engaged parents, the benefits of living on a military base, and so on. As she explained in a recent interview, “We work under extremely favorable

conditions for teaching and learning. We get that.”

However, she added, “The question isn't why we've posted high NAEP scores, but why have those scores improved so much over time?” As she pointed out, DoDEA's student population hasn't changed significantly over the past decade. Nor has the system's budget, its teaching force, or the ways in which it coordinates services with base leaders. In that case, what explains its students' steadily increasing NAEP scores over the last several years, especially in mathematics?

What *has* changed in recent years, noted Schiavino-Narvaez, is the intensity with which DoDEA has scrutinized its own performance, raised its expectations for student achievement, and pushed every part of the system to align its work around a

shared improvement strategy, focused on the adoption and implementation of new K–12 academic standards.

The strategy itself has been fairly conventional—over the last 15 years, most public school systems have implemented new academic standards. But DoDEA’s commitment to the work has been extraordinary, Schiavino-Narvaez argued. Since joining DoDEA in 2016, she has been deeply impressed by her colleagues’ refusal to be satisfied with student outcomes that, in most other school systems, administrators would crow about: “Throughout DoDEA, people are constantly asking, ‘what more can we do?’ to strengthen the curriculum, give teachers better professional development, provide more effective student services, and on and on.”

Is Schiavino-Narvaez correct to think that DoDEA stands out as an especially high-performing system in this sense? Compared to most other school systems, does DoDEA exhibit an unusual level of devotion to the principle of continuous improvement?

Of course, it’s difficult to confirm the existence of something as abstract as an organizational commitment to improvement. However, evidence gathered by Cognia, the independent agency that has accredited the Defense Department schools since 1945, backs up Schiavino-Narvaez’s argument: Not only do DoDEA’s leaders espouse the virtues of constantly assessing and refining their educational programs and services, but Cognia’s data confirm that DoDEA does, in fact, stand out from other school systems in the extent to which personnel at every level of the organization—from Headquarters

to the three regional offices to the districts and schools—seek out criticism, respond to recommendations, and take concrete steps to improve their policies and practices.

## DoDEA’s recent progress, as described by the system’s leaders

Thomas Brady served as DoDEA’s Director from 2014 to May 2024. Previously he served as Superintendent of Schools in Providence, RI, as well as holding senior school system roles in Philadelphia, PA, Fairfax County, VA, and Washington, DC, and serving for 25 years as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army (including a period as Commanding Officer of the military base at Fort Belvoir, VA).

Soon after he began at DoDEA, he identified a pair of pressing challenges. First, in the four years since the 2010 publication of the Common Core State Standards, most public school systems in the country had adopted and spent a few years implementing new and more challenging academic standards in reading, math, and other subjects. But DoDEA had yet to do so, and Brady and his colleagues thought it was well past time to begin the process. So, this became the first of the two main priorities named in [DoDEA’s strategic plan for 2014–2018](#). Over those five years, DoDEA would develop and begin to implement a new standards-based system, including new curricula, assessments, instructional practices, and related professional development for teachers, staff, and administrators.

Second, when Brady began at DoDEA, he was surprised to discover that in previous years, Headquarters had given the school system’s



three regional offices (representing schools in Europe, Asia, and the Americas) quite a bit of leeway to define their own curricula, select their own textbooks and classroom materials, decide their own hiring practices, and more. As he saw it, what had long been a single, highly centralized system had become, in effect, three somewhat disjointed systems. Not only was this inefficient, he argued, but it undermined one of DoDEAs' core responsibilities, that of ensuring that its students can transfer smoothly from, for example, one of the schools in Turkey or Korea to another one in South Carolina or Puerto Rico.

Thus, the strategic plan's second priority was to streamline the DoDEA's organizational structure, reaffirming that Headquarters would take the lead role in decision-making about system-wide concerns such as academic standards, curriculum, assessments, school accountability, teacher hiring practices, budgeting, and investments in shared technology. School and district leaders would continue to have a fair amount of flexibility to manage local resources, respond to local needs, supervise teachers and staff, and so on. However, Brady argued, Headquarters has a responsibility to ensure that all parts of the DoDEA system are aligned with one another and consistent in their goals and practices.

### Taking the time to get it right

Not only did those two priorities—implementing new academic standards and restoring a healthy balance between centralized decision-making and local flexibility—define the scope of Brady's first five-year plan but, as Schiavino-Narvaez

explained, they defined the [subsequent five years](#) as well:

“The story of the last ten years boils down to these two main goals: building a solid, standards-based educational system and making sure the whole organization is consistent in supporting what we're trying to do with curriculum and instruction. So, it's not a flashy reform agenda. But it has been a sustained, solid effort to get everybody aligned around the same goals and make sure that our teachers and leaders have the support they need to do the work.”

Both she and Brady reiterated just how valuable it has been to take a gradual, patient approach. “When states adopted the Common Core, they were well-intentioned,” said Brady. “But then they tried to implement it in one or two years, which turned out to be a big waste of money, effort, and political capital.” By contrast, DoDEA took the long view, and that, he added, has been a “game-changer” (Saavedra & Steele, 2012).

Rather than trying to roll out new standards in math, language arts, and other subjects all at the same time, DoDEA gave itself permission to focus, for a handful of years, on just one: math—and more specifically, math in the elementary and middle grades.

### A narrow focus and a system-wide strategy

The decision to narrow in on mathematics in grades K–8 also made it possible to take on a broad implementation strategy, touching on all of the pieces (curriculum, instruction, assessment, instructional materials, professional development, and more) that

have to come together to improve teaching and learning in any subject area. That is, it's far more realistic to pursue comprehensive school improvement *as it pertains to K–8 math alone* than it would be to address all of these challenges in every subject area and grade level, all at the same time.

For example, once DoDEA had begun to introduce its new math standards, redesign the curriculum, and coach teachers in upgrading their instructional strategies, it became clear that local and district leaders would also need professional development in this area. So, DoDEA made it a priority to coach administrators as well, giving them a strong intellectual grounding in the new math standards (e.g., helping them learn the core concepts taught at each grade level, identify the demands this work will place on teachers, and plan out how best to assess progress in this area), so that they could provide not just administrative support but effective instructional leadership.

This investment in professional development for administrators led to the creation of three new Centers for Instructional Leadership (CILs), one in each region. But the CILs weren't expected to be full-service operations from the start. Rather than trying to address every academic subject area on day one, they began by focusing just on K–8 mathematics. The idea was that once the CIL's were on solid footing in this area, then they could build their capacity related to other subjects and grade levels. (In the last few years, for instance, DoDEA has begun to focus on math at the high school level as well, and it has relied on the CILs to take the lead in convening monthly, system-wide meetings

to discuss the roles that administrators at the school, district, and central office levels will need to play in this phase of the work.) Again, DoDEA's strategy has been to build comprehensive supports for educational improvement, but to do so one subject area and level at a time.

### Streamlining governance

When Brady set out to strengthen Headquarters' role in making decisions about educational standards, curriculum, and other system-wide concerns, he expected to encounter some pushback from staff at the three regional offices. After all, they had gotten used to making their own decisions. Plus, Brady explained, it's only natural for staff to be skeptical that a new Director will actually follow through on such plans.

Brady realized, though, that he didn't have to provoke a conflict over decision-making authority. Rather, as DoDEA introduced specific, concrete plans to implement the new standards, the three district offices would themselves come to recognize that it made good strategic sense to bring their work under a single umbrella.

For instance, at the very beginning of the standards implementation process, Headquarters created a "learning walkthrough" process by which local administrators would visit math classrooms and assess the extent to which teachers had begun to use their new curriculum and upgrade their teaching strategies. But, since the three regional offices didn't have staff who were trained to do these walkthroughs, they had no choice but to

rely on Headquarters to set up the process, create the observation tool, reassign staff to provide instructional support, and provide the necessary training (via the new Centers for Instructional Leadership). In short, Brady's first priority (adopt and implement new academic standards) made it inevitable that the regional offices would follow the second priority (bring the parts of the organization into alignment).

"Every school system struggles to find the right balance between tight alignment and some amount of loose flexibility," said Brady.

“ Given our levels of student mobility and how dispersed our schools are, it's pretty important for us to err on the side of tight, centralized authority. Have we found the sweet spot? I don't know, but not long ago, I got an email from a math teacher in Okinawa. She said that a new student had just arrived mid-year from one of the schools in Germany. On the first day, she checked in with him and saw that he was exactly two pages behind where his new classmates were in the textbook. That's a pretty good sign of alignment. ”

### Adapting to new conditions and challenges

While DoDEA's two most recent five-year plans have prioritized a pair of overarching priorities—standards implementation and organizational improvement—they've included long lists of additional goals and activities as well, many of them contributing

to the two larger priorities. For instance, as part of the effort to implement new academic standards, DoDEA has also invested in new formative and summative assessments, online tools for analyzing and sharing student assessment data, weekly release time for professional learning communities, and new advising services for college and career exploration. And to help streamline the organization, DoDEA has created an entirely new hiring and onboarding system for new teachers and staff, new internal audits and staff satisfaction surveys, and new computing systems for record-keeping and data sharing.

At the same time, the five-year plans have also been revised every year to address emerging needs, including some that lie outside of the two main priority areas. For example, and like many other school systems, DoDEA has recently made it a priority to diversify its teaching force to be more reflective of the students it serves. Like most other systems, it has sought, in the wake of the pandemic, to provide better mental health services for students and staff. And, of course, when the pandemic began, DoDEA immediately updated its strategic plan to include a robust COVID response. (It has been widely praised for this work, which included frequent consultations with the Centers for Disease Control to set up guidelines for in-person instruction, COVID testing, contact tracing, and other efforts to contain the virus. Thanks to its long-running investments in distance learning, it was able to make a relatively smooth transition to online instruction. And it was one of the

first school systems to return to in-person teaching and learning.)

In the last few years, though, DoDEA has made a point of cutting back on the number of goals and activities included in its plans. “For the time being, less is more,” said Brady.

“There’s an exhaustion factor that sets in toward the end of every five-year plan. So, we’ve pared back somewhat and reiterated that the most important things are to continue with the next phase of standards-based reform and to make sure our teachers, staff, and administrators have the support they need to provide excellent instruction.”

“We’re not there yet,” added Schiavino-Narvaez:

“We want to see fewer teacher-directed lessons and more student-centered work. We want to put more high-quality materials in teachers’ hands. We want teachers to give students more challenging tasks and assignments. And we want more opportunities for students to use more higher-order reasoning, discuss complex ideas, do independent writing... But while we still have a lot to do, the people I work with make me feel pretty optimistic. I am surrounded by people who really want to talk about teaching and learning – that has been real treat.”

## DoDEA's systemic improvements, as described by the accreditors

In the 25 years since the Defense Department and the National Education Goals Panel commissioned their trio of studies, DoDEA's performance has received very little attention from researchers. Nor, for that matter, has there been much research into the educational experiences of military-connected children *in general* (DePedro, 2011). And of those studies that have been conducted, most have addressed issues related to mental health, child development, and psychological well-being, rather than students' academic achievement or the organizational performance of their schools (Esqueda et al., 2012; Cozza et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Sherman & Johnson, 2016; Setti-Parnes, 2021; Hall et al., 2022).<sup>1</sup>

But while published research on DoDEA's recent work has been scant, DoDEA's accrediting agency (known for the last several years as Cognia<sup>2</sup>) has gathered a wealth of data that speak to the nature and quality of the organization's ongoing improvement efforts.

In the United States, public schools typically report to and are held accountable by their districts, states, and the federal Department of Education. But since DoDEA has always been independent of those authorities, reporting only to the Department of Defense, it has had to seek out alternate ways to solicit feedback and hold itself accountable for its performance, such as by participating in NAEP and requiring its students to take various other standardized assessments. For 80 years, it has also relied on Cognia to perform comprehensive, ongoing assessments of its work. And while some school systems view accreditation as a minor annoyance—a regular inspection to which they are required to submit—DoDEA has placed a great deal of importance on this process, frequently consulting with Cognia, seeking out its feedback and recommendations, and studying its reports.

Indeed, DoDEA has chosen to undergo a particularly intensive version of the accreditation process: Cognia conducts a ten-day site visit to each of DoDEA's schools (and in recent years, each of its eight district offices) every five years, assigning a team made up of 10–20 veteran educators (usually volunteers) to perform structured interviews, document reviews, and extensive classroom observations,

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<sup>1</sup> At Thomas Brady's request, Brown University researcher Kenneth Wong is currently conducting what he describes as an "independent organizational and policy review" of DoDEA's system-wide improvement efforts over the last decade. He doesn't expect to complete his study until later in 2024, but says his preliminary findings appear to be quite consistent with the present case study's descriptions of DoDEA's organizational strengths.

<sup>2</sup> Cognia was formed in 2019 through the merger of the accrediting agency AdvancEd—the largest school accrediting organization in the United States—and Measured Progress, an organization focused on educational assessment. Created in 2006, AdvancEd had subsumed the pre-college divisions of three regional accrediting agencies, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Northwest Association of College and Schools. Today, Cognia works with roughly 36,000 schools, districts, and other institutions in 80 countries.

relying on various tools and rating systems to capture information on every facet of school and district performance, from governance and strategic planning to school climate, classroom resources, curriculum, instruction, and—most importantly—what students are actually doing and learning in the classroom.

When it comes to particular school- and district-level decisions, some of the data is confidential. But DoDEA posts each [school](#) and [district](#) accreditation report on the system’s website. And Cognia has shared findings about the system’s overall quality, including examples of specific ways in which DoDEA tends to differ from the hundreds of other school systems (and thousands of schools) that Cognia accredits.

## Evidence of DoDEA’s overall quality

Echoing Schiavino-Narvaez (as well as the 2001 Vanderbilt study), Cognia’s Chief Global Accreditation Officer Annette Bohling<sup>3</sup> noted that on the surface, DoDEA’s reform agenda, teaching strategies, and school practices are fairly conventional. For instance, DoDEA is hardly unusual in pursuing standards-based school reform, designing new standards-aligned curricula and assessments, and providing related professional development. But, she added, DoDEA does stand out as an unusually well-run and high-performing school system.

A few years ago, Cognia launched a [Schools and Systems of Distinction](#) award to recognize the schools and districts that

earn the highest composite scores during the accreditation process. Unlike the U.S. Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon Schools program, which recognizes schools mainly on the basis of students’ test scores, including the schools’ progress in closing test score gaps, Cognia rates schools and districts on several dimensions, including student engagement, teacher development, classroom learning environments, leadership, and organizational commitment to continuous improvement. In other words, schools can’t win recognition just by virtue of students’ high test scores; they have to demonstrate effectiveness in all of the areas that Cognia assesses.

In 2022 and 2023, Cognia named a total of 41 school systems of distinction; three of them were DoDEA school districts. Put another way, of the roughly 500 school districts that Cognia accredits, a little more than 8 percent have earned this award in the past two years, but almost 40 percent of DoDEA’s districts have done so (and more of its eight districts could win the award in the next few years).

## Alignment of policies and practices

As described above, DoDEA’s leadership has made it a top priority over the past decade to develop a single policy framework for the entire school system to ensure that all of its 160 schools teach to the same academic standards; use the same curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom materials; and provide similar advising,

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<sup>3</sup> Bohling passed away shortly before this case study’s publication.



counseling, and other kinds of support. Given how frequently DoDEA's families relocate, such consistency matters a great deal, helping to ease students' transitions to new schools and communities.

Because all DoDEA schools serve relatively similar student populations in similar community settings and with similar amounts of funding, they've never varied in their performance to the extent that Cognia sees in most school systems, where the teaching and learning environment in one school might be entirely different from the school environment in the adjacent neighborhood. Still, Darrell Barringer, Cognia's Lead Evaluator for DoDEA (who has conducted site visits to all 160 of DoDEA's schools, all eight of its district offices, and all three regional offices) noted that the level of consistency among DoDEA schools—in their policies, organizational practices, student and family services, and the competence of the teachers, staff, and administrators—is exceptional. Not only do its schools and districts tend to receive high ratings on Cognia's various measures of school and district quality, but they tend to receive *similar* ratings from one school and district to the next, a pattern that Cognia very rarely sees in its accreditation work.

According to Barringer, this speaks not only to the system's recent focus on systemic planning but also to its eagerness to respond quickly and decisively to any and every sign that a school might be letting its standards slip. "During a recent round of accreditation visits," he related,

“...we found that one of the DoDEA districts wasn't as prepared as we're

*used to seeing. That doesn't mean they weren't performing well, just that they weren't quite up to the standards we're used to seeing in the DoDEA schools. So, after we commented on this to DoDEA Headquarters, we immediately heard from district staff that they were taking steps to address our concerns. Basically, if we identify an area for improvement, we know that the DoDEA schools will address it, quickly and effectively. That's just not true in many of the systems and schools we work with. DoDEA really is an outlier in terms of follow-through and response. And that's why we see such consistency from school to school. If one school or district seems to be lagging behind, system leaders jump on it right away, and things improve.”*

## Devotion to continuous improvement

From Cognia's perspective, this determination to “jump on” and respond effectively to problems sets DoDEA apart from all of the other systems it accredits. “The seriousness with which they take and act on assessments, feedback, and recommendations is remarkable,” said Barringer.

“Working with school systems, the question is always whether they really want to use the feedback we provide. Many of them just want the accreditation, not the recommendations. DoDEA is unique in this way. They really listen and respond. A few years ago, for example, we were talking with one of the DoDEA districts about principals' classroom observations, and

*we suggested they look at research from the Wallace Foundation showing that it's a waste of time to visit classes unless you actually talk with teachers about their instruction. They took the recommendation to heart, looked at the research, and gave their principals training on discussing instructionally focused actions. And that sort of responsiveness is true for every school and district in the system. ”*

In short, when asked why DoDEA students have shown so much progress in recent years, as evidenced by their constantly improving NAEP scores, Cognia's staff gave precisely the same explanation as Schiavino-Narvaez: DoDEA's leaders, throughout the organization, have fully bought into the ethos of continuous improvement. Said one Cognia staff member:

*“ They respond quickly to any and every recommendation, not just the “must do” recommendations but the less serious ones, too. And this is a system that's high-performing already. I don't remember them ever falling short of a standard. But they're always trying to take the next step, both at the district level and at Headquarters. When we send our reports, everybody reads them, even the DoDEA Director. ”*

Said another:

*“ DoDEA's investment in data-analysts really is distinct. They give their staff heavy-duty training. I haven't seen any other district do this with this level of commitment, and I haven't seen any*

*other district get this sort of buy-in from teachers to use data and contribute to data collection and analysis. ”*

And, finally, an observation from Barringer provides perhaps the best illustration of just how rare it is for school system leaders to show this level of determination to seek out and act on feedback. He said one district was particularly impressed by the detailed feedback it got from Cognia's classroom observation tool, which focuses on what students are actually *doing* and *learning*, rather than just the teacher's actions. They went ahead and certified their own staff members to use the tool and began to send out teams to other DoDEA schools to observe and give feedback on classroom practice. He continued:

*“ Now that's become standard practice across the system. Every quarter, every district sends a team (made up of the district superintendent, somebody from instructional leadership, teachers, and support staff) to visit every school to do an interim assessment. It's a process they've modeled after ours, including interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. Like us, they write up a report, and if they've identified specific problems, then they arrange for coaching or other kinds of support. And keep in mind that this is in addition to the regular Cognia accreditation process, which takes place every five years. It's the only case in which schools have chosen to do this, as far as I know. And they do it because it's helpful. They want the data. ”*

## Learning from DoDEA

At the end of a case study like this one, it's always difficult to say whether the ideas and practices developed in one context will have much relevance to administrators, teachers, and staff who work in another. That's particularly difficult in this case, given the ways in which DoDEA stands apart from every other public school system. What can a typical system learn from one that benefits from so many unusual advantages, from its healthy budget to its experienced teaching force, highly engaged parents, disciplined students, healthy and stable environments, integrated schools and neighborhoods, and excellent—often top-notch—facilities?

Because DoDEA's recent progress has featured a fairly common improvement strategy (the implementation of new academic standards) rather than a novel school design or program, it's difficult to point to a specific innovation that other school systems might want to replicate. If DoDEA owed its success to, say, a new intensive tutoring program or a four-day school week or a shift to competency-based promotion or dual-enrollment or AI-based personalized instruction, then another state or district might very well decide to try out such practices for itself. But one can't simply "adopt" the sorts of organizational norms and practices that drive DoDEA's work.

However, while DoDEA's approach may be difficult to copy, it's not really the purpose of a case study to entice others to do so. In the end, the value of learning about a system like DoDEA is to raise important questions that

every district will have to answer in its own ways.

For instance, in discussing the DoDEA schools' close working relationships with their base commanders, Thomas Brady asked why it tends to be so rare for public school leaders and local officials to collaborate in assessing and responding to the needs of children and their families? To reiterate Robert Hauser's (2020) point, while it hasn't often been described in these terms, DoDEA appears to be one of the country's best exemplars of a robust and well-implemented community-schools model. True, DoDEA schools have an unusual relationship to the military bases that host them, but their work suggests that the benefits of integrating school and social services far outweigh the challenges involved in doing so. While other school systems may not be able to build the sort of relationships within their community that DoDEA schools have with the military bases that host them, it's hard to imagine that they can't do more to share information and coordinate services with local officials and agencies.

Likewise, one might ask why it is so rare for school systems to build and maintain the sort of consistently high-performing organizational culture that exists across DoDEA's various offices and school sites. As the Vanderbilt researchers found almost 25 years ago, as DoDEA's current leaders have echoed, and as Cognia has confirmed, this school system's most important, defining feature appears to be its deep commitment to continuous improvement on behalf of the students and families it serves.

But how might a typical school system jumpstart the sorts of organizational norms and practices that, in DoDEA's case, have developed over a period of decades? For instance, would that depend upon hiring the right kind of leadership team, one that is strong, smart, and creative enough to transform the school system through sheer force of will? Or—as the researcher Thomas Hatch once argued (2001)—do efforts to *improve* organizational capacity require that a certain baseline level of organizational capacity *already* exists?

According to Brady, DoDEA's progress over the last decade has had to do mainly with the latter. To the extent that he and colleagues in Headquarters have succeeded in implementing new standards, strengthening instruction, and boosting student achievement, it is because earlier generations of DoDEA leadership had recruited, developed, and retained so many highly capable teachers, staff, and administrators.

If there's a secret sauce to be found in DoDEA's work, he argued, it has to do with the military's patient approach to organizational capacity-building, which stands in stark contrast to the overly ambitious, rushed approach that tends to be favored by local, state, and federal officials: "Typically, boards want immediate results, so they hire a superintendent who promises to be a 'reform Messiah,' and they give that person two to three years to turn everything around. Of course, that leads

to rushed and half-assed implementation, which leads the superintendent to be fired, and the cycle starts all over again." After ten years at DoDEA, and having been given the opportunity to pursue five-year plans, with predictable budgets, he asked, "Why isn't this the norm everywhere? What makes it so difficult to create a longer, more realistic schedule for school improvement?"

While urgent promises to "transform" K-12 education have always been popular among education reformers, such rhetoric seems to have gone into overdrive in recent years. Today, one hears constant talk of "break-the-mold" charter school models, "revolutionary" new approaches to computer-mediated instruction, major philanthropic efforts to "rethink" high school, do away with the Carnegie Unit, and so on. However, DoDEA illustrates just how much can be accomplished when a school system implements fairly traditional practices with greater care, competence, and consistency and continues to improve upon them. One might argue that DoDEA is so distinct from typical public school systems—in its funding, governance, student population, family supports, and other factors—that its experience only reinforces the urgent need to transform other systems in fundamental ways. But while its many advantages must be acknowledged, DoDEA's progress speaks above all to the value of sustained efforts to make the most of the familiar grammar of K-12 education.

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