

Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable With Marilee Fitzgerald, Director,  
Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Via Teleconference  
Subject: Department of Defense Education Initiatives  
Time: 11:04 a.m. EDT, Date: Thursday, August 30, 2012

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**WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):** I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, August 30th, 2012. My name is William Selby, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating the call.

Today we are honored to have as our guest Marilee Fitzgerald, director of Department of Defense Education Activity. We are excited to discuss the start of the new school year and initiatives like the Common Core adoption, Parent Portal and DoDEA's proposed changes to graduation requirements. Somebody else just joined us?

**Q:** That's me. It's Ian.

**MR. SELBY:** All right. Thank you, Ian.

**Q:** Yep.

**MR. SELBY:** A note to the bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. And please respect our guest's time and keep your questions succinct and to the point.

At this time, Ms. Fitzgerald, the floor is yours for your opening statement.

**MARILEE FITZGERALD:** Well, hello, everybody. I'm so pleased to be able to talk to you today about some of the exciting things that are going on in the DOD schools. As many of you know, we just opened -- every school by the end of this week will have opened in DoDEA. That's 194 schools. We are in 12 countries, two territories and seven states. And nearly 87,000 students will walk through our doors this school year. And in the U.S. public school systems, as you know, we'll have about 1.2 million children who will be joining their peers in U.S. public school systems throughout our nation.

Our children in DoDEA range in grades from grade preschool through grade 12. They come from all different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. As you know, in fact a majority of the children in DoDEA are minority children. And they have one common bond that unites them all: They are part of a military community. And I like to look at our children as ambassadors of the United States military's core values: honor, courage, selfless sacrifice, loyalty, respect, integrity and excellence. A fabulous group of children and a -- what marvelous commitment, incredible commitment that our families have made to our nation. And in DoDEA, like so many of our schools around the nation, have made a commitment that the education of our military children will not be a sacrifice that our military family members have to make. And that's certainly true in DoDEA.

And so this school year we open our doors remembering that our children will attend six to nine schools before they graduate from an educational career. Many of them will have moved two, three -- many of them will move every two to three years. In DoDEA, as some of you may know, we had about a 35 percent mobility rate. Many know of the sadnesses that occur in our children's lives as a result of having the parent deployed or -- whether it's to a war zone or sometimes to just somewhere where the -- pretty far away from Mom and Dad.

And at this point, before I turn it over, I'd like to sort of give a shout-out to all the educators who teach our children. There -- there's something very special and unique about our military life. And we talked about the deployments and the separations as being two characteristics of that. But our teachers not only live and work in the military community -- and many of our teachers are military spouses. They have a great understanding of what -- of what needs to happen in the classrooms with their children. They are adept at customizing the education, taking children from where they are and bringing them to a place where they can maximize their potential. They understand the social and emotional support that must be given to these children in order that they can focus on learning. So we're very proud of them. And hopefully as the year goes on, our children will learn to -- our new students will learn to love our schools, as all of our alumni seem to report to us that these schools are such great value to them.

You mentioned as you -- as you opened, William, about some of our initiatives. And I'd like to just maybe give you a little -- maybe five or six that we think this year our parents might be interested in. You're quite right; we have joined 46 states in adopting the Common Core. The Common Core educational standards really identify what students should know by grade level and by content area by the time they leave the school year -- leave the academic year.

It's important to understand that these standards not only benefit the children in DoDEA -- and we've had educational standards in place as long as the school system has been started -- but for the first time, our nation has come together to decide what it is their children must know and learn by the time they leave school. For our military children and for children who are mobile, this is great news because among these 40 states, there's some common understanding about that. And so when children move from classroom to classroom, I think the academic disruption will be minimized as a result of these Common Core Standards. And we're looking forward to implementing them in DoDEA.

The first two content areas that we will delve into will be mathematics and reading and language arts. And then science will come on a bit later, when the planning group -- (inaudible) -- the Common Core group publishes the standard course.

Right now they haven't done that yet. They're still in the framework development stages. We've also increased our mathematics graduation requirements. Children will now be required to have four Carnegie units of math before they graduate from school.

And I want to emphasize that it's not just about the numbers, it's -- and the units of graduation, it's about the course offerings, as well, because we have increased the course offerings in mathematics for our children, actually in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. So we're looking forward to children having great options for learning, from financial literacy to biotechnology engineering, robotics engineering and so on, some fun and exciting things for them to learn.

And of course, we continue with our commitments that all of our children will learn a foreign language when they're in DoDEA, beginning in grades kindergarten. So we are halfway on our journey in our elementary schools, and we're hoping with the -- over the next couple years all of our schools will be teaching a foreign language to our children. This is in addition to the host nation program that exists in our foreign countries so the children are exposed to the host nation's culture and language.

And of course, we have a great focus on STEM, which is an important initiative for us. So I've talked a little bit about the curricular changes that you will see, which you'll see in our physics class in the next couple of years, the use of modeling and simulations in our curriculum, the use of virtual technology in our schools, and you will begin to see our middle school and high school children replacing their textbooks with laptops, so that we can really bring learning in real time to our students and help our teachers create exciting and contemporary lessons for our children.

So with that said, I'd like to open up for all of you to ask questions.

**MR. SELBY:** OK. And Heather, you were first on the line. So go ahead with your question.

**Q:** I actually don't have a question at this time.

**MR. SELBY:** OK.

Jennifer.

**Q:** Yeah, I have a few questions. Marilee, this is Jennifer again, with Stars and Stripes, and --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Hi, Jennifer.

**Q:** Hi. And it's nice to talk to you today. And I was just -- I was curious about what you said as far as the foreign languages offered in the elementary schools.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yes.

**Q:** Can you tell me a little bit more about how that will be expanded? And are we talking about just one language or multiple languages?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Well, on the -- currently in DoDEA, one-half of our elementary schools in grades kindergarten through third grade teach a foreign language, and it's Spanish. And we chose Spanish because it was the most common language taught in U.S. public school systems at the elementary grade level. And so we wanted to create the -- increase the possibility that our children could continue learning that language when they entered our U.S. public school systems. So Spanish was chosen.

Quite frankly, Jennifer, I think with the advent of technology, I think one day we'll be able to differentiate that. But today we've picked Spanish for our children.

The expansion will occur over the next few years, and we would like to bring foreign language learning -- and it would be Spanish -- beginning kindergarten through sixth grade. And right now we have some pilots under way that will help us maximize the resources that we have. So for example, we know that at the middle and high school level, telepresence or instruction through connecting children to remote classrooms using video teleconferencing -- in the business world and education world we'd refer to it as telepresent -- we know that works really well.

What we don't know is that it worked really well with kindergarten children. And so we have some pilots going on this year where we will be teaching the foreign language through telepresence.

We also have purchased some software so children can use an online program to help. And then we have increased the teachers for a face-to-face instruction. And we're hoping that through the pilot, we'll understand how we can expand this in a cost-effective way, and not just cost, but in an effective way for learning. I mean, we're really interested in building proficiency for our children.

And there are many reasons to study foreign language. Certainly the notion that our country is dependent upon international relations, whether it's economic, social or political. All that said, it's important -- it's hard for any one of us to engage our lives without intersecting with an international issue or someone from another country or dealing on a daily basis with an international issue. All that -- when you study foreign language, you build respect and understanding that helps you move and navigate through our political and economic system.

That's important, but there's another important reason for it, Jennifer, and that is that when you study a foreign language, you actually improve your achievement in all other content areas. That's a -- research-based evidence for us. So if we're teaching a foreign language in kindergarten, children will do better in mathematics, science, English, writing and so on as a result of studying the foreign language.

So there are great cognitive benefits as well as the social benefits of studying a foreign language. So we're hoping that in the next few years, all of our elementary children will be studying a foreign language. But I do believe, Jennifer, that one day it won't be one language, it will probably be several, because some new technology will come out to assist our teachers.

**Q:** OK. Thank you. And I have another question.

Should I just save that until somebody else goes, or can I go again?

**MR. SELBY:** We'll go to Bianca first and then we'll come right back around to you, Jennifer.

**Q:** OK, that sounds great.

**MR. SELBY:** Bianca?

**Q:** Yes. Good morning, ma'am.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Good morning.

**Q:** I actually have three questions, so if you need to cut me off to give more time to others, I completely understand.

The first question is, is there a specific date that the graduation requirement takes effect? Because according to the website, it still shows three units required for math, and you stated it would be changed to four. So is that effective start of this school year or at a certain date?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** It started with the freshman class. We'll check the website. Thank you, Bianca. So the freshman class. And maybe that's the confusion on the website.

**Q:** For current graduates --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** All -- for current entering freshman, it will be required to take, yes.

**Q:** OK. So then that was my next question. Students that are currently a junior or senior will to be penalized for not meeting the current changes?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** That's correct. And I also want to make one other point of clarification. The three years comes into play in that, with the change, not only have we increased the overall requirement but we've said that at least three units of mathematics must be taken in high school.

**Q:** OK.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** And that's a difference because our children who were doing quite well could conceivably take algebra in seventh grade, geometry in eighth grade, and take algebra II in their freshman year of high school and complete all of their -- and could have completed all of their mathematics requirement under our previous rule and not take another math course after

their freshman year. Typically, many of them can take it beyond their sophomore year. And in fact, many of our high school seniors never took mathematics courses.

Few of them took it. So new graduation requirements will apply to our incoming freshmen, beginning school year '13-'14 -- I'm sorry. So next school year, school year '13-'14.

**Q:** OK. And then my final question: The irony of this call comes at a time where I -- I work for Blue Star Families, but I am also a Marine spouse and I have a son in high school, who just transferred from a DOD school. And he's actually in a position where they want to retain him because they are a different -- they have different requirements, and he was to be in his senior year.

So without getting into my personal story, are there any protections in place? Because I have worked with the school liaison, but for the sake of parents who are in a position where they feel their military child is being put in a bad academic position because maybe his transcript isn't being translated fairly or because different -- there were different standards at the DOD school verse the Allentown schools. Is there anywhere to go for those parents?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Absolutely. Absolutely. There are a couple of places to go. First of all, if a parent is coming from a DoDEA school, they can always come back to DoDEA for help.

**Q:** OK.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** We have a partnership office that's set up today. It's headed by Kathy Facon. And I can give -- we just switched offices, so I don't have her phone number -- office here, but I can give you her email address --

**Q:** OK.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** -- which is kathleen.facon -- F-A-C-, as in Charlie, O-N, @hq.dodea.edu. And we have staff there who help our parents as they transition their children from -- in and out of a DoDEA school. So if they once were with DoDEA, great. If they were not with DoDEA, and you have this problem school district to school district, a non-DOD school district to another non-DOD school district, our office can still be of help.

But the closer help might be right there in your local school community. Either the school liaison officer can help, or I would suggest that you start with the counselor and then use the chain of command through the schools. But you can always come to DoDEA and DoDEA will point you in the right direction. Sometimes it's hard to navigate the public school system and find out who the right person is. Our partnership office knows who those folks are, and you can always use them as a resource. And we will point you in the right direction, so that you can have -- and we're very good at helping to translate the DoDEA requirements vis-a-vis what might be required in a public school system.

**Q:** Thank you very much.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** So we can certainly help you. Absolutely.

**COMMANDER :** Ms. Fitzgerald, this is Commander -- (inaudible).

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yeah.

**CMDR. :** I'm sorry to interrupt you. Is that Cathleen with a C or with a K?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** K.

**CMDR. :** Thanks.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Thank you.

**MR. SELBY:** OK. And Heather, did you have a question yet?

**Q:** I have -- well, I have one question about the teachers. You gave a shoutout -- this is Heather Sweeney from military.com.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Hi, Heather.

**Q:** You gave a shoutout to all the teachers, and you know, you said that they live and they work in the military communities, so they understand the emotional and social needs of military children. I was actually a teacher myself. I taught kindergarten. And I lived in a military town, and I had a lot of military kids. I had a student whose father was killed in Iraq, and she was still going through some of those emotions.

But some of my fellow teachers had absolutely no idea how to deal with a lot of military kids and the things that they were going through. So I was wondering, do you give your teachers any sort of training --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yes.

**Q:** -- as far as how to cope with the special circumstances that our kids go through?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yes.

Actually, they have been trained over the years, and beginning actually with the engagement that we had, in my association with the school system, beginning back -- I think it was during --

**MR. :** After 9/11?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Pardon me?

**MR. :** After --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** After -- well, even Bosnia, then after 9/11 --

**MR. :** Kosovo.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** -- the Kosovo engagement -- the teachers have received special training on how to deal with the issues that arise as a result of these deployments or even just, frankly, transitions generally; they don't even have to be deployments. And special training is given to our counselors.

Now, I would tell you that my observation has been, in assuming this position, that that training has been spotty in some locations; it hasn't been consistent throughout the school system. And one of the challenges that I have before me and one of the goals is to ensure greater consistency and uniformity from school to school, so that in every school all the teachers, all the counselors are well trained to deal with our military children and the special circumstances that result because of, for example, long engagements in the war or great illnesses in the family, and long-term injuries that have an impact on family life and certainly a child.

So I think your point's well taken. Maybe it's not everywhere, but certainly the school system has invested in helping our teachers and our counselors understand the difference.

Another aspect has been brought to bear which I think deserves some recognition here, and that's the military life educational consultant. There -- you know, there's a special talent in dealing with children who are coming from families where there's great loss and great separation, maybe even beyond the capabilities of our teachers. There's grief in children and so on. And you can't just work that issue in the classroom and the teacher. And the department invested in military life education consultants, and they're on all of bases, especially in our heavily deployed communities. And they're the bridge position between the schools and the homes.

And these folks come with a social work background or a background in psychology, and their special emphasis is in this kind of area, where they help our children and our families through these deployments. They have been absolutely instrumental. They're a great support system for our teachers and our counselors.

**MR. SELBY:** Thank you, ma'am.

And Jennifer, did you want to go ahead with your next questions?

**Q:** Thanks. I had read recently that DoDEA is going to be requiring schools overseas to increase instructional time for art, music and PE from about 45 minutes a week to about 60 minutes a week. And I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about that. Is that something that's going to be starting this year?

And also, how will that instruction time be increased? Will it be within the usual classroom or will it be more -- (inaudible) -- onto art class, for example?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** OK. Well, first let me say it's true.

We are going to be increasing the instructional time in art, music and PE to 60 minutes.

In our domestic schools we already have 60 minutes of instruction. We did a review, and the best practice and the national average -- actually, the preponderance of school districts in the United States dedicate about 60 minutes of instruction to these areas.

It won't happen until next school year, although we have asked our principals to begin it whenever they are ready to begin it.

And there are several ways that we're doing it, and we've asked for our schools to submit the action plans. One, we can simply hire more teachers if we need to. Sometimes this will create a need for an additional teacher in either art, music and PE, or in any one of those areas. For example, we might have a half-time resource dedicated, and this new requirement will push it to a full-time resource requirement. That's one way.

Some schools are adding it on in the course of a day and coming to school a little bit earlier, staying a little late, and that time is being made up -- and that time is being -- the school year is being extended. Some have suggested to do that.

Others are taking those additional 15 minutes and integrating them into the curriculum, which is another way of doing this. Our schools in the Isles District have chosen to do it this way.

There are standards behind each of these courses, in art, music and PE, and they will be addressed in other courses -- social studies, music -- I'm sorry -- social studies, English, math, science -- and there will be deliberate attention given in this curriculum to these areas of the standards, so that they are integrated. That integrated approach is not haphazard. That's a very deliberate and well-thought-out model of instruction.

What you don't want to do is just to add that time and someone to draw something, and you say, OK, we've added the extra 15 minutes in art. That's not what we're after here. When we talk about an integrated model, we're talking about a very rigorous and deliberate attention to the standards. It's just occurring in course -- in other subject areas, not == (audio break).

**MR. SELBY:** Hello?

**Q:** Hello?

**MR. SELBY:** Is anybody still on the line?

**Q:** I'm still here.

**Q:** I'm here.

**Q:** I'm still here.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** That's OK. And it will vary by school.

**Q:** Right.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Each school will be able to decide how best to integrate the additional 15 minutes.

**Q:** And is that just in the elementary schools?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yes, it's just in our elementary schools. That's correct.

**Q:** OK. And I -- and I had one more question, if I --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** OK.

**MR. SELBY:** Sure. Go ahead.

**Q:** OK. When you talked about the Common Core Standards, looking at adopting those, first in mathematics, reading and language arts --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yes.

**Q:** -- is that -- do you think that that will help as far as the situation that Bianca mentioned with her son transferring from a DoDEA school to a stateside school and then not -- you know, not having the -- having met all the requirements? Is this -- is this an effort to -- (inaudible) -- that happening?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** I certainly think -- I don't know the -- Bianca's entire situation to say that this would help. But just on hearing it, I can't help but think it will help, because there's great variance in what is expected to be taught and learned, subject by subject and year by year. That definition, that articulation -- if that occurs in all of our classrooms in our 46 states, I don't think Bianca's problem would exist. Again, not knowing all of the issues with her child, it's hard to say. But it is aimed at doing -- at kind of neutralizing this -- the variation that you get from state to state in what should be taught and learned.

And these standards are anchored to the very best practices, and they're research-based. So for many states, including DoDEA in some areas, they will -- they will increase us and challenge us to do more and to achieve more. So I think -- I can't help but think it would help.

**Q:** OK. So we could -- we could possibly see curriculum changes, additional academic requirements when these Common Core Standards are adopted?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** (Inaudible) -- oh, absolutely you -- in DoDEA we're anticipating it. We're just beginning our journey into moving into the Common Core. It'll take about three years. This -- we are beginning an evaluation. We will this year. At the end of this year we hope to have it done. But we will have our current standards in language arts and English and mathematics, and we're also going to do science because we know was coming up. We'll look at the current standards and then we will benchmark those against the Common Core Standards and find out

where our gaps are, and then we'll be in a position to tell you what kind of a heavy lift it will be for us to move into the Common Core Standards.

But I fully anticipate that it will drive curriculum changes. We will have to give professional development to our teachers. In the mathematics area alone, the focus of those standards is really on teaching fewer functions and going deeper into them. In the U.S. we have typically taught a lot and we don't go all that deep. These standards challenge us to do just the opposite. And so we will have to do very engaged, competent instruction in mathematics.

And it may drive, you know, specialized teachers in mathematics to teach our elementary children. I've spoken with some states who have done that, where mathematics is taught as a specialty, as it would be art, music and PE. You have your math specialist who's teaching that because they've seen such a significant change between what they were teaching in their school districts and what now is being offered in the Common Core, and the professional development hasn't caught up yet with teachers. And so during that period of transition, math specialists are being used.

So these are the kinds of things that DoDEA will be looking at as we examine the kind of gap that we have between our standards today and those of the Common Core.

**MR. SELBY:** Thank you, ma'am. And do you have time for one more question?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Sure.

**MR. SELBY:** Bianca?

**Q:** Do you happen to know what the four states that have not adopted the Common Core are? I think you had mentioned 46.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Yeah. I should know these. Texas --

**MR. :** Virginia.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Virginia. (Pause.) (Inaudible) -- the other two states that have not adopted the Common Core. Texas, Virginia --

**MR. :** Well, we can --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Might I get back with you on that? I apologize for not having that at my fingertips.

**Q:** OK. No problem.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** I'm sorry. I should know that.

**Q:** No problem.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** And I want to say about that, I wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion that Virginia and Texas and the other two states that I can't rattle off for you at the moment have standards that are not as good as the Common Core. That's not the case, or that there would be tremendous disruption as children move to the states of Virginia and Texas because those states are heavily populated with military children.

It's simply saying that maybe those standards are very closely aligned to those Common Core and there really isn't a need to change a wholesale approach, because they're so close there. And we know that from Virginia, for sure, because our children have done quite well in our Virginia schools. So I wouldn't want the natural conclusion to be that those standards are below par in any way.

**Q:** Thank you.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** You're welcome.

**MR. SELBY:** OK. Well, with that, ma'am, I'd like to thank everybody for your questions and thank you for your participation today. Did you have a --

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Well, I'd like --

**MR. SELBY:** Did you have a closing statement, ma'am?

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Sure. And I want to say thank you to everybody who participated today. I think it's a great moment when you have such interest in the education of our children. And you certainly are a wonderful forum to get that news out to our parents and to our community members. And you play a vital role in that, and I want to thank you for what you do.

And I think probably in closing, this -- we're developing a -- rolling out a new community strategic plan this year, and I think it sets a theme for the next five years of what our journey will be. And it's summed up really in a very simple word; it's "excellence." And I think if I left you with anything, I want you to know that what will drive us over the next five years is that we want every child in our schools -- every child in our school deserves a great teacher, every school deserves a great leader, and every school deserves to be high- performing. And so whatever it takes, that's where we're headed.

We have wonderful schools, we have pockets of tremendous excellence, but over the next five years it will be in every school. We have great teachers, great principals and great schools.

**MR. SELBY:** Roger that. Thank you very much, ma'am.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Roger that.

**MR. SELBY:** (Laughs.)

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Thank you.

**MR. SELBY:** Thank you, everybody, again. Today's program will be available online at DoDLive.mil. You'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with an audio file and also a print transcript.

Again, thank you everybody on the line. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time.

**MS. FITZGERALD:** Thank you.

**Q:** Thank you.

**Q:** Thank you.

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