

Changes in DODEA: The Impact of Executive Orders

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Abstract

This paper examines DODEA's successes in student academic performance, arguing this success stems from a standard curriculum and college-and-career readiness initiatives, along with a sustained commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Drawing on social efficiency, critical theory, and humanist pedagogy, this analysis demonstrates how culturally responsive practices have supported resilience and achievement among military-connected students. Recent United States executive orders banning DEI-related content, cultural observances, and literature are explored as threats to the success of the DODEA system. By highlighting racial and gender-based achievement gaps, it is argued that educational restrictions stemming from recent executive orders risk eroding DODEA's academic achievements.

Department of Defense schools, as part of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA), are a collection of over 160 schools that serve U.S. military families across 3 regions: U.S. installations in the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific. These schools have consistently been some of the highest performing United States schools, leading the nation in reading and mathematics assessments (Cowen, 2022). In the past, DODEA's emphasis on equity in education has led to promising educational outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, with "higher scores across their diverse population and achievement gaps that are significantly smaller than the rest of the nation" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

The success of these schools is regarded as an amazing feat, especially considering the disrupted lives military children often lead. How do these schools manage to consistently outperform other United States schools? Some attribute the success

to the college and career readiness standards implemented in 2016, along with increased teacher and leader development. The general organization of DODEA's practices in terms of college and career readiness can be compared to social efficiency curriculum (Spring, 1968) in that DODEA seeks to teach its students subjects and skills that will one day be relevant to higher education or the workforce. Does this mean that the secret to academic success lies in moving students as quickly as possible through a curriculum, focusing on "useful career knowledge" and "eliminating unnecessary waste"? To put it simply, no. To chalk DODEA's success up to social efficiency would be a huge misunderstanding of what makes DODEA unique—a uniqueness which is under attack, threatening DODEA's long-standing academic success.

With most DODEA schools serving military families outside the continental U.S., students at

these schools are placed in unique circumstances, living in a foreign country, surrounded by often unfamiliar cultures, while still attending U.S. sanctioned schools. Because one or both of their parents are likely in the U.S. military, these kids will also probably move country to country every three or so years. A lifestyle full of rapid, involuntary changes is enough to make any school-aged child feel isolated, stressed, and certainly unfocused at school. So, how *does* DODEA manage to turn these children into top performers? While part of this success can certainly be attributed to standardization of core knowledge across schools, a pedagogical tactic best highlighted by humanist pedagogy (Hirsch, 2009), as well as the aforementioned “college and career readiness” focus, there is more to DODEA than initially meets the eye.

In order to familiarize military children to their homes outside of the United States, there has been a large focus on cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within DODEA schools. Language and culture classes, which focus on immersing DODEA students into their surrounding culture, have been a long-standing requirement of DODEA curriculum. In recent years, values of diversity, inclusion, and equity have also been integrated into core curriculum, with students being prompted to think critically about their academics in terms of historical, racial, and cultural context. This practice, referred to as critical theory (Friere, 1968), has been at the center of many political debates in recent years, with certain members of the Republican Party stating critical race theory is “an attempt to rewrite American history” (Anderson, 2021). However, critical theory allows students to place newly learned knowledge within the context of broader social institutions, creating connections and solidifying new concepts. Critical theorists would argue that teaching students to think critically about how they fit into the world and its systems can foster social change and a greater educational understanding.

A critical understanding of your place in a larger society is especially important for students who are constantly moving, being surrounded by different cultures, and wondering how to define themselves in a broader context.

DEI practices have also been present in cultural observances such as Black History Month and Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage month. However, because of recent executive orders from President Donald Trump, DODEA schools have been ordered to halt the celebration of cultural observances including those related to cultural awareness months (Svan, 2025). The same executive orders also prompted the review of clubs and books. Many extracurricular clubs have had their meetings paused, such as pride clubs and women in STEM, and school libraries are now required to register their books into a database which checks for banned content. A large number of books, many of which include themes of queer and racial inclusion, have been “quarantined,” with many more currently under review. The titles of these executive orders, “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” and “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling,” highlight the motivations behind this censorship, with an obvious theme of LGBTQ+ and racial content being primary targets for bans. Furthermore, the vague language of these executive orders is leading to fear and confusion among students and educators, many of whom now avoid discussing race and gender all together.

With themes of race, gender and sexuality being banned from schools, subjects such as history and psychology are taking a big hit. Many of the explicitly outlined banned texts come from AP Psychology classes within DODEA. Because of this, concerns are arising about the ability of DODEA students to meet College Board Advanced Placement standards and pass AP tests. These

executive orders have been met with backlash from parents and students, with many calling it a hindrance to learning and DODEA's continued success. Multiple demonstrations have occurred in DODEA schools worldwide in support of DEI practices in schools, the first of which taking place at Humphreys High School in South Korea with 175 student participants (Svan, 2025).

As it pertains to executive bans of cultural observances, President Trump's administration has made an argument that these bans are in the name of academic efficiency, with cultural observances in schools often taking up teacher planning time, as well as monetary resources. This logic has also been applied to extracurricular clubs which receive government funding or meet in federal buildings, which encompasses pretty much all school clubs within DODEA because it is a federal institution within the department of defense. This decrease in cultural events and club meetings in schools has been largely driven by the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). This idea of "cutting out" aspects of schools that are not seen as efficiently accomplishing a goal of college and career readiness has heavy ties to social efficiency curriculum, hence the shared term "efficiency" in DOGE and social efficiency (Spring, 1968).

This increase in bans regarding DEI content has had many implications for members of DODEA. Teachers are being kept under watchful eye, with a new requirement to write weekly emails to supervisors outlining what their classes accomplished last week. These emails stand to do two things: evaluate if teachers are including banned content in their class curriculum, and determine which teachers are deemed as "inefficient" and will be reviewed for possible termination. The Pentagon recently announced plans to increase termination of civilian Department of Defense employees (Vincent, 2025), including DODEA teachers. Those who choose not to comply with these email mandates are

threatened with "further review" and are expected to be part of a mass termination at the end of the school year.

Students are also stakeholders in this issue, having their educational freedom and access to resources limited by these executive orders. One group of students who are especially affected by these changes are minority students. Content bans limit representation in literature and strip resources such as supportive clubs or faculty members. A loss of DEI resources makes it harder for students, especially those who are non-white or gender non-conforming, to adjust to new environments such as a new school/country. It is expected for feelings of isolation and marginalization to rise among minority students in DODEA. This could have implications on the continued success of minority students, such as Black and Hispanic students, within DODEA, and has possible adverse outcomes for academic performance. A widening of achievement gaps between students included in a racial minority and white students is a possible outcome, threatening DODEA's status of having smaller achievement gaps than the national average.

DODEA teachers are organizing efforts to maintain DEI practices within military communities. Many DODEA teachers have shifted banned events, such as cultural celebrations like Black History Month, off of the military base. Teachers will invite students and their families to participate in events with reading, including banned books, cultural demonstrations, cultural meals, and discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion. One current DODEA teacher stated "On base, a lot of things that are banned in schools or offices we are doing on our own time. For example, Black History Month couldn't happen at school, so we met off base and had an event we publicized on Facebook. I volunteered to read books and just sat there reading to kids. The commissary can't have displays for any kind of heritage month, but they do things like

have sale aisles that are just Hispanic foods or Asian foods.”

This shift of DEI practices from schools to events that can't even be held within the military base marks a concerning privatization of Education. Although it is helpful that teachers are “taking matters into their own hands” and continuing to teach outside of school, it raises concerns for children and families who can't attend events outside of school hours. This solution follows the neoliberal emphasis on privatization and deregulation by making DEI practices less and less available to the general public. DEI practices belong in schools, where they're accessible.

Some DODEA teachers, the ones who have less to lose, are keeping DEI in the classroom by simply choosing to ignore content bans implemented by the executive orders. These teachers continue to use banned literature in their lessons, discuss issues of systemic inequality, and continue to support LGBTQ+ students by affirming their identities at school. Although it is expected for teachers who do not comply with the executive orders to be terminated at the end of the school year, in an expected mass termination of civilian Department of Defense employees, these teachers continue to stand up for their beliefs in the classroom, and make a difference by passing on ideas of diversity, equity, and inclusion to their students.

An organization called the Federal Education Association is fighting to make sure DEI can stay available to military children through formal schooling. The FEA, a union advocating for educators working within the Department of Defense, has called on congress to exempt DODEA schools from executive orders which restrict race and gender content in education. Regarding content bans across DODEA, the FEA sent out an email to its constituents stating they will continue to represent DODEA educators as they, along with members of congress, push for negotiations with

the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth. Although this solution does not address schools outside of DODEA who are struggling to comply with new executive orders, it does at least hope to provide some relief for federal educators as well as maintain DODEA's status of high educational standards and low achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students.

Overall, the fight to maintain academic excellence in DODEA begins with maintaining DEI practices in schools. The success of minority students depends on equity and inclusion within the classroom, and it's clear that President Donald Trump's executive orders do not seek to maintain this success. There is an attack on diversity, specifically as it pertains to people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals, that is happening in America's schools. By banning content which discusses race, gender, and sexual orientation, our current administration aims to stop discussions of this matter altogether. Schools are being used to target the awareness of future generations. This is why we must continue to educate our students about matters of social disparity, despite content bans and attempts to negate the truth. The way forward is through a socially educated populace, which DODEA can continue to create by fostering diversity and awareness in its students.

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