
Defense Report

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Who Will Pay to Educate Children Who Live on Military Installations? We Need a Fast Answer

The federal impact-aid program was established to compensate for the presence in civilian communities of the families of federal civilian employees and military personnel who required community services such as education but did not necessarily contribute to the community tax base. To some extent the program was abused because communities received impact aid, despite the fact that many federal employees and military people purchased or rented homes and contributed to the tax base in that way. Over the years, however, the program has been pared to take most of these realities into account.

But now we have a situation in which we are almost solely concerned with impact-aid funds to pay for the education of the children of military families who live on federal installations.

In most cases, these children go to civilian schools which, until now, have received annual impact-aid payments to compensate the community for the service. This year, however, the President and Congress are locked in a battle over federal spending and one of the results has been an impasse over impact aid. It appears that unless this impasse is resolved there will not be enough impact-aid money to compensate the concerned communities. Now, halfway through the school year, several of them have announced plans to start charging tuition for school attendance by children from military bases.

As a way out, one county in Virginia has proposed to simply drop the schools it operates on a large Army base and ask the state to make them an independent school district. At the same time the Defense Department has gone to court to force that county to continue to educate the children without any tuition payments. This standoff has been building for many years and the apprehension of military families has grown with it.

There are points to be made on both sides. The communities should be reimbursed for educating the children from military bases. The children's parents rightfully expect access to public education without tuition payments. But most importantly, it is the responsibility of the President and Congress to reach a reasoned, equitable solution to this problem. The time has come and passed for them to live up to that responsibility.