

Deployed, Not Disqualified: Defending Servicemembers in Our Schools

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My name is Jonathan Butcher. I am the Acting Director for the Center for Education Policy and the Will Skillman Senior Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Thank you Chairman Walberg, Ranking Member Scott, and Representative McClain for the opportunity to testify.

At least one of the other witnesses today has served our country with dignity and dedication and brings a similar level of commitment to the classroom. Colonel Neeley's role and that of other members of the military who have participated on school boards and as educators should be respected and protected.

My testimony makes two points. First, Congress should give military families more education options by allowing federal education funds to follow children to the learning environments that their parents choose. Second, states should move school board elections to general election years so that more voters participate and school boards better reflect the communities they serve.

Military families care deeply about their children's education. Their commitment to our country and the sacrifices they make are more than enough reason to offer these families the chance to choose how and where their children learn. Furthermore, parents who are empowered to select the best educational settings for their children report being more "plugged in" to their children's school, which means they are more likely to become active in their school communities, whether through volunteering, teaching, or serving on school boards.¹ To protect and even enhance servicemembers' involvement, policymakers should give them the ability to choose their child's educational setting.

¹ John Kristof, "Are Parents from High-School Choice States Different," EdChoice, March 13, 2026, <https://www.edchoice.org/2026-are-parents-from-high-school-choice-states-different/>. See also Philip Vassallo, "More than Grades: How Choice Boosts Parental Involvement and Benefits Children," Cato Institute *Policy Analysis* No. 383, October 26, 2000, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/more-grades-how-choice-boosts-parental-involvement-benefits-children>.

Servicemembers place a high value on educational opportunity. According to a 2025 survey of military members, respondents ranked education as the second-most important issue affecting their families, second only to economic concerns.² Military-connected students typically change schools six to nine times before graduating from high school.³ As a result, military families must regularly evaluate and make decisions about their children's education.

When choosing schools, servicemembers prioritize both student safety and academic quality. Approximately one in four respondents to the survey mentioned above chose either bullying or “needs not being met” as reasons that would convince them to choose a new learning experience for their child.⁴ The importance of education is further reflected in family decisions: approximately two of five respondents reported moving closer to their child’s school to better support that child’s education.

Military parents report higher levels of satisfaction when they can choose their children’s schools. Among survey respondents, 82 percent of parents whose children attend charter schools said they were “very satisfied” with their child’s schooling experience. Satisfaction rates were also higher among families using private schools (73 percent) and Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools (65 percent) than traditional district schools (63 percent).

Federal policymakers can help to meet the needs of military families by allowing parents to direct their children’s share of federal education funding toward the learning opportunities that best fit their children’s needs. One way to do so is through education savings accounts (ESAs), which are already available to families in nearly two dozen states, including Arizona, Florida, Texas, and West Virginia. With an ESA, policymakers deposit a portion of a child’s spending from the state funding formula into a private account that parents can use to buy education products and services for that child.

ESAs give parents the flexibility to choose the educational setting that works best for their children. Families can use these accounts to pay for private school tuition or to customize an education program using a combination of services, including textbooks, online courses, tutoring, and specialized therapies for children with disabilities. Military families should have access to these opportunities.

² Colyn Ritter, Alli Aldis and Paul DiPerna, “2025 Surveying the Military: What America’s Active-Duty Servicemembers and Spouses Think about Military Life and K-12 Education,” EdChoice, 2025, https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/02_2026-Military-Survey.pdf.

³ New release, “Month of the Military Child 2023—Taking Care of Our Military Children,” U.S. Department of War, April 3, 2023, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3349616/month-of-the-military-child-2023-taking-care-of-our-military-children/>.

⁴ Ritter, Aldis and DiPerna, “2025 Surveying the Military: What America’s Active-Duty Servicemembers and Spouses Think about Military Life and K-12 Education.”

Yet Heritage research finds that approximately half of children in active-duty military families live in states that do not offer private school choice through vouchers or ESAs.⁵ As a result, many military families lack access to the educational options that best meet their children's needs. Again, when parents can make choices for their child's education, they report having more "agency" and were more likely to attend meetings at their child's school, for example.⁶ Policymakers should allow members of the military to choose how their child learns, and this will incentivize them to be more involved in K-12 schools.

Second, state lawmakers should change school board election cycles so that these elections fall on general election years. As The Heritage Foundation's Education Freedom Report Card explains, school board elections are often held off cycle, when voter turnout is substantially lower than in general elections.⁷ These low-turnout contests allow well-organized interest groups such as teachers' unions to exert outsized influence over both candidates and election outcomes. Consequently, candidates backed by teachers' unions often enjoy a significant advantage over their opponents.

Evidence suggests that this dynamic affects the composition of school boards. A Brookings Institution survey found that 37 percent of school board members identified as "liberal or very liberal," compared with 23.6 percent who identified as "conservative or very conservative."⁸ These ideological differences can shape debates over curriculum, civics instruction, and policies related to gender identity in schools.

Teacher unions have long advocated for a range of policy positions, including support for gender identity initiatives and race-related educational programs.⁹

⁵ Lindsey M. Burke and Anne Ryland, "A GI Bill for Children of Military Families: Transforming Impact Aid into Education Savings Accounts," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3180, June 2, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/BG3180.pdf>. Since the adoption of ESAs in Texas, the number of children in active-duty military families living in states without private school choice options has changed from "more than half," as stated in the paper, to approximately half, using figures from the World Population Review and data from EdChoice. See World Population Review, "Military Members by State 2026," <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/military-members-by-state>, and EdChoice, "School Choice Across the United States," <https://www.edchoice.org/all-programs/>.

⁶ Kristof, "Are Parents from High-School Choice States Different?"

⁷ Anna J. Egalite, "When School Board Elections Lose Their Voice," *Education Next*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.educationnext.org/when-school-board-elections-lose-their-voice/>. See also John E. Chubb, "The System," in Terry M. Moe, ed. *A Primer on America's Schools* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), pp. 24–26.

⁸ Jon Valant, Rachel M. Perera, and Nicholas Zerbino, "Main Findings from a Survey of America's School Board Members," Brookings Institution, June 5, 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/main-findings-from-a-survey-of-americas-school-board-members/>.

⁹ Sarah Mervosh, "Support for Teaching Gender Identity in Schools Is Split, Even Among Democrats," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/us/gender-identity-race-education.html>; news release, "New Survey Finds Strong Majorities of Americans—including Nearly All Major Religious Groups—Support Nondiscrimination Protections for LGBTQ People," Public Religion Research Institute, March 19, 2026, <https://prri.org/press-release/new-survey-finds-strong-majorities-of-americans-including-nearly-all-major-religious-groups-support-nondiscrimination-protections-for-lgbtq-people/>; and Arne Duncan, Martha Kanter, and Eduardo

These unions and their allies have reliably left-of-center policy goals, including promoting “transgender” activity among minors and radical racial concepts inconsistent with civil rights laws.¹⁰ Because unions are among the most active participants in off-cycle elections, their policy preferences often carry significant weight in school board governance. The combination of low voter turnout and organized interest-group participation helps explain the ideological leanings observed on many school boards.

At the same time, public opinion on these issues is often more varied than school board debates suggest. For example, a 2023 Gallup survey found that 55 percent of Americans believed that changing one’s gender is morally wrong—an increase from 51 percent in 2021.¹¹ Similarly, a 2023 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that 65 percent of Americans (respondents were disaggregated by political affiliation, religion, age, and more) said that only two genders exist, up from 59 percent in 2021.¹² Regardless of one’s view on these issues, the data suggest that Americans hold a range of perspectives that may not always be reflected in local education governance.

For these reasons, school boards should better reflect the priorities of their communities rather than the priorities of the most active special-interest groups. Moving school board elections to general election years would increase voter participation and broaden representation. In jurisdictions where election dates are determined locally rather than by state law, local officials should pursue the same reform.¹³

Holding school board elections during general elections would increase voter participation and thereby shape school boards more accurately reflect the priorities of their communities.

State lawmakers should adopt policies that encourage voter participation in these elections.

Ochoa, “Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action,” U.S. Department of Education, January 2012, <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/road-map-call-action-accessiblepdf-81669.pdf>.

¹⁰ American Federation of Teachers, “Take Action,” <https://www.aft.org/action>; National Education Association, “Our Issues,” <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/action-center/our-issues>; Brenda Alvarez, “We Need to Teach the Truth about System Racism, Say Educators,” *neaToday*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/we-need-teach-truth-about-systemic-racism-say-educators>; AFT Resolution, “Support of the Rights of Transgender Persons—AFT Stands in Unity Against Discrimination in North Carolina and Mississippi,” <https://www.aft.org/resolution/support-rights-transgender-persons-aft-stands-unity-against-discrimination>; AFT Resolution, “Supporting the LGBTQIA+ Community,” <https://www.aft.org/resolution/supporting-lgbtqia-community>; and National Education Association, “White Supremacy Culture Resources,” NEA Center for Social Justice, December 2020, <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/white-supremacy-culture-resources>.

¹¹ Jonathan Butcher, *The Polarization Myth* (New York: Encounter Books, 2025), p. 112, and Jeffrey M. Jones, “More Say Birth Gender Should Dictate Sports Participation,” *Gallup*, June 12, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507023/say-birth-gender-dictate-sports-participation.aspx>.

¹² *Ibid.*, and “The Politics of Gender, Pronouns, and Public Education,” Public Religion Research Institute, June 8, 2023, <https://prri.org/research/the-politics-of-gender-pronouns-and-public-education/>. For partnerships, see Public Religion Research Institute, “About,” <https://www.prri.org/about/>.

¹³ The Heritage Foundation, “Education Freedom Report Card: Methodology,” <https://educationreportcard.heritage.org/pages/methodology>.

Greater voter participation would produce school boards that are more representative of their communities and more accountable to families. It would also create opportunities for a wider range of citizens, including servicemembers and their families, to engage in educational leadership and public service.

President Ronald Reagan captured the character of American servicemembers in his 1984 speech at Pointe du Hoc, the cliff standing between two of the major landing points for American soldiers on D-Day. There, President Reagan called the brave men and women who fought on those beaches and in that terrible war “champions who helped free a continent.”¹⁴ Quoting Stephen Spender’s poem *The Truly Great*, Reagan said they “fought for life” and left “the vivid air signed with [their] honor.” Such high praise remains appropriate today.

Our servicemembers risk their lives, sacrificing safety and comfort at the service of our country. That astounding level of leadership and character are the very virtues that parents, taxpayers, and lawmakers should want represented in our schools. What better lessons to teach the next generation than the value of sacrifice, the reward of hard work, the dedication to a cause greater than oneself?

Servicemembers care deeply about their children’s education. School boards need more balanced representation. Protecting the participation of servicemembers on school boards and in the classroom will provide more viewpoint diversity on these boards and in schools. Policies that provide these protections will also benefit servicemembers and their families—a benefit they deserve as they defend our nation.

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¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, “These Are the Boys of Pointe du Hoc,” in Adam Keiper, ed., *The Heart of a Great Nation: Timeless Wisdom from Ronald Reagan* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), pp. 233–238.

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