Introduction
Department of Defense Education Activity oversees pre-kindergarten through 12th grade educational programs on behalf of the Department of Defense. DoDEA operates 166 accredited schools, employs more than 12,000 individuals and serves 74,000 children. Congress recently called on DoDEA to support military and family readiness by increasing access to its schools. Readiness is an important concept within the DoD, as it refers to our military’s ability to engage in combat and fulfill assigned missions and tasks. Specifically, Congress authorized a pilot program that expands who is eligible to attend a DoDEA school in the Americas region. Traditionally, only families living on base can attend DoDEA schools in the United States. Now, families who live off base can have that same opportunity. This Congressional authorization created communications and operational needs as DoDEA shared this new program with families.

Research
The DoD long has recognized the significance of family readiness and its impact on overall military readiness, performance, retention and recruitment. Quality education is both a stabilizing influence in the lives of children and their families and an overall element in the readiness, retention and morale of America’s Force. With nearly 1 million school-age active-duty military dependent children worldwide, service members have growing concerns about the quality and level of support offered by local primary and secondary education programs in some locations. Lack of access to high quality education may compel service members to shorten their military careers or leave families behind to keep their children in preferred schools. Recent survey data suggests that the latter decision puts undue hardship on military families and affects the choice to continue to pursue a military career.

During the research phase, we also identified audiences and analyzed media to determine available communications channels. The main audience is, of course, military-connected parents living near the installation and parents who have been ordered to report for service at the installation; the latter is a group of individuals who could be coming from anywhere in the world. We also needed to communicate with 1) school superintendents about the pilot and its potential impact to their district, 2) members of the Air University K-12 Public Education Working Group, which is focused on education options in the River Region, and 3) military leaders.

Planning
This new initiative required DoDEA to coordinate internally at all levels, including worldwide, regional, district, installation and school. We sought to 1) develop a communications model that could easily be replicated at future sites, 2) ensure a transparent application and notification process for parents and 3) create tools and resources for education team members that were simple and easy to use.

To inform our parents and community stakeholders, the DoDEA Americas Communications Office collaborated with installation partners to produce a communications plan. A key strategy was that DoDEA and installation leaders would speak with one voice about the pilot program and the opportunity it afforded families.

Implementation
Maxwell Elementary Middle School at Maxwell Air Force Base was the first of four pilot sites to launch; due to Air University, the families that call this base home are ever-changing. We collaborated with the installations leaders to understand and refine communicate strategies and deepen knowledge about communication opportunities. The result was a unified communications approach between DoDEA and Maxwell Air Force Base to ensure consistent messages, timelines, engagements and messages on traditional and new media.

We collaborated on a joint press release, coordinated social media posts (with similar language and graphics) and conducted a live town hall with a question-and-answer session. The release of communications, such as the town hall and opening the application portal, was timed so that all families, regardless of time zone, could participate. Further, all communications products were similarly branded for consistency across communications channels.

Evaluation
The overall communications effort reached 3.5 million people, and media placements were local, national and international. 1) DoDEA currently is in the process of using this model to support the 2022-2023 school year launch of pilots at Camp Lejeune, NSWC Dahlgren and Fort Jackson. 2) Parents from around the world expressed interest in the program; they reported that the application and notification process was transparent and clear. DoDEA had 194 applications and filled the initial pilot to capacity. DoDEA is in the process of tracking that cohort of students to better understand how this pilot program can contribute to military readiness. 3) The tools and resources created for DoDEA staff were simple, easy to use, contributed to the success of the Maxwell launch and are being used at the new pilot sites.
Campaign Image
For brand consistency across communications channels, we selected a campaign image to use in communications materials for the pilot program. It featured the school’s mascot, an eagle.

Social Media Image/Sample Post
Post text:

“We appreciate the great local community partners and DoDEA collaborations to increase public education options, and we’ll continue to work with them and the team at DoDEA on this important issue,” said Lt. Gen. James Hecker, Air University commander and president.

Coordinated Press Release
A key strategy was that DoDEA and installation leaders would speak with one voice about the pilot program and the opportunity it afforded families. To that end, we issued a joined media release that included statements from leaders from Maxwell Air Force Base, including Air University, and DoDEA. You can read it here
Coordinated Tactics
We coordinated during and after the launch of the pilot. During the launch, the live town hall was a tactic favored by families from around the world. Afterwards, leaders and others were interested in learning how the pilot program met the needs of military readiness.

Website Snapshot
We developed a web presence to communicate information about the pilot and how to apply.

MAXWELL AFB E/MS: NEW FOUR-YEAR PILOT PROGRAM

New Four-year Pilot Program
Maxwell Elementary and Middle School hosts first DoDEA pilot program, opens application for off-base children

To attend a Department of Defense Education Activity school in the continental United States, a student’s parent or guardian must 1) be a full-time active-duty service member or full-time Department of Defense civilian and 2) reside in on-base housing. However, Congress recently authorized a pilot program through the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that would expand that eligibility to four pilot sites. It allows for the children of full-time, active-duty military who do not live on an installation to attend a DoDEA school, provided space is available.

Maxwell Air Force Base, home to Maxwell Elementary and Middle School, is the first locale to introduce this four-year pilot program. The school currently serves 350 students. To launch this pilot, DoDEA Americas collaborated with installation commanders to determine how to prioritize enrollment of new students in such a way that supports military readiness. This pilot program is blazing a trail for the other Americas sites, which will model efforts after this one.
Playbook for New Pilots

It was important to ensure success for new pilots. One of the key tools created was a playbook — a project planning template to stand-up locations selected to participate in the eligibility expansion program pilot for the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act. The template outlined the project’s objectives, phases, specific tasks, timeline recommendations and communications approaches. The intention behind this publication was to ensure uniformity amongst the four pilot locations for consistency in planning and implementation. You can view it here.

Testimonials

I am delighted that DoDEA selected MEMS as the first site for this exciting pilot program. Providing military families access to high quality public education is essential to making Maxwell AFB and Gunter Annex an assignment of choice. Given the high demand, we will continue to partner with DoDEA on the program and hope to further expand enrollment in the coming years.

— Col. Eries Mentzer, 42nd Air Base Wing commander

It’s a pretty unique idea … You have military kids that can find commonality and build social relationships. I think that the other part is the fact that they’re offering in-person, which helps with my job flexibility and my wife’s job flexibility, and we’re just grateful for the opportunity.

— Maj. Andrew Herzog, a Deputy Staff Judge Advocate and father