

Sub-Committee on Children and Families

Armed Services Sub-Committee on Personnel - Supporting Our Military Families

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Witness:

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Director

Department of Defense Education Activity

Testimony:

Chairman Chambliss, Chairman Alexander, and members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the efforts that the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) is making to meet some of the challenges facing military parents. DoDEA is charged with providing a high quality, comprehensive American educational program to dependent children of our military members overseas and in our domestic schools. Part of that charge is to provide services and assistance that go beyond the basic educational needs of our students, especially during times of deployment and war.

DoDEA accomplishes this on many levels through programs specially developed and implemented to address all issues that arise when a parent is deployed. Our teaching staff and administrators are provided with a comprehensive orientation to issues of deployment as well as to issues related to the military service of the sponsor. Deployment is a way of life in the military and DoDEA employees understand the impact that it has on the families and particularly the students they serve. Just as part of the DoDEA mission is to provide instructional excellence, it is also to maintain continuity and normalcy in otherwise very anxious times. This not only provides stability for the students, but also eliminates at least one concern from the minds of active duty military parents. Active military members should never have to add concern about their children's progress in school to their duties in the field. Our first and foremost responsibility is to keep students focused on their academic development, and DoDEA's record of strong student achievement is reflective of this focus. Students need time to be children and the daily schedule of school can provide this.

DoDEA teachers are highly sensitized to the needs of their students and their communities. Overseas, DoDEA teachers are an active part of the military community. They have a strong allegiance to the mission of the bases they serve and have a strong sense of pride in the military activities of that base. They value the strong partnership they have with the command and parents who value their work with students. In our domestic schools, DoDEA teachers are part of the larger community surrounding the base and are also active in supporting the Service members.

DoDEA annually identifies programs, materials, and intervention strategies to assist school counselors and school psychologists in their daily role of support for and training of staff, students and parents. In addition to these materials, DoDEA ensures that counselors and psychologists are provided information about resources and strategies to support students and their families in response to world situations. Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, DoDEA researched materials, programs and intervention strategies to enhance the resources available to counselors and psychologists. The Crisis Information Webpage, a link to the DoDEA website was designed to help families, educators, and

community members understand how schools would ensure that children and personnel are safe and secure.

The schools extended instruction to address questions and topics that are naturally on students' minds during a time of combat, by initiating special age appropriate activities across the curriculum. Older students were able to study geography and historical aspects of the Middle East to develop a better understanding of the culture and history of the region. Younger students participated in craft activities that sent cards, cookies, and other touches of back home to their parents and other deployed members of their community. Patriotic activities became an even more important part of the school culture.

Lastly, the strong connection to the command was extremely helpful in addressing the needs of our students. From the very top, commanders were committed to providing information and a connection for our students to their deployed parents through Internet connections, video conferencing activities, and to the Adopt-a-Service member Program. Schools became a conduit for a variety of direct and indirect communication with deployed parents. Students regularly wrote letters, sent e-mail messages, recorded audio tapes and sent videos produced in their classes to maintain a dynamic connection with their parents.

A classic example of this was the recent graduation of the 2003 Class of General H. H. Arnold High School in Wiesbaden, Germany. Through a partnership with parents, contractors, and command, the graduation ceremonies were broadcast live by satellite to locations in Iraq permitting deployed parents to be virtual participants in the critical milestone of their child's graduation ceremony. Events such as these occurred at a number of DoDEA high school graduations. And these events don't happen without the strong partnership and sense of commitment of the command, community, and staffs at DoDEA schools.

DoDEA staff and students also faced the need to "redeploy" during the recent military activities in Iraq. Several of our schools were evacuated due to State Department directives and our staff and students were faced with leaving their homes. DoDEA staff members and their families were returned to the United States and depending on their certification were assigned to our domestic schools, reassigned to other schools in Europe or brought to DoDEA Headquarters to work on curricular issues.

Our DoDEA students and their families were given packets before they left for the designated safehaven. These packets included transcripts and course work information that would assist in an easy transition to their new school. Since we were unsure on how long these schools would be closed, for those students who were seniors, the packet included the transcript, the course work needed to graduate and a letter of assurance to the local school district from DoDEA that upon completion of the listed coursework, DoDEA would issue a diploma for that student. With few exceptions, this cooperation between DoDEA and the local school districts went very well.

I thank you for the opportunity to share with you just a few of the ways that DoDEA supports the social and emotional needs of our students while continuing to focus on our primary mission of providing a high quality education. Everyone at DoDEA feels honored to play a role in supporting our military families and contributing to their quality of life. I am proud of the DoDEA staff around the world for their commitment to our parents and students.