DOD Education Partnership Grants support military-connected children in charter schools.
DODEA EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP GRANTS SUPPORT

MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) was established to meet the education needs of military families with school-aged children. Its schools currently serve more than 78,000 children worldwide. In the United States, however, 80 percent of military-connected students attend public schools. The DoDEA Educational Partnership Program is authorized, through the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act, to award grant funds for programs that serve military-connected students in U.S. Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The Partnership Program provides grants to LEAs to support projects that aim to improve the academic and social/emotional outcomes for military-connected students. Since 2009, the Partnership Program has awarded 329 grants in 34 states, serving over 1.5 million students, about 30 percent of whom were military-connected.

Military-connected students attend all forms of domestic public schools, including charter schools. Charter schools are different from traditional public schools in that these are not regulated by a local district, but rather by a charter authorizer—typically, the State Education Agency or a LEA. Charter schools are often referred to as “schools of choice,” and usually are governed as LEAs that are distinct from the local public district. Students elect to attend and may enter a lottery for enrollment. Charter schools center on a mission, or charter, and frequently have programs designed with a specific curricular focus or a focus on a particular student population. Charter schools have the unique opportunity to serve military-connected students by designing a mission to meet the specific needs of those students. For example, since the average military-connected student will change schools six to nine times in his/her school career, military-connected charter schools have the flexibility to build strong transition programs as students enter and exit the school, and adopt national curriculum standards and assessments (versus state-specific curriculum standards and assessments).

There are currently 5,700 charter schools in the United States, eight of which are housed on military installations and many of which serve military-connected students. These schools include:

- Jacksonville Lighthouse Charter School: Flightline Upper Academy, Little Rock Air Force Base (AFB), Arkansas
- Sonoran Science Academy Davis-Monthan, Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona
- Manzanita Public Charter School, Vandenberg AFB, California
- Wheatland Charter Academy, Beale AFB, California
- Sigsbee Charter School, Naval Air Station Key West, Florida
- LEARN 6 North Chicago, Naval Station Great Lakes, Illinois
- Belle Chasse Academy, Naval Air Station/Joint Reserve Station New Orleans, Louisiana
- Imagine Andrews Public Charter School, Joint Base Andrews-Naval Air Facility, Maryland

The National Charter School Resource Center at the U.S. Department of Education recently issued a toolkit on establishing charter schools that serve military students. This toolkit “provides the framework, references, tips, and resources needed by developers of charter schools for military families to understand the critical issues surrounding the charter school option; to see how similar challenges have been met by others; to locate viable sources of support; and to find the means necessary to develop high-quality, military-connected charter schools.” 1 DoDEA also issued a planning guide for establishing charter schools on military installations. Its purpose is to “prescribe the DoD-recommended standards

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1 The toolkit is available online at http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/charter-schools-and-military-communities-toolkit
and provide an overview of charter schools, the phases of establishing and operating a charter school, and information on those charter schools already operating on DoD installations. The objective of this planning guide is to provide interested parties with the information and resources necessary to successfully navigate the startup and operational phases of a charter school."³

Charter schools that serve military-connected students are eligible to apply for DoDEA Educational Partnership Program grant funding. Currently, the Educational Partnership Program funds three charter school grant projects. This brief provides an overview of those programs, highlights some of their successful grant strategies, and offers advice to other schools and charter programs that support military-connected students. Discussion questions that can be used as part of a school professional development (PD) meeting are included at the end of this document. All of the information included in this brief was provided by the schools themselves or via grant progress reports submitted to DoDEA. Table 1 provides a snapshot of these three programs.

³The planning guide is available online at http://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/upload/CharterSchools_Ian2015.pdf
### Table 1. Charter Schools with DoDEA Partnership Program Grant Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Grades Served</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Percent Military-Connected Students</th>
<th>Charter Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sigsbee Charter School</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Marine science, Environmental education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert View Academy</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Character education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonoran Science Academy</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>STEM education, College preparation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Common Themes

Each of the grant-supported schools has a unique focus that reflects both the surrounding base and the mission of the school. All three have a curricular focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) but approach the subject matter in unique ways. These schools use three common approaches when designing school programs that support military-connected students:

- A focus on holistic student development increases student achievement.
- Strong community and parental support is essential for a successful partnership between the school and the base.
- PD on the special nature of military-connected students can improve the overall culture of the school and individual student achievement.

This report briefly discusses each school and highlights several successes and lessons learned from each.
**SIGSBEE CHARTER SCHOOL**

**Location:** Key West, FL  
Military Installations Served: Naval Air Station Key West  
Grant Year: 2011  
Grant Title: Keys to Success: Service for Learning  
Project Focus: STEM  
School Website: [http://www.sigsbee.org/](http://www.sigsbee.org/)

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**Sigsbee Charter School Mission**

The mission of Sigsbee Charter School is to provide each child with the opportunities and skill sets to realize his or her fullest potential. We aim to inspire and empower students to become lifelong learners who meet high academic standards and demonstrate responsible citizenship. Through the development of creative and critical thinking skills, all students will acquire a level of empathy that encourages them to be assets to their community and stewards of the environment.

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**OVERVIEW**

Sigsbee Charter School (SCS) was established in 2010. Prior to that, the school existed as a public school, as part of Monroe County Public Schools (MCPS) in Florida. The school was built on Naval Air Station Key West and given to MCPS as a community school so that military families would have a walkable option for their children and a school that focused specifically on their needs. When MCPS decided to close the school due to low enrollment and economic hardship, the property reverted back to the Navy and the community began a grassroots effort to create a charter school. SCS worked with community members, families, and military service members to design a charter with military families in mind.

Stakeholders understood that students at Sigsbee would be coming from all over the world and from many different academic and social experiences. They knew that Key West is largely rural and can be an isolating place, one where students can encounter challenges related to acclimating. The charter opted to focus on the unique ecology and climate of Key West to have a unifying academic thread, but also to give transitioning students exposure to the special features of where they live. Over the last 5 years, the school has grown to 486 students in grades K-8. It is a nationally recognized school of excellence that has received numerous grants and awards.
MEETING THE NEEDS OF MILITARY FAMILIES

As a school with 70 percent military families, SCS makes multidimensional efforts to meet the needs of its school community. First, the school takes care to ensure that all staff members understand not only the mission and charter of the school, but also what is unique about working with military students and their families. The principal conducts two weeks of PD with new teachers each summer, which includes topics such as understanding the importance of classroom routines and culture, conducting individual assessments on an ongoing basis, and looking for changes in behavior that might be due to a parent deploying. This training is important for making students feel respected and letting them know that they can expect the same kind of treatment from every adult in the building.

Second, SCS also tries to minimize stressors for new families by hosting outreach events, providing priority enrollment for military families, placing all school information online, and purchasing school supplies for all students so that they can start instruction immediately. SCS has three military family life counselors (MFLCs), provided by the military, who meet with students and offer workshops for families on relevant topics. SCS notes the importance of keeping military students at the center of their mission, something they attribute in part to ensuring that a third of their charter board is comprised of military members.

THE DODEA PROJECT

SCS received a DoDEA Educational Partnership Program grant in 2011, with funding through 2014. The project aimed “to engage and inspire students to be successful 21st century learners by enhancing resources and opportunities in science, technology, and math. In addition, service learning projects were embedded in curriculum frameworks to ensure that student learning is tied to meaning and purpose. Providing service learning opportunities along with transportation further connects transient students to their community and bolsters their sense of belonging. To accomplish these goals, PD initiatives and additional support staff empower teachers to provide opportunities that meet the needs of each individual student.”

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

One of SCS’s most successful project strategies was implementing an engaging, inquiry-based science curriculum that centered on field experiences. SCS recognized that military-connected students would stay an average of two years in their school and then move on. The school wanted to offer hands-on
STEM-centered learning experiences to ensure kids were building portable, college- and career-readiness skills while, at the same time, engaging students in the unique ecological features of the Florida Keys.

DoDEA grant funds allowed SCS to provide PD for teachers on how to develop an articulated curriculum in inquiry-based learning, and allowed students to step outside the classroom and learn about their environment. SCS says that this strategy was successful because it gave students unforgettable hands-on experiences, while growing socially and emotionally and learning about science. SCS’s overall project goal for their DoDEA grant was to improve the math and science achievement scores of their students. They met their project goal of increasing scores on state assessments and maintaining student assessment scores well above the state average.

The challenge of a fieldtrip-heavy curriculum, SCS noted, is that it can be relatively simple to do fieldtrips in isolation, but it is challenging to embed field experiences into the central focus of students’ study. It requires a great deal of time spent on curriculum mapping and articulating units of study across grade levels. SCS worked to develop partnerships with local science organizations, for example, to explore preserving the coral reef. They then built their seventh grade curriculum around human impact on the environment. By integrating work with scientists from community organizations and field experiences into the day-to-day curriculum, students felt more engaged and connected. SCS said that this strategy helped to boost student achievement. However, they note that it is also a challenge to show achievement over time when the student population is transient. As the student population changes each year (SCS generally turns over about one-third of its student population), it is difficult to document progress over time. Florida state assessments have changed as well, thus compounding the difficulty. However, through multiple assessment measures and stakeholder feedback, SCS has been able to demonstrate above-average student progress over time.
OVERVIEW

Desert View Academy (DVA), located within the Juniper Tree School District catchment area, recently received a renewal of their 15-year charter from the State of Arizona. Unlike Sonoran Science Academy or Sigsbee Charter School, DVA is not located on a military installation. The school began as an alternative to district schools, providing smaller classes and incorporating character-based education into the curriculum. The original vision of the school was to incorporate the six pillars of character—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—into all aspects of school life. Now, as the school continues meeting its mission, it features “Mission Monday,” during which a question or activity is offered to refocus students and staff on the school’s goals.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF MILITARY FAMILIES

DVA serves approximately 20 percent military-connected students, most of whom are linked to the Marine Corps Air Station Yuma or the Yuma Proving Ground. DVA recruits military families by advertising in the base family guides and by providing an early “enrollment day” on base, before general enrollment opens. The school also partners with a local Marine squadron, which means that Marines come to the DVA campus for special activities, such as field day or holiday events. There is
also a dedicated tab on DVA’s website for military families that provides local resources and contact information. The Marines and Air Force provide a school liaison officer (SLO) as well as family advocates to assist families transitioning in and out of the school. DVA is attractive to military families because of the additional services it provides, but also because of its strong academic ratings.

**THE DODEA PROJECT**

DVA received a DoDEA Educational Partnership Grant in 2013, with funding through 2016. Their project, called Beyond Technology Education (BTE), aims to “increase STEM achievement in technology and math through an integrated technology program, while focusing on three foundational elements: assessment, lesson development, and PD, each of which will instill confidence, increase competence, and impart content knowledge while targeting the common core.”

**SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

One of the strategies of the BTE program is to incorporate technology into the classroom and day-to-day lives of students. The school now has a grant-funded technology teacher who works both in a regular classroom and a separate technology lab funded by the grant. The technology teacher also provides formal and informal PD to the teaching staff on how to incorporate technology into their lessons. The teaching staff work together to create several integration projects throughout the year that combine content knowledge, research, and technology across multiple classrooms. The grant also funded hardware such as iPads and mimeo boards and pads, as well as PD time to train teachers on how to use these. The principal and technology teacher note that, after the first year of the grant, teachers were much more comfortable using technology in their classrooms and school leadership was more likely to see technology-based instruction during classroom walkthroughs than in years prior.

As an example of a challenge the school encountered, DVA noted that approximately one-third of the school’s teaching staff is comprised of military spouses. As families are relocated, it leads to a regular turnover in teachers. To address this issue, DVA now assigns each new teacher a mentor to assist them with transitioning into the DVA community.
Sonoran Science Academy Mission

To provide a rigorous, college-prep, STEM-focused education through a challenging, comprehensive curriculum, continuous assessment, and dedicated teachers, inspiring students to become the leaders of tomorrow.

OVERVIEW

The Sonoran Science Academy Tucson (SSA Tucson) is part of the Sonoran Science Academy charter school network in Arizona. The charter organization, which began in 1999, was founded on the principles of promoting college- and career readiness through a strong STEM curriculum. SSA Tucson opened in 2009 after a group of military-connected stakeholders held town hall meetings to discuss how additional school options could be provided to military-connected students. They identified the need for a secondary school with a rigorous curriculum to be located on a base that had closed due to low enrollment. Parents and other stakeholders chose to be part of the SSA model because of its STEM curriculum and the stability of the organization.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF MILITARY FAMILIES

Located on Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, SSA Tucson serves 205 students, 66 percent of whom are military-connected, in grades 6 to 12. It offers a number of services targeted specifically to the needs of military-connected students. There is a DoDEA-funded, full-time counselor on staff who is dedicated to serving military-connected students. The school provides tutoring and enrichment programs for
all transitioning students in order to fill any gaps and bring students up to speed on their curriculum quickly. All transitioning students receive math and reading assessments before they are placed in class, so that loss of instructional time is minimized during the early adjustment period. When transitioning students enroll, they are also assigned a peer “buddy” to show them around the school and make them feel welcome.

SSA says that the school appeals to military families because it is located on base and offers small class sizes and strong academics. SSA Tucson administrators say that they have a good relationship with the SLO on base, which also helps in spreading information via “word-of-mouth” to new military families. The principal and counselor conduct PD sessions for staff on the needs of military-connected students and the school’s mission. In addition, the military family life counselor (MFLC) from the base provides staff with relevant training and information.

**THE DODEA PROJECT**

SSA Tucson received DoDEA Educational Partnership grants in 2011 and 2014. The 2011 Sonoran CARES (Counseling, Academics, Resources, Engagement, Support) project “employs a full-time counselor to provide individual and group student counseling, targeting students who have or will have a family member facing deployment. The purpose of the group is to increase student knowledge about deployment, build student competencies, and provide a safe environment to express feelings within a supportive peer network. In addition, the counselor oversees a peer mentorship program to assist students who transfer into the school, facilitate parent and caregiver support groups, and establish and train a crisis team for emergency interventions.”
The 2014 grant built on lessons from their earlier grant project and aims to implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) model. The goal of this project is “to assist those of our highly mobile student population who are identified as being at risk for not meeting academic expectations. The school will prepare in advance to assist with the arriving students’ transition to the most appropriate level of instruction. PD will improve teaching at all tiers, as well as to help our RtI Coordinator understand the best ways to intensify instruction between tiers and to match available resources/supports to student needs.”

**SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

SSA Tucson employs 19 full-time teachers and a complete staff of 27. Frequently, teachers are military spouses or soon-to-retire teachers, thus the school turns over about one-third of its staff annually. The school notes this as a challenge, and points out the importance of training new staff quickly and thoroughly to meet that challenge.

School climate is touted as central to SSA Tucson’s mission. Students join the school with a wide range of academic and/or emotional needs, and the school promotes a continuum of services to meet them where they are. The school recommends building strong relationships with the military community so that families receive all the information and access to services that are available. SSA Tucson employed strategies, such as conducting PD for teachers about topics related to military-connected students and resilience; hiring a full-time military-dedicated school counselor; providing a character education curriculum; and making available family nights, parent book clubs, and student support groups.

SSA Tucson noted that it is a challenge to involve families and offer programming that is accessible to everyone. The school recommends flexibility and regular outreach efforts. For example, conducting a parent survey in the spring and fall each year to ask parents about dates, times, and topics they prefer. SSA Tucson’s efforts to enhance the school climate are working. As part of their grant requirements, the school conducts a climate survey of students and families each year, and results show that climate has improved each year of the grant program.
SUMMARY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three charter schools featured in this brief use DoDEA Educational Partnership funds to enhance their offerings to military-connected youth. Each school provides academic programming and support services to make educational experiences positive and productive for military-connected students and their families. To meet these goals, these programs abide by three central approaches.

1. **A focus on holistic student development increases student achievement.**
   - SCS recommends that other charters serving military-connected students focus first on their mission and making sure that the needs of those students are at the center.
   - DVA weaves character education and social/emotional learning into all aspects of their curriculum and school culture in order to support military-connected students’ academic and social/emotional needs.
   - SSA Tucson employs military-specific counselors, offers PD to teachers about military-connected students, and regularly assesses school climate.

2. **Strong community- and parental support is essential for a successful partnership between the school and the base.**
   - Sigsbee Charter School emphasizes the benefit of having one-third of their school board comprised of military members, thus maintaining military connections and ensuring that the needs of military-connected students and families are taken into account.
   - Sonoran Science Academy Tucson works with their SLO, their grant-funded school counselor, and their MFLC to build relationships with military families and establish partnerships with the military base.
   - All three charters offer priority enrollment for military families, community outreach, web resources, and other services to demonstrate their responsiveness to the needs of military families and community.

3. **Professional development on the unique nature of military-connected students can improve the overall culture of the school and individual student achievement.**
   - SCS recommends holding explicit PD training on a regular basis to inform staff about the needs of military-connected students, the Interstate Compact (http://www.mic3.net/), students’ social/emotional needs, and school transition policies. SCS also implements a mentorship program for students, recognizing that supportive peers are often just as important (if not more so) than supportive adults.
   - DVA and SSA Tucson invite their SLOs to provide PD to their instructional staff about the needs of military families.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions below are meant to prompt discussion about the charter schools included here and how these educators’ experiences relate to yours. Use these questions to guide your own reading, or use them as discussion tools during collaborative professional development sessions.

1. Sigsbee Charter School designed their curriculum focus around the unique environment of the Florida Keys. This offers students who are not from the Key West area hands-on field experiences with marine ecosystems. What unique environmental or cultural experiences could you highlight to help military-connected students learn about the special features of your area?

2. Sigsbee includes an intentional mix of stakeholders on their charter school board: military representatives, community members, school personnel, and parents. If you were developing your own charter school, what stakeholders would you include on your board? Why?

3. Sigsbee offers several days of PD before school starts in the fall for new teachers to learn about Sigsbee’s curriculum and the unique needs of military-connected students. When does your school offer PD about military-connected students? What would be other vehicles or timing to deliver this type of PD? What would you include on your agenda?

4. Sonoran Science Academy Tucson administers a climate survey each year to students and parents. What aspects of the school climate are central to your mission? How do you assess the status of your school climate?

5. Military-connected students comprise one-fifth of Desert View Academy’s student population. The school works to ensure that the needs of these students are met, in part, by creating a dedicated page for military families on the school’s website. How many military-connected students attend your school? What strategies would you use to meet the needs of your military-connected students if your military-connected student population was not high enough to justify, for example, a full-time military counselor?