
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

Maxwell Air Force Base Elementary/Middle School
Department of Defense
Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, AL

Audio: Supporting Highly Mobile Students at a Department of Defense School

My name is Paul Hernandez. I am the principal of Maxwell Air Force Base Elementary Middle School.

Our current enrollment is approximately 400 students. We serve students starting at age 3 and we go through 8th grade.

All the children at this school live on base, and most of the families are here for 10 months as part of their training for the military service.

Department of Defense schools are probably unknown to many people. We have schools in the Americas, in Europe, and in the Pacific and Asia. We have some challenges and similarities that most schools will face, we have a variety of students. We have curriculum that we have to follow but we also have different challenges that others might not be familiar with.

We face challenges such as deployments to other countries, deployments to war zones and things like that.

Most of the students that we have are here for a very short time due to the nature of the military base and their parents being here for courses that last approximately 10 months.

With that high mobility rate comes several specific challenges. Some of those include we receive students from potentially all 50 states and from overseas. They arrive to us with varying levels of proficiency and performance, with special education needs and other needs, and we have essentially one school year to identify what those needs are to try to meet those needs, and try to get the students where they need to be per grade level standards.

To address some of these challenges we have structured our school with a couple of basic principles. One was a mind shift among our teachers to accept the fact that we are going to have to start over every single year. We also recognize that because of the nature of so many new students all the time, all year long, and every year we needed to increase time for professional collaboration. And so we have built that in on a daily basis.

We also recognize that with deployments and constantly changing schools that children had special education needs and counseling needs that we were not equipped to handle. We have had to invest in positions to support those needs: a military family life counselor, guidance counselors, school psychologists and other special education staff to be able to handle the different challenges that we face.

Our PLCs have been extremely vital to our success. Teachers have 30 minutes daily of PLC collaboration time and they also have common prep time.

We have spent a lot of time training our teachers so that they understand how to use that time most effectively. We have also helped our teachers by providing them a common planning tool which walks them

through a backwards design process, starting off with standards and looking at assessments, identifying higher cognitive demand tasks, common homework, pacing out their units, and then allowing for looking at student work. And then after the unit is complete. We have a set of questions they ask to evaluate how they did, what things they would change, what things they should keep. And then we encourage them to file those so that every year we don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Because of the nature of our school, we never know what grades or kids we will have from year to year. And so we often have to try different practices to meet those needs. For example this year we had too many 4th and 5th graders for the amount of teachers that we had. And so we, in the spirit of experimenting and learning and action research, we shared all the fourth and fifth grade students among three teachers, and we did not differentiate in terms of their grade level, but we based all of it on their ability level.

We have a small school and so sometimes our teams are normal teams that you would expect, a kindergarten team, a first grade team. Our Middle School is even smaller, and so we have two math teachers collaborating that don't teach the same course, we have our ELA and our social studies teacher also collaborating together and Elementary health and PE teacher collaborating with a middle school health and PE teacher, but the process is what is important. You just have to be creative, and meet the needs of the students by doing the best practices continuously.

While our school is perhaps different than many other schools, the processes and practices that we have in place can really help any school.

I would demystify any beliefs that we have better teachers, or better students than anybody else. We simply are committed professionals who have identified some things that work really well, and we have been undeviating in our commitment to doing those things repeatedly and regularly and efficiently. And that's really where our success lies. Ordinary people, doing best practices, and the right things for the right reasons all the time.