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# 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

## Finding 9

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## Mirroring the civilian community, nationwide shifts to virtual, hybrid, and homeschool education have had secondary effects on military spouse employment; however, more than half of active-duty family respondents agreed their oldest child is thriving in school.

Dependent children's education continues to be a top issue for active-duty military families, but this year, COVID-19 brought many changes to education across the globe. Active-duty family respondents were asked to identify the modality and curriculum used by their oldest child for both the 2019/2020 and the 2020/2021 school years. Like their civilian counterparts, active-duty military families saw a shift in school modality from in-person to virtual education for their children since March 2020. Virtual education delivery more than tripled from the 2019/2020 school year to the current school year; from just 15% to more than half (51%) of active-duty military respondents with at least one school-aged child.

**Education Delivery Modality for Oldest Child**  
Active-Duty Family Respondents with at least One Child in K-12 Education

	2019/2020	2020/2021
Online/virtual	15%	51%
In-person	63%	28%

While most military children continue to attend public schools in their local communities (71%), there was also an increase in the percentage of active-duty family respondents

choosing to homeschool their children, either through a self-selected or a purchased school curriculum. Only 8% of active-duty family respondents with children eligible for K-12 education reported they homeschooled their oldest child during the 2019-2020 school year, but this number jumped to 13% who homeschooled their oldest child in the 2020-2021 school year. These rates are higher than the general U.S. population before COVID-19, in which only 3% of children were homeschooled.<sup>1</sup> Although homeschooling also increased among civilian families as a direct response to COVID-19,<sup>2</sup> homeschooling has become a growing practice among military families to offset some of the challenges of military life, such as relocation and gaps in child(ren)'s education.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have sparked more families to shift to this education style; 7% of active-duty family respondents whose oldest child was in public or private school moved their child to homeschooling for the 2020-2021 school year. A quarter of currently homeschooling active-duty family respondents (26%) indicated they will homeschool their children until they graduate, but most (63%) intend to transition to traditional school at some point. While the Interstate Compact provides guidance for military families transitioning from state to state, it does not include guidance for schools supporting families transitioning from homeschooling. School administration, educators, and School Liaison Officers (SLOs) should be prepared to support military families who may be moving from homeschooling to a public school setting.

“We chose to homeschool our children because the quality of education was inconsistent from state to state. We will continue to homeschool our children until there is quality education available to them.”

— Air Force Spouse

Despite challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, active-duty family respondents have a generally favorable impression of their oldest child's private, public, or DoDEA school, rating the school as above average (32%) or excellent (22%), and over half (56%) feel their oldest child is thriving. Since COVID-19, some military family respondents reported they chose to move their oldest child to a homeschool curriculum; however, most (85%) active-duty family respondents' oldest child is enrolled in a public or private school curriculum in the current school year.

The majority of active-duty family respondents with children attending public or private school (68%) were offered a choice of delivery method (e.g., virtual, in-person, or hybrid education) for their children's 2020/2021 school year. While most active-duty family respondents (65%) did not change the education delivery method for their oldest child from public or private schools, among those who did, over half (54%) of the respondents did so because they wanted in-person instruction for their children; one-fifth (21%) reported it was due to a conflict with parent(s)' work schedule, and one-fifth (21%) of respondents were concerned schools were unsafe because of COVID-19.

### IMPACTS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

In addition to changes in education options for their oldest child, COVID-19 school closures have added another obstacle for active-duty spouses seeking employment. Of those active-duty spouse respondents (does not include active-duty spouses who are also active-duty service members) who were working before the COVID-19 pandemic, one-third (30%) said they stopped working at some point during COVID-19, and half (49%) reduced hours during COVID-19 because of an inability to juggle work and child(ren)'s educational support. Further, of those who stopped working during COVID-19 because of a mixture of competing priorities among child care, children's education and health, and work responsibilities, nearly three-fourths (72%) are still unemployed. At the time of our survey, over a third of active-duty spouse respondents (36%) who are not working stated they were not working so they could homeschool their child(ren) or supervise virtual schooling.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### STATES

- Identify and share best practices (including applicable provisions) from the Interstate Compact to support families moving from homeschool to public school.
- Collect and share data on prevalence of homeschooling military families attempting to transition into the public school system.
- Identify best practices from a virtual schooling environment and explore feasibility of maintaining some remote learning capabilities to better support military families transitioning out of a school district in the midst of an academic term.



### CONGRESS

- Commission a longitudinal study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual schooling on military children's education and military spouse employment – comparing long-term outcomes of military-connected family members to those of their civilian peers.\*
- Fully fund the Department of Education's Impact Aid grant program and increase funding provided via DoD Impact Aid to ensure public schools serving military children have adequate resources (i.e., adequate SLOs, military cultural competency, etc.).

## LIMITATIONS

This large (n=2,385) sample, while not representative of the active-duty population as a whole, provides compelling insight into the impacts of COVID-19 school closures on military children's education. Families with multiple children enrolled in K-12 education may have different experiences and situations for each child. To simplify analysis, this sample only includes information about the family's oldest K-12 enrolled child. For that reason, it will not be representative of all military children of respondents in K-12 education.

The sudden increase in virtual, online, or distance education, in which the child is learning from home, guided by a teacher and supervised by an adult, may have blurred the definition of homeschool for many families.<sup>6</sup> Active-duty family respondents whose oldest child is receiving virtual education via a public or private school may consider themselves "homeschooling" even if the child's curriculum is provided by a public, private, or DoDEA entity because they are often responsible for the child's day-to-day educational tasks, particularly with younger children. The unintended interchangeability in the terms "homeschooling" and "online/virtual schooling" may have impacted how respondents answered related child's education questions in this year's MFLS.

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

1. National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Table 206.10. Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through 12th grade, by selected child, parent, and household characteristics: Selected years, 1999 through 2016.*  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_206.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp)
2. Prothero, A. & Samuels, C. A. (2020, November 11). *Home Schooling is Way up with COVID-19. Will it Last?* Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/home-schooling-is-way-up-with-covid-19-will-it-last/2020/11>
3. Blue Star Families. (2020). *2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.*  
<https://bluestarfam.org/survey>
4. Gubnitskaia, V., & Smallwood, V. (Eds.). (2020). *Homeschooling and Libraries: New Solutions and Opportunities.* McFarland.
5. Military Child Education Coalition. (2020). *Military kids now: 2020 survey summary report.*  
[https://www.militarychild.org/upload/files/MCEC\\_2020EdSurvey\\_digital.pdf](https://www.militarychild.org/upload/files/MCEC_2020EdSurvey_digital.pdf)
6. Grose, J. (2020, August 18). *What it means to homeschool.* *NY Times.*  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/parenting/homeschool-coronavirus.html>