



NATIONAL
MILITARY FAMILY
ASSOCIATION

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February 24, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

The National Military Family Association (NMFA) strongly urges your support for a Pre -K program in Department of Defense Education Activities (DoDEA) overseas locations. Current Pre -K programs are unable to accommodate 80% of the eligible population of four-year-olds, with parents unable to access similar early childhood education (ECE) programs comparable to their counterparts in the continental U.S. The lack of Pre-K services impacts the number of children at installation Child Development Centers (CDCs), many of which have limited space and long waitlists, and in some cases can be a barrier to spouse employment. By establishing a Universal Pre-K program at DoDEA OCONUS locations, children can reap the benefits of early education programs, it would help relieve the overburdened CDCs, and offer options for child care/child education for families currently not utilizing the child development programs overseas, allowing for work flexibility for service members and spouse employment.

A DoD Preschool Access Feasibility Study¹ highlighted the numerous benefits of enrolling children in ECE programs. Four-year-olds who had access to Pre-K services experience positive educational and mental outcomes, which include, but aren't limited to: development of academic and literacy skills, higher levels of social competence, greater gains in vocabulary and math skills, and better peer relations. There is substantial evidence that enrollment in a quality Pre-K program is linked to better child outcomes and school readiness.

However, current early education programs at OCONUS locations cannot accommodate the population of four-year-old children. One installation reported 36 four-year-olds enrolled in Pre-K but over 500 enrolled in Kindergarten. This indicates that around 80% of potential Pre-K participants are not being served. Programs such as Sure Start have eligibility restrictions, prioritizing enlisted service members, as well as limited space available. While CDCs by comparison do not have eligibility restrictions, they do not provide the ECE curriculum that children would receive in a quality Pre-K program. Additionally, many CDCs are subject to long waitlists due to limited staff and space available. While some CDCs have developed optional Pre-K programs, the high demand by families indicate the need and desire for a universal program at all installations overseas.

"Not having access to Pre-K was a developmental detriment to our children and affected me and my [wife]'s ability to be involved in the base and surrounding community. . . Without school to enrich our children's lives and occupy their days, we struggled to put her in an advantageous position. Our family balanced caring for and educating our children with her involvement in the community and transitioning into a new life season. It was tough." (Air Force Family)

Access to child care options is strongly linked to spouse employment. In the recent 2021 Active-Duty Spouse Survey², 54% of spouses who reported unemployment cited the availability of child care as the primary reason.

¹ Office of People Analytics. (2023, February 23). 2021 Active Duty Spouse Survey. Retrieved from Military One Source: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/survey-findings/2021-spouses-survey/>

² The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. (2016). *Preschool Access Feasibility Study*.

Additionally, this can negatively impact family finances and the cost of regular child care can be prohibitive. Families need access to the same range of child development programs their CONUS and civilian counterparts. Half-day or full-day Pre-K programs would help address this issue in overseas locations.

While the benefits of Pre-K are numerous for both children and their service member parents, we recognize that implementing a universal DoDEA program could impact CDCs as well. Therefore, we encourage collaboration between DoDEA schools and the Child and Youth Programs so that they can creatively utilize existing installation spaces and other resources as well as address wraparound care during the summertime.

We urge you to consider all Pre-K options available for the DoDEA school system at OCONUS locations. These programs would positively impact military families and impact readiness in service members.

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit dedicated to serving the families who stand beside the uniform. Since 1969, NMFA has worked to strengthen and protect millions of families through its advocacy and programs. We provide spouse scholarships, camps for military kids, and retreats for families reconnecting after deployment and for the families of the wounded, ill, or injured. NMFA serves the families of the currently serving, retired, wounded, or fallen members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard, and Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA.

Sincerely,



Besa Pinchotti
Executive Director & CEO