



**BLUE STAR
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY
FAMILY
LIFESTYLE
SURVEY**



Education Access and Quality

2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Military Children's Education

In collaboration with



Syracuse University

**D'Aniello Institute for
Veterans & Military Families**



JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

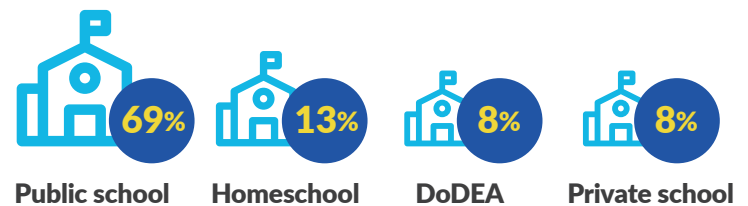
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Nearly two-thirds (61%) of active-duty family respondents report their oldest child is thriving in school, and 54% feel a sense of belonging to their school, but these educational experiences may be offset due to factors related to military life (such as relocation) and the current delivery method of education (such as virtual or hybrid schooling).

Military children's education remains a top issue of concern for active-duty family respondents (31%), as it has been since 2018. The majority of active-duty family respondents are parents (85%), and of those, three-quarters (74%) have one or more children currently enrolled in K-12 school (including homeschool). The majority (69%) report their oldest child is enrolled in public school (see Figure 1).

Notably, 26%^a of active-duty family respondents with children enrolled in K-12 report having a child or children with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and 16% with a 504 plan, compared to 14% of all public school students ages 3-21 who receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the US.¹

Figure 1: Type of School of Oldest Child in K-12^b



Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging to the local civilian community is a critical component of military family resilience. In the 2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS), active-duty family respondents with children in K-12 education reported higher scores on a measure of belonging to their local civilian community^d than those who have children not eligible for K-12 education.^{2,c} A deeper exploration in the 2021 survey looks at respondents' sense of belonging to their local civilian community by their oldest child's school, finding little difference: roughly one-third of all active-duty family respondents with at least one child enrolled in K-12 indicate they feel a sense of belonging to their local civilian community, regardless of the type of school; 33% of those respondents note their oldest child attends private school, 31% public school, 29% homeschool, and 26% DoDEA^e school.^{f,g}

^aThis was a "Select all" question asking respondents to report if any of their children are enrolled in special education. Answer choices include an IEP, a 504 plan, gifted and talented, and/or a write-in option. It is important to note that respondents may have selected both an IEP and a 504 plan, and may have been referring to one child or multiple children. The special education question was only asked of families who reported their oldest child was currently enrolled in public, private, or DoDEA schools.

^bActive-duty family respondents only.

^cIn the 2019 MFLS, belonging to the civilian community was measured differently than in subsequent surveys. In this instance, it was reported as respondents' mean score on 10 items pertaining to their local civilian community.

^dIn the 2021 MFLS, belonging to the local civilian community was assessed using a single item.

^eDoDEA schools are often situated OCONUS, and sense of belonging to the local civilian community may be affected by cultural differences or language barriers. Families who homeschool may benefit from additional opportunities to engage with their local communities, such as organized homeschooling groups, to build their sense of belonging to the local civilian community.

^fMost DoDEA schools are located in overseas assignments, and the majority of families live on the installation with other military families — not in the civilian community.

^gThe questions about the type of school were asked for the oldest child who is eligible for K-12 enrollment.

Impacts of Military Life on Belonging and Thriving in School

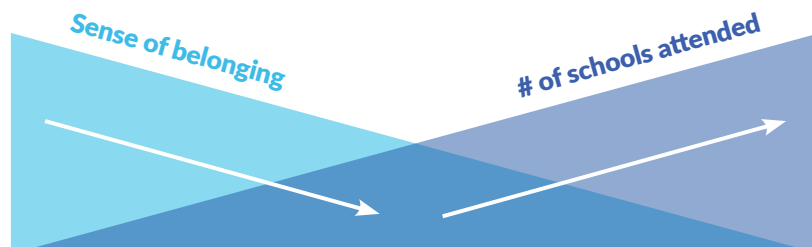
For children, their community is most often their school; it is where they work, play, and form social relationships. Therefore, a sense of belonging to their school is integral to positive child outcomes. However, military life and frequent relocations that necessitate moving to a new school may impede a child's sense of belonging to their school: 52% of active-duty family respondents who report their oldest child is an adolescent and has attended four schools or fewer also believe their child feels a sense of belonging to their current school, compared to just 36% of those whose oldest child is an adolescent and has attended five or more schools (see Figure 2).

Overall, active-duty family respondents report a positive experience for their oldest child enrolled in K-12. Most report their oldest child is thriving in his/her school (61%) and feels a sense of belonging to their school (54%), and almost half rate their oldest child's school as above average or excellent (49%).

However, military life and family experiences can impact children's education and in turn, children's experiences and well-being can influence family functioning. It can be argued that children's education is a readiness issue; active-duty family respondents who report their oldest child is thriving in school are significantly less stressed than their peers who do not believe their child is thriving.

Figure 2: Sense of Belonging to School and Relocation

As the number of schools attended increases, sense of belonging to school decreases



Active-duty family respondents who report their oldest child is thriving in school **are significantly less stressed** than their peers who do not believe their child is thriving.

"My daughter has done very well with virtual learning. **She actually chose to stay virtual when she had the chance to attend in person.** She has all A grades and has enjoyed not having to get up extra early for transportation to school."

Active-Duty Army Spouse

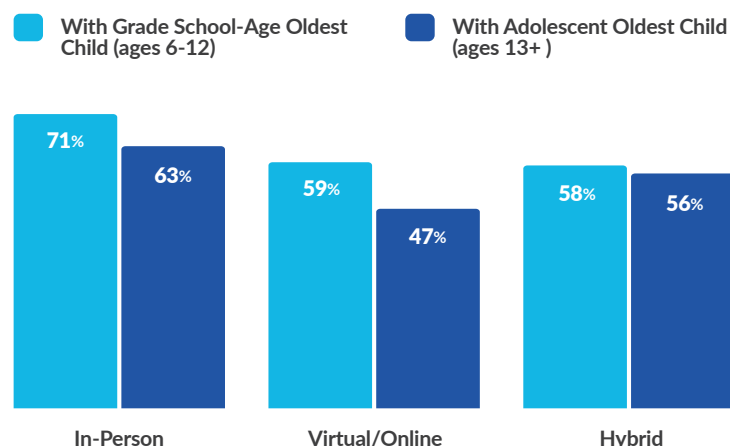
Education Modality and Thriving in School

In addition to the impacts of the military lifestyle, the delivery method of education during COVID-19 lockdowns and beyond has played a role in families' experiences of military child education. At the time of survey fielding (April-June 2021), 21% of active-duty families report their oldest child is currently enrolled in online/virtual school, 52% in-person, and 26% in a hybrid modality (a combination of online/virtual school and in-person).^h A greater proportion of those active-duty family respondents whose oldest child received in-person instruction report their child is thriving at school than those whose oldest child is receiving virtual or hybrid education delivery (see Figure 3). This trend persists for both oldest children categorized as grade-school-aged (6-12 years old) and those categorized as adolescents (13 years and older). Regardless of delivery modality, fewer active-duty family respondents with an adolescent oldest child report their child is thriving than those with an elementary school-aged oldest child.

^hThe question about method of delivery was only asked of families who report their oldest child is currently enrolled in public, private, or DoDEA schools.

Figure 3: Percent Who Agree That Their Oldest Child is Thriving in School

Active-duty family respondents (n=1,790)



"The public school changed their schooling from hybrid to full in-person back to online back to in-person **about five times this year.**"

Active-Duty Marine Corps Spouse

"For my teenager, his school was closed from March through September and was online. **He became very depressed and was failing.** They went back to school in September and went back online for 7 weeks over the winter holidays. He still was quite depressed. After being back in school since January, I have seen — just in the past 2 months — him become engaged and productive."

Active-Duty Army Spouse

Homeschool

Continuing a trend seen in Blue Star Families' 2018 MFLS,³ there are elevated numbers of active-duty family respondents (13%) who choose to homeschool their children; nearly 2-4 times⁴ the proportion of children ages 5-17 homeschooled in the general U.S. population.¹ Despite work to emphasize the importance of local school quality in basing decisions for the Air Force,⁵ a slightly greater proportion of Air Force active-duty family respondents (16%) report their oldest child is homeschooled, compared to Army (13%), Marine Corps (13%), and Navy (11%) active-duty family respondents.¹ Furthermore, of all active-duty family respondents who report their oldest child is homeschooled, nearly 4 in 10 (38%) plan to homeschool their child until they graduate and nearly a quarter (22%) until they would do better in a traditional school setting, indicating that homeschooling trends may not be limited to COVID-19 pandemic school challenges. Just 18% of those whose oldest child is homeschooled report they intend to do so until in-person education is available or until it is safe to return to traditional schooling, seeming to indicate that homeschooling is a long-term choice for many active-duty military family respondents.

The top three reasons active-duty family respondents give for homeschooling are the same as when asked in 2019⁶: "to stabilize their children's academic experience" (52%), "give flexibility to spend time together as a family" (36%), and "to avoid poor quality school options" (35%). In addition, active-duty family respondents

"Our family has homeschooled for the past 4 years. The past year **has not had a significant impact** on our child's education."

Active-Duty Air Force Spouse

"Moving during COVID was hard. Our kids did ok. We had 2 military families on our street and we know them well but that's it. We chose to live off post because the schools near the post did not have a great reputation. The 2nd order impact was we didn't have a community or attend a school that was military heavy or aware. **If we could fix the schools that feed posts around the country AND fix military housing, we could transform the experience for so many.**"

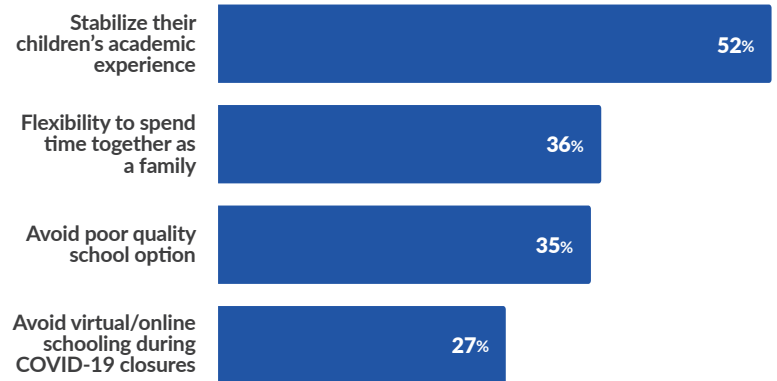
Active-Duty Army Spouse

¹Homeschooling rates may have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic for all U.S. children, though the proportion of active-duty family respondents to this survey who report homeschooling their oldest child remains higher than the adjusted post-COVID estimates.

²Response rate is too low to report for Coast Guard, National Guard, and Reserve families.

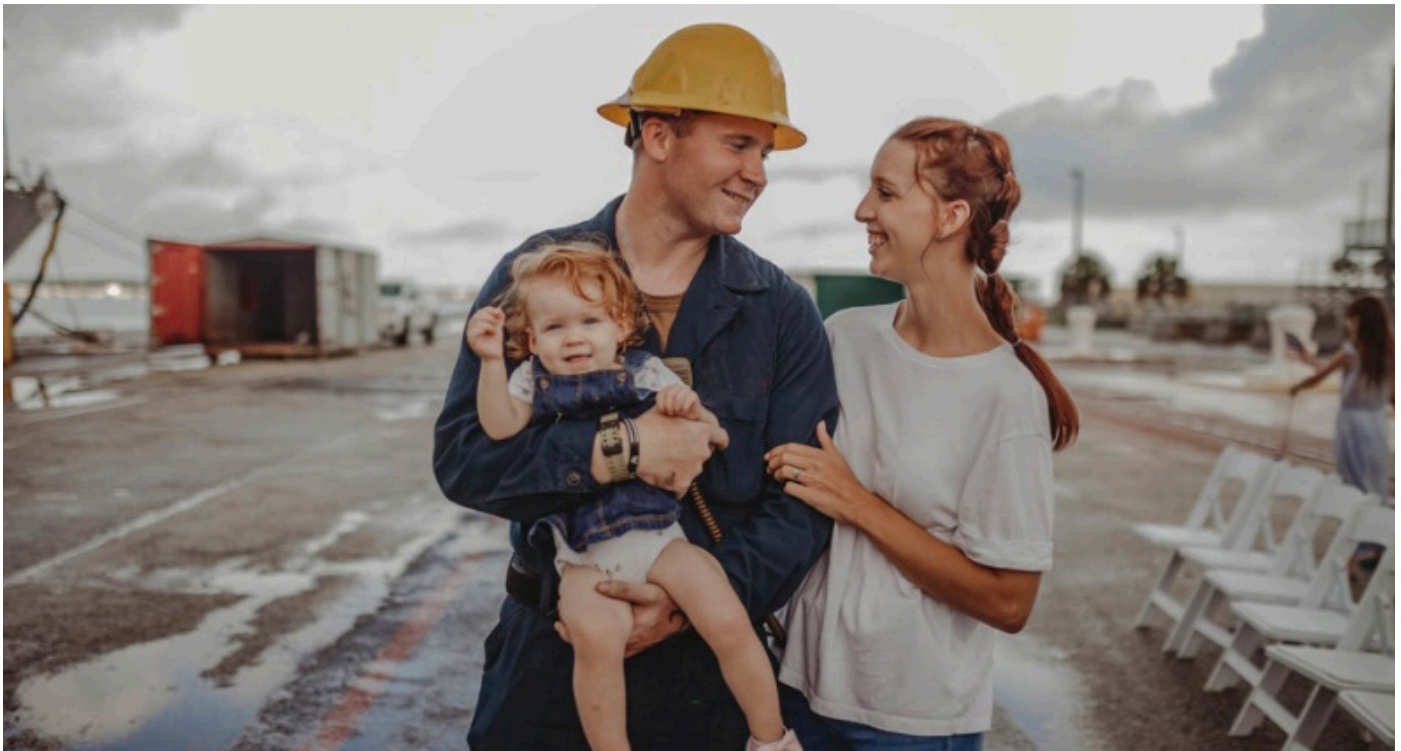
note they homeschool “to avoid online/virtual schooling due to COVID-19 closures” (27%). A slightly greater proportion of those active-duty family respondents who relocated during the COVID-19 pandemic^k report homeschooling their oldest child (15% versus 12%). Recently relocated families may have felt homeschooling is less disruptive to their child(ren)’s education than trying to navigate a move and the COVID-19 pandemic and the back and forth between virtual, hybrid, and in-person schooling. Many families mention these issues in response to the qualitative question: “This past year has seen many changes to children’s education. Please share with us how these changes have impacted your child(ren)’s education and mental health? What were some challenges you experienced? What worked well?”

Figure 4: What Were the Top 3 Reasons Your Family Chose to Homeschool Your Child(ren)? (n=280)



Lingering Effects of COVID-19

Similar to their civilian peers, active-duty military families continue to be impacted by disruptions from COVID-19 school modality changes. However, for military families, frequent relocation, particularly during COVID-19, has exacerbated pre-existing challenges in transferring schools and maintaining a semblance of continuity. Further, challenges related to COVID-19 are likely related to the choice of some active-duty military family respondents to homeschool.



^kWithin the 12 months prior to survey fielding.



Limitations

Most questions in the education finding were asked about the oldest child enrolled in K-12 education, not all the children in a family. However, respondents were asked if any children in the family have an IEP, 504 plan, and/or are enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Program. While it was intended to reduce survey fatigue for respondents, asking about only the oldest child enrolled in K-12 education does not fully capture the experiences of military families with multiple children enrolled in K-12 education. Additionally, some sample sizes were small, such as the questions related to homeschooled children. Lastly, all data is self-reported, and it is possible respondents did not answer questions based on their oldest child enrolled in K-12, but the oldest child within their family.

Recommendations

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report



Military

- Educate families to enhance awareness of education support programs and resources, such as the School Liaison Officer (SLO) program and the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children to improve school transition experiences.
- Provide training for sponsors on how to support families with K-12 children in transitioning to a new school, and/or provide resources such as the Military Child Education Coalition's Military Student Transition Consultant Program, especially for families moving to an area without a SLO.



States

- Allow homeschooling military families to utilize their "home state of record," instead of their current residence for homeschooling education requirements, to maintain continuity across relocations.*



Schools/Local Communities

- Enhance professional development for school faculty and staff on military children's educational challenges and needs.
- Encourage and support schools and homeschool groups to create opportunities for engagement between their military families and the civilian communities they live and serve in to enhance children's sense of belonging, such as Blue Star Welcome Week.



Congress

- Commission a report on the social, emotional, and academic outcomes for military children/teens who have experienced multiple military-related relocations or school transitions, particularly for children with special needs.
- Commission a report on the impact of virtual/hybrid learning during COVID-19 and its effects on military children's academic progress and emotional health.

Acknowledgments

Blue Star Families' Applied Research team would like to thank the Military Child Education Coalition for its review and feedback on this finding.



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- 4 Ray, B. D. (2021). *How Many Homeschool Students Are There in the United States? Pre-Covid-19 and Post-Covid-19: New Data*. National Home Education Research Institute. <https://www.nheri.org/how-many-homeschool-students-are-there-in-the-united-states-pre-covid-19-and-post-covid-19>
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