

In shadow of war, post's school does well but questions remain

FORT RILEY (AP) — Ware Elementary's brightly colored walls and cacophony of student voices make it seem like any other school.

But the students at this school on a military base face a challenge most of their peers don't. By Thanksgiving, 85 percent of them will say goodbye to a parent heading for Iraq for at least a year — perhaps for the third time in their young lives.

Despite the disruption at their students' homes, building principal Deb Gustafson and her staff have worked since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks to keep the outside world — and the war — from getting past the schoolhouse doors.

They aren't using a new, trendy approach, focusing instead on meeting academic standards and communication.

And the effort has paid off. In 2005, the federal Department of Education named Ware Elementary a Blue Ribbon School, and students routinely achieve a "standard of excellence" on state reading and math exams.

"We can't wait for the achievement to improve. We have a direct responsibility for these military kids to have a quality education," said Gustafson, who became principal a month before the terror attacks.

Yet the larger question of how well children who have parents deploying multiple times during the

Iraq war will fare still looms. And educators, psychologists and others acknowledge they don't have good answers for that question.

The Army surveys families every four years, and a 2005 University of North Carolina study of its data suggested that with each deployment, one in five children face depression or problems in school.

But there's little research about the effects of multiple deployments, said Michelle Kelley, a professor of developmental psychology at Old Dominion University.

"I don't know that it ever gets any easier," Kelley said. "They shouldn't have these kinds of worries that their parents could be harmed all the time or they could die overseas. Those are the kinds of worries you try to protect them from."

While Ware Elementary is now doing something right, it previously was considered a school in need of reform. Before the terror attacks, only 30 percent of the students were proficient in reading, while only 40 percent were proficient in math.

Even without parents' multiple deployments overseas, reasons existed to believe Ware's 529 students would continue to struggle academically. Eighty-six percent of them live in poverty; 65 percent are likely to move during the school year; in one week in early September, 11 new students enrolled, while five left.

In one respect, Ware is lucky because of geography. It is part of the

Geary County School District, cited in 2005 by Standard & Poor's for getting high academic results with the resources it receives. The study praised the district's effort to recruit a strong staff and noted that it uses test data to drive decisions.

Each nine-week quarter begins and ends with extra testing, so teachers can determine where students' skills are lacking. New students take tests shortly after their arrival to assess their skills.

"In the military, you don't progress unless you do continuing education," said Mary Keller, executive director of the Military Child Education Coalition, a group based near Fort Hood, Texas, that helps schools and parents. "When you see schools like this, you see a school building of children who are resilient, and also children who know there is an expectation to learn."

Also, a third of Ware's teachers have spouses in the military. Third-grade teacher Cindy Rasmussen's husband will leave soon for Iraq, his second tour.

"Being here with the kids helps, it keeps my mind off of it," she said. "It's nice to be in the position when they come and say they are scared and worried and it's easy to say, 'You know what, I understand completely.'"

The obvious downside to being a child of the military is the stress caused by deployments. The North Carolina study suggested younger children have greater fears about

parents' safety and parents of older children were less likely to view the Army as "a good place to raise children."

Ware fourth-grader Kevin Giles watched his father go to war and return a year later.

"I just felt really bad because he was gone. I was just miserable," Giles said. "I feel a lot better. He's home and he's with us and he's doing things with us."

When fears surface, Rasmussen finds a way for students to contact the parent overseas, such as writing letters.

"For some kids, the family can say we did this before and we're going to be fine," Keller said. "For some, it may have been a hard time, not for the person deployed, but it could have been a real strain at home that made it tough on the family."

Fifty-five percent of the Army's soldiers are married and it has developed support, such as counseling and child care services. Fort Riley

operates a School Age Services building, which offers before- and after-school programs, such as computer labs and drama workshops.

"It gives them a place they can come and really relax and really be themselves," said Maxine Williams, its director. "Sometimes we do deal with some difficult situations where the mom or dad has deployed and we're kind of like the home away from home where they can really talk and let us know what's going on."

At Ware, Susan White, a veteran third-grade teacher, said the school attempts to keep routines normal and children's lives balanced.

"We're all accountable for each other's kids," she said.

Joanne Righter's twin sons, Joseph and Samuel, are in middle school but she still volunteers at Ware, where the boys once went. Her husband went to Iraq while they were Ware students and is now on his second stint.


Fort Riley: <http://www.riley.army.mil>
Ware Elementary School: <http://ware.usd475.org/>
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