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## Push public schools around bases to improve

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**M**oving is a fact of life for members of the military. For military parents, it means their children will be attending a new school in a different state or country every few years. Despite these constant changes, they want to ensure that their children have access to a high-quality education. Unfortunately, it is not something they can take for granted.

Part of this dynamic may change soon. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has under consideration one of the biggest changes in military personnel policy since the draft ended 40 years ago.

The Pentagon is rolling out its vision for a 21st-century fighting force, "Force of the Future," in waves. Some of the changes were announced last month. One important part of this plan, still under consideration, could include extending the time at a station to four years, up from the current two to three.

If approved, the Pentagon will create more academic stability for military children and, as a result, it may retain career servicemembers for longer.

This change would offer a lot of advantages. But, this only solves part of the problem. The Pentagon still knows that it must address the quality-of-schools issue around military bases. Military parents believe the overall quality of the schools surround-

ing military bases is wildly uneven. And it has given several indications that it is willing to help address parents' concerns.

Carla Coulson, one of the Army's most senior base management leaders, recently told an audience at the Stimson Center, a Washington think tank, that there is an internal working group thinking "with respect to what the larger Department [of Defense] may be able to do to address some of the concerns that we may have with public schools." One possibility is to factor education into decisions about realigning bases.

Coulson's point harkens to a statement by former Army Chief of Staff Ray Odierno. He told a gathering of Army families in late 2013 that "if [elected officials] want to keep the military in their communities, they better start paying attention to the schools that are outside and inside our installations. Because as we evaluate and as we make decisions on future force structure, that will be one of the criteria."

The military certainly has leverage. Many of the communities represented by these elected officials are deeply dependent on soldiers' wages for their economic well-being. In 2013, 19 Army bases contributed at least 15 cents of each dollar earned in their host counties. Ten of those 19 produced a third or more of local income, and four of the 19 exceed 50 percent.

Another element of the Force of the Future plan may give members of the military more say in where they are stationed,

if they agree to serve longer. If adopted, military families might vote with their feet and transfer to bases surrounded by stronger schools.

Families with experience in numerous schools know where the good schools are. An Army-sponsored study confirmed that some of 19 Army communities have well-performing schools, but others perform less favorably. Meanwhile, as groups such as the Collaborative for Student Success have pointed out, some host states have adopted high educational standards and others have not.

Military parents can act on information like this if the Force of the Future reforms take effect. The ramifications of all of these changes would be significant. Military jobs and wages would flow from communities with poor schools to ones with strong ones. It would send a wake-up call to communities with weaker schools.

Carter should approve these win-win changes. If enacted, the military would retain experienced personnel and would not have to spend as much money recruiting and training new servicemembers. Base communities with weaker schools would have time to improve their schools before any change comes.

But most important, these changes would give military families the stability and access they have long wanted.

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