

Module 6: School Choice

Lesson One: About School Choice

Lesson Two: Helping Families Manage School Choices

Module Overview: This module provides School Liaisons with a guide to the types of school options that exist across the country for military families, the types of criteria families may consider when choosing a school, and additional ways in which School Liaisons can be helpful in the process of school selection. For families, the issue of school choice can be intensely personal. School Liaisons can provide needed information and resources to ensure that families are making the best and most informed choice for their children.

Learning Objectives: Through this module, School Liaisons will be able to:

- Provide an overview of school choice options in the U.S. education system.
- Provide an overview of specialized programs for students in the U.S. education system.
- Identify variations in policies and school choice options.
- Identify and compare variations in class size, curricula, teacher qualification and general academic performance.
- Identify academic support to augment school-day learning and determine the most appropriate for a given student's need.
- Identify and implement ways to provide support on school choices to parents/guardians.

Lesson One: About School Choice

Lesson Overview: The term “school choice” means giving parents the opportunity to choose the type of school their child will attend. Whether a military family is moving with school-age children or wants to ensure the best education for their children in their current location, they need to be equipped with information about appropriate education options. This lesson informs School Liaisons about types of school choice and helpful decision-making criteria.

Learning Objectives: After completing this lesson, School Liaisons will be able to:

- Provide an overview of school choice options in the U.S. education system.
- Provide an overview of specialized programs for students in the U.S. education system.
- Identify and compare variations in grading systems.
- Identify and compare variations in classroom size, curricula, teacher qualification and academic performance.
- Identify academic support to augment school-day learning and determine the most appropriate for a given student’s need.

Type of School Choices

Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted various public school choice options for parents and guardians. Currently, nearly half—46 percent—of parents report that they have a choice of schools, and 16 percent of students attend a school of their choice, up from 11 percent in 1993.¹

School choice options vary in both supply and demand. On the supply side, states and districts have created a wide range of schooling options from which parents might choose. On the demand side, states and districts have established laws and policies that allow parents to make particular choices or restrict their choices from among a set of schools. The Federal Government has encouraged some forms of school choice, for example, by providing funds for the creation of magnet schools and charter schools.

The following is a description of the major choice policies that allow parents to choose schools for their children:

Interdistrict Choice

About 15 states allow parents to choose to have their children attend any school within the state, in any school district. However, some states restrict such choices to students attending low-performing schools or allow receiving districts to restrict choices if space is limited. No state provides transportation to students crossing district boundaries.

Intradistrict Choice

Most states, and many school districts, allow parents to enroll their children in any school within a district. In some cases, though, districts “control” the choices to limit racial segregation. Not all districts provide transportation for such students, however. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, the Federal Government requires districts to allow students who attend schools in need of improvement to transfer to higher-performing schools.

Voucher Programs

Ohio and Wisconsin provide vouchers to enable a limited number of low-income families to enroll their children in private or parochial schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee, respectively. The Federal Government had established a similar program for families in Washington, DC, but that program has been suspended. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of voucher programs in 2002; however, state courts have struck down voucher programs in Arizona and Florida.

Next, learn about additional school options created by states and districts.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The Condition of Education 2009* (NCES 2009–081), [Indicator 32](#).

Type of School Choices

In addition to providing parents with the option to transfer their children to schools outside their home attendance zone, states and districts provide a variety of school options for families. School Liaisons should determine which of these options are available in their particular communities and be prepared to share this information with families. These include:

Alternative Schools

These public schools offer alternative curriculum or school schedules for students with disciplinary problems or those who cannot function in a traditional school environment. Often, these schools provide an opportunity for high school students to meet their graduation requirements through a schedule that also allows students to work during the day. Many alternative schools opened in the 1970s as options for students “at risk” of failure in traditional schools; more opened in the 1990s for students who were expelled from schools under “zero-tolerance” policies for weapons or drug violations. There are more than 6,200 alternative schools in the United States; the largest number of alternative schools is in Texas.

Charter Schools

These are independent public schools designed and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, education entrepreneurs, and others. An authorizing agency—often the school board but in some cases a university or a mayor—grants a school a charter to operate for a limited period of time. The authorizing agency monitors the school to ensure that it is fiscally sound and meets performance targets. The agency can grant an additional charter or shut the school down if it fails to meet its goals. Charter schools are open to any student who applies; however, in nearly all cases schools must hold a lottery to select students if it is oversubscribed. There are currently 5,453 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, which educate 1.7 million students, including a handful on military bases.

Magnet Schools

These are public schools designed to facilitate school desegregation by “attracting” students from outside the school’s neighborhood. Magnet schools often focus on a specific subject, such as science or the arts, or they provide programs for gifted and talented students. Some magnet schools require students to take an exam or demonstrate knowledge or skill in the specialty to gain admission. Magnet schools also conduct lotteries to select students if over-subscribed and employ other procedures to maintain racial balance.

Private Schools

About 10 percent of U.S. students attend private or nonpublic schools. About 80 percent of these schools are religiously affiliated. Other independent schools are based on a particular educational philosophy or approach to learning, such as Montessori or Waldorf schools. Students generally must apply for admission and pay tuition or fees to attend. Private and religious schools generally fall outside of Federal and state regulation, because they do not accept government funds; however, nonsectarian schools are prohibited from discrimination in admissions, and states can regulate their programs in areas such as health, safety, and teacher certification, as long as they do not impinge on the free exercise of religion or parents’ rights to direct the education of their children.

Homeschooling

This is instruction offered in the home, usually by a child’s parent or guardian, which might include virtual learning programs conducted over the Internet and/or consortia of parents who collaborate to

provide additional education options and support. About 1.5 million students were homeschooled in 2007, up from 850,000 in 1999. Most states have general guidelines about the grade-level program of study for students who are homeschooled to ensure they meet graduation requirements and are fully prepared for post-secondary options. These regulations need to be carefully regarded by parents if they want to ensure that their child will complete his or her education according to State regulations.

Virtual Schools

Virtual schools range from part-time supplemental courses that students take online in addition to their regular classroom courses to full-time online schools. Overall, about 700,000 students were enrolled in virtual schools in 2006, twice the number from 3 years before. Half the states operate statewide virtual schools, and many school districts also offer online courses. Some states are moving towards requiring online courses. For example, Michigan requires every student to take at least one online course to graduate. Virtual learning can be exclusively provided online or contain “blended” learning elements in which classes are delivered partially online with occasional face-to-face meetings as well. This option is particularly useful for students who need additional credits in order to graduate (i.e., credit recovery), for students seeking classes not offered in the local school, or for students who may not be able to attend face-to-face classes due to location, disability, or other reasons. Most students are enrolled in online courses at the high school level, but opportunities for elementary and middle school students are increasing.

Specialized Programs

In addition to the various types of school options available, many public schools offer specialized programs to meet specific student needs. School Liaisons should know which of these programs are offered within the community and share information with families as appropriate.

Dual Enrollment Programs

Nearly nine out of ten high schools offer students the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school. These programs include Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, which enable students to earn credit when they enroll in college if they pass an examination, as well as programs that allow students to take courses on college campuses while still enrolled in high school. In some cases, students must pay tuition or fees to enroll in college classes, and most pay for the costs of the exams required in AP and IB classes.

Special Education Programs

These are services specifically designed to serve children with developmental, neurological, and/or learning disabilities. The Federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to offer these programs and to provide them in the “least restrictive environment.” The types of services provided are spelled out in an Individualized Education Program (IEP), an educational plan designed to accommodate the child's unique learning requirements and agreed to by the child’s school, counselor, and parent or parents. Depending on the IEP, a student might be taught by specially trained and credentialed teachers, schools may offer a modified classroom structure and sizes, modified curriculum, and adapted physical space. Freestanding special education schools are also available but are most often private institutions; public school systems may also send their children who cannot receive necessary special education services from the district to local or private special education schools. (More information about this can be found in Module 9: Supporting Students with Special Needs.)

Criteria for Choosing a School

As discussed in Module 4: The U.S. Public Education System, states have the authority over school operations and the nature of school choice options available. These variations across states can impact military-connected students in transition trying to complete required coursework and exams or meet graduation requirements.

It is important for School Liaisons to be familiar with the school options available and how local schools carry out the implementation of school choice in order to provide informed guidance to families. What follows are some important variations of note that families may face from state to state.

School Choice Options in the Local Area

School Liaisons should be familiar with the laws governing school choice in the state and understand whether students are able to transfer to another school in the district or in another district and under what circumstances. School Liaisons should also know the range of school options in a district.

Differences in Available Programs

School Liaisons can assist parents in comparing various school options. The School Liaisons should know which schools have specialized programs or particular emphases that might be appropriate for children, and they should be able to get access to data that compares school performance.

Homeschooling Requirements

School Liaisons should know homeschooling laws and be able to inform parents if they need to use certain materials or have their curriculum approved, if their children must take state assessments, and what opportunities are available through homeschooling consortiums in the area.

Private School Options Available

School Liaisons should know the range of private schools in a community, understand the enrollment application process and deadlines, and know whether tuition assistance might be available.

Variations in Class Size

While research is mixed on the exact students-to-teacher ratio for optimal classroom learning, conventional wisdom suggests that smaller class sizes are advantageous because they allow opportunities for more personalized learning. Smaller class sizes are typically found in preschool and elementary grades, while middle and high school public school classes can be as large as 35 or 40 students. School Liaisons should be aware of these ranges in their community and share this information with parents. Parents should consider whether their child is able to manage such sizes or whether a smaller structure is more appropriate.

Variations in Curriculum

While all schools within a state are expected to meet the same standards, states and districts vary in the extent they allow flexibility for schools to design their own curriculum and instructional programs to meet the standards. Some schools have particular emphases (e.g., mathematics and science or the arts) and some emphasize a particular instructional strategy (e.g., phonics or whole language). School Liaisons

should be aware of these variations to enable parents to choose options that are appropriate for their children.

Teacher Quality

Under ESEA, schools are required to notify parents about the number of teachers in their schools who are designated as “highly qualified.” Teachers are highly qualified if they are certified, if they have a degree in the subject they teach, and if they pass required tests. Teachers who are teaching under emergency credentials are not highly qualified. Parents should be aware if a particular school has a large number of teachers who are not highly qualified. Private schools and many charter schools (depending on the state) are exempt from state certification requirements, but still may require teachers to be certified.

Academic Achievement

Under ESEA, schools are required to report student performance on statewide mathematics and reading tests for the school overall and for each subgroup of students within the school. Schools that do not make “adequate yearly progress” on these tests are subject to sanctions and intervention. While statewide tests are not the only measure of a school’s quality, they do provide important indicators of academic achievement. School Liaisons should be familiar with the academic record of a school and be able to interpret test scores to help parents decide on a school’s quality.

Supports that Augment School-Day Learning

In addition to programs and services offered during the regular school day, parents may also be guided to consider other supports and offerings that can help their child succeed. School Liaisons should become familiar with the options offered for the full range of student ages throughout the community. These include:

Extracurricular Activities

School Web sites, directories, and information boards on school grounds provide a portrait of the activities students are provided to grow and develop. Schools may have special programs and activities to welcome and involve new military-connected students. Occasionally, schools partner with outside organizations to provide extracurricular activities.

Tutoring/Academic Support

The Resources section of this module includes a listing for military-sponsored tutoring services. Students in Title I schools that are in need of improvement for 2 years under ESEA are eligible for free tutoring services, called Supplemental Education Service (SES) programs. Information about SES enrollment can be found through the local school, and a list of approved SES providers is available through the state education office. In addition, fee-for service tutoring programs are often advertised in local newspapers or community directories.

Afterschool Programs

All service branches offer afterschool programs for military-connected students (also listed in the Resources section in this module). However, families, especially those living far from the installation, may prefer to send their children to the local school or community's afterschool programs. Information about these services can usually be found at the local school and through community directories of programs. When helping parents choose quality programs, it is important to consider the qualifications of staff, the structure of the program, and to discuss its relative quality with other parents.

Parent Involvement Activities

An active parent group at a school can sometimes mean that families have more input into the operations and offerings of a school. For a newly relocating military family, this can also mean better support systems to guide the child's experience. Some installations have created parent groups of military families to provide mutual support on issues related to education.

Lesson One Summary

Key Points:

- School choice gives parents the opportunity to choose the type of school or supplementary program their child attends in order to best meet their child's needs.
- School choice options vary by state and community.
- In order for military families to take full advantage of their choice options, they need to be informed about the options available in their particular community.
- Variations among school choice options can impact how a student meets curriculum and graduation requirements and should be shared with families.

Looking Forward:

Next, learn how laws governing school choice can impact military-connected families' decisions.

Lesson Two: Helping Families Manage School Choices

Lesson Overview:

School Liaisons need to keep themselves informed and up to date about laws governing school choice and the local options and services available. This lesson arms School Liaisons with the information needed to inform themselves and their military families transferring into an installation location about their school choice options.

Note that School Liaisons can help families understand how schools are performing and assist in providing school data, but are not to advise families on which schools they should enroll their children in. The role of a School Liaison is to provide unbiased information on schools and allow families to interpret and make schooling decisions that will best meet their needs.

Learning Objectives: After completing this lesson, School Liaisons will be able to:

- Provide parents/guardians with up-to-date information on school choice options available.
- Identify potential changes in U.S. education policy that may affect school choice options for military-connected students.

Ways School Liaisons Can Be Helpful

In order to provide a useful orientation to families transferring into an installation location, School Liaisons need to be informed about laws governing school choice and the availability of local school options and services. What follows are some suggestions on ways in which to keep up to date:

- Review the U.S. Department of Education document *Choosing a School for Your Child*, which includes checklists and relevant questions to help parents make an informed choice of school. The document is available online at www.ed.gov/parents/schools/find/choose/index.html.
- Consult the National School Boards Association's repository of state laws and policies on school choice. It can be found at <http://www.nsba.org/site/index.asp>.
- Familiarize yourself with information provided by the Center for Education Reform on the status of school choice across the country. Information can be found at: <http://www.edreform.com/Home/>.
- Consider Military OneSource as a useful resource for obtaining information on schools. Users can access the service toll free from the United States at 1-800-342-9647, from overseas at 1- 800-3429-6477, or access the service for a charge from overseas at 1-484-530-5908. In addition, their website at www.militaryonesource.com offers information on school choice issues.
- Review school district and/or state websites for information on school choice and other related programs for students. These websites often provide policy and administrative guidance as well as a point of contact.
- Check with the appropriate school district administrators in the community to verify choice and program options and to gain a better understanding of implementation.

U.S. Education Policy Reform

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) may bring about changes that affect the way schools operate and even how student achievement is assessed. These changes may also impact the choices a parent may have among schools in a particular location. Some changes already underway can affect school choices. School Liaisons should be aware of these changes and be prepared to explain them to the parents of military-connected children. Here are some important policies being implemented:

New Teacher Evaluation Methods

More than a dozen states are developing new methods for evaluating teacher effectiveness. These measures will provide information on the extent to which schools have employed teachers who are effective in improving student learning, and these measures can be used to compare schools. Parents can take the level of teacher effectiveness into consideration when choosing a school for their children. School Liaisons should be aware of the new policies and practices to make available the most current information about teacher effectiveness within schools.

Expansion of Charter Schools

The Obama administration's Race to the Top program encourages many states to lift previously enacted caps on the number of charter schools allowable within the state in order to create more available charter schools. At the same time, the administration has also encouraged districts to replace low-performing schools with charter schools. For military-connected students located in low-performing school districts, such reforms could provide additional and/or higher-quality options in the near future.

Lesson Two Summary

Key Points:

- School Liaisons need to be informed about laws governing school choice and the availability of local school options and services.
- School Liaisons need to pay attention to changes in policies and their possible effect on school choices and services available to families transferring into an installation.
- The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) may bring about changes that affect the way schools operate, how student achievement is assessed, and the choices a parent may have among schools in a particular locale.
- School Liaisons can help families understand how schools are performing and assist in providing school data, but are not to advise families on which schools they should enroll their children in. The role of a School Liaison is to provide unbiased information on schools and allow families to interpret and make schooling decisions that will best meet their needs.

Module Summary

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Key Points:

- School choice gives parents the opportunity to choose the type of school or supplementary program their child attends in order to best meet their child's needs.
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Looking Forward: Next, learn about what School Liaisons need to know about how school performance is determined in order to help military-connected families make the best educational decisions for their children.