

Why GAO Did This Study

Many families struggle to balance their job demands with ensuring that their children have access to a high-quality education, and for military families this struggle can be exacerbated by the highly mobile nature of their service. Family concerns about education affect readiness and retention of military personnel, according to the Department of Defense (DOD). The majority of children of military families in the United States attend public schools. A 2008 DOD study recommended offering military families a public charter school option in areas with poorly-performing local schools. In response to a directive in a House Appropriations Committee report, GAO examined: (1) the characteristics and origins of charter schools on military installations, and (2) the challenges charter schools on military installations have faced in starting up and continuing their operations.

To conduct this review, GAO interviewed officials in the eight charter schools on domestic military bases and one school being planned; visited two schools; interviewed Education and DOD officials; and reviewed relevant federal and state laws, federal regulations and guidance, and school, federal agency, and other documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education clarify whether military base charter schools that use enrollment preferences are eligible for charter school grants and that DOD and Education take actions to help address startup and operational challenges for these schools. In their responses, DOD and Education agreed with GAO's recommendations.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Guidance Needed for Military Base Schools on Startup and Operational Issues

What GAO Found

Eight charter schools were located on domestic military bases and one charter school was being developed on a base at the time of GAO's review. The military base charter schools differed in their academic focuses and served military-connected students to different degrees. For example, one school focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics while another used the arts to teach all subjects. Enrollment of military-connected students at these base charter schools ranged from 42 percent to 90 percent, and three schools used preferences to ensure a higher proportion of these students. For example, one charter school with a stated mission of educating military-connected children gave first preference to children of active-duty personnel, who represented the preponderance of enrolled students. The schools were established to address different interests, including family perceptions about the quality of education in local school districts and military officials' need to attract and retain military families to bases. In some instances the impetus for establishing a charter school on a military base originated with private entities. For example, a private developer hired to build housing on the base worked with a charter management organization to develop a charter school they thought would make living on the base more attractive to military families.

Charter school officials cited several challenges to starting up and operating on military bases, such as using enrollment preferences for military-connected students, providing civilian access to schools, and obtaining facilities. Most states require schools to be open to all students, and when organizers of one school sought to enroll solely military-connected students, state law prohibited this because of the state's open enrollment requirements. Some states have changed or interpreted their charter school laws to enable schools to give enrollment preference to military-connected students. Furthermore, two charter schools that have enrollment preferences for military-connected students have received Department of Education (Education) Charter Schools Program (CSP) grants, which require charter schools to provide all students an equal opportunity to attend the school and admit students by lottery if there are more applicants than spaces available. Although these military base charter schools have received these grants, Education has expressed concern that the use of such enrollment preferences would violate CSP program requirements. Charter schools have also encountered operational challenges. For example, access for civilians can be difficult. Nearly all the military base charter schools were located behind the base's security gate, requiring civilians to complete a background check and show a pass. Several school officials reported difficulties conducting school activities such as open houses and sporting events because each base had a limit on the number of security passes for civilians. Like other charter schools, military base charter school officials also reported obstacles to obtaining facilities, such as financing. However, they also encountered unique challenges, such as complex military facility and land leases. Several school and military base officials said that having guidance and more information sharing could help with startup and operational challenges charter schools on military bases face. However, there is currently little guidance or information sharing about military base charter schools.