
Defense Report

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Who Is Entitled to A Free Public Education? The Branches of Our Government Don't Agree

Year after year the service men and women whose assignments require them to live on military bases have to cope with the uncertainty of how the education of their children will be funded. Like any other tax-paying citizens, they are technically entitled to a free public education and the federal government has, for years, compensated the local school districts to make up for the fact that these families don't pay local property taxes. But this "impact aid" money has been pared lower and lower. This past school year, military families in several localities have been threatened with the necessity of paying tuition for attendance at public schools because impact aid money was either inadequate or slow in coming.

Now compare this situation to the one resulting from a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that the children of illegal aliens must be provided a free public education. The ruling has been particularly hard on communities along the border with Mexico with high concentrations of illegals who pay no taxes and frequently are a drain on public services. The mayor of Brownsville, Texas, himself a Mexican-American, was recently quoted as saying that when uninvited guests arrive, "... you can only add so much water to the soup before it loses its flavor."

As far as the children of military families are concerned, the anxiety for the first half of 1982 ended with the arrival of summer vacation. A stopgap solution was reached to forestall the mailing of tuition bills. But the 1983 budget proposed by President Reagan cuts the funds even lower and, as slowly as Congress is moving on that budget, it will be well into the new school year before military families know whether or not they face the possibility of new tuition demands.

A far fetched solution to the problem might be to get the Supreme Court to reaffirm the right of *every* child to a free public education. Then every administration would have to budget to support the education of military offspring who live on base. No one's children should have an education that is "watered soup."