

Newsweek

Daddy, Why Is My School Falling Down?

The troops returning from Afghanistan this year face a bleak homecoming: the nation's commitment to their families is flagging-- particularly at the broken-down schools that serve soldiers' kids.

by [Kristen Lombardi](#) June 27, 2011

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Jesse Chehak for Newsweek

The family at Geronimo Road Elementary School. From left: Amanda, Christy, Catie, and Brittany Hunter.

For nearly half her life, 11-year-old Catie Hunter has lived apart from her father, an Army platoon sergeant deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and twice to Korea. Such extended

separation would stress any child. But Catie must endure additional hardship at her elementary school at Oklahoma's Fort Sill.

To get to class on stormy days, the fifth grader must dodge what she calls "Niagara Falls," the deluge of rainwater that flows from the school's rotten roof into large trash bins below. Pleasant days aren't much better at Geronimo Road Elementary. Catie passes by chipped floors, termite-infested walls, and cracks in bricks the size of the principal's finger. In the ceiling, tiles are bent and browned by leaks. Some dangle by threads of glue. A bucket, strapped by a bungee cord, hangs over the gymnasium door, another makeshift rain receptacle. Inside her classroom—built before Dwight D. Eisenhower became president—an archaic air-conditioning unit at times drowns out her teacher's voice.

"I'm really proud of the fact that the school is still standing," says Catie, a pixie of a girl who twitches her nose when she talks. "Sometimes I wonder if it's going to fall in."

School conditions that disgust many adults only add to the pressures on a child longing for a father deployed four times since her birth. "I wish he were here," she admits. "I miss him a lot."

Catie's circumstances are hardly unique. An investigation by NEWSWEEK and the Center for Public Integrity's iWatchNews found that tens of thousands of children of U.S. military personnel attend military-base schools that are falling apart from age and neglect, and have failed to meet the Defense Department's own standards. The conditions at schools on military installations have worsened in the last decade even as the average soldier-parent endures an average of three deployments, each lasting up to 18 months.

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In Germany, for instance, the children of U.S. soldiers still go to class in World War II-era Nazi barracks that were cited for fire hazards just a few years ago. At Fort Riley in Kansas, students drink water tainted brown from corroding pipes, while at Fort Stewart in Georgia, mold that grew on walls and sprouted from floors was so serious at one school that the library had to be shuttered for emergency cleanup.

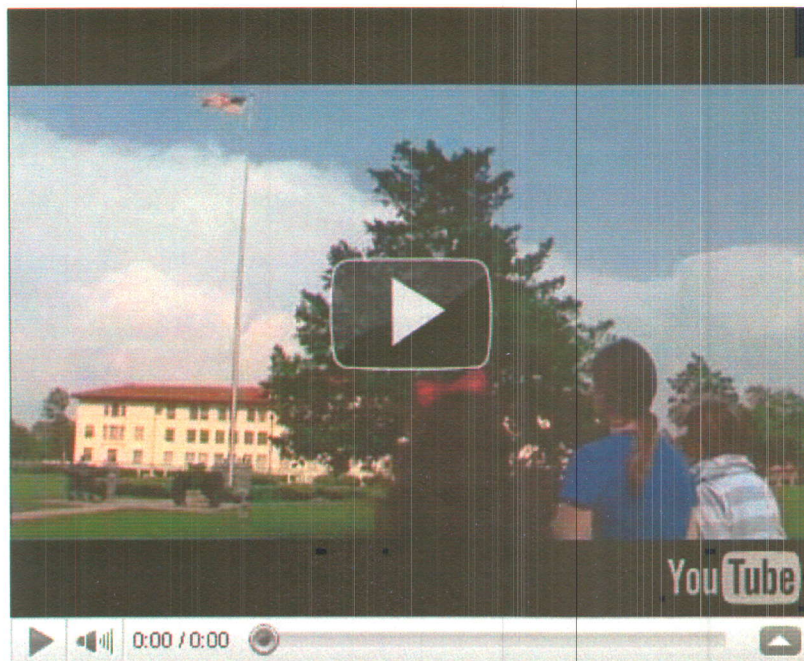
The military schools crisis is so little known that *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof recently suggested the military's treatment of kids might perhaps be its "most impressive achievement," while first lady Michelle Obama boasted in April that the administration has made the education of soldiers' children a top priority.

But in nearly 200 interviews across the globe, educators, parents, and students at military-base schools painted a far bleaker story. They have used boiler rooms, trailers, hallways, or closets as makeshift classrooms or workspaces, and fretted as children sweltered on hot days when antiquated air-conditioning units stopped working.

Conditions are so bad that some educators at base schools envy the civilian public schools off base, which admittedly have their own set of challenges.

"Some of the new schools in town make our schools look like a prison," says David C. Primer, who uses a trailer as a classroom to teach students German at the vaunted Marine headquarters in Quantico, Va., just 30 miles south of the nation's capital, in one of the country's most affluent suburbs.

Safety also is an issue. In April, a fire traced to an aging gas line broke out in the cafeteria at an elementary school at Fort Stewart in Georgia. "The conditions are terrible," says Tina French, a mother of two autistic students at the school. "DOD schools are supposed to be the best. We're not seeing that here."



The Pentagon acknowledges it has a significant problem, as nearly \$4 billion in needed renovations and new construction at its schools have piled up during a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Military officials' own reports to Congress in 2008 and 2009 show as many as three quarters of base schools the Pentagon operates are either beyond repair or would require extensive renovation to meet minimum standards for safety, quality, accessibility, and design.

The Defense Department's education agency concedes it "cannot keep pace with the types of renovations and maintenance needed when a school building goes beyond its useful life and the age of the building becomes a barrier to using these dollars wisely."

About half the military schools the agency operates are at least 45 years old. Nonetheless, the DOD education office insists "none of our schools is unsafe, and no school is a hazard to anyone."

That's hardly the gold standard the Pentagon, as a matter of law, has promised its war fighters.

The 1978 Defense Dependents' Education Act requires the military to provide "academic services of a high quality" to the children of soldiers on active duty. A 1988 Defense Department directive went further, broadly guaranteeing military families "a quality of life that reflects the high standards and pride of the nation they defend"—including education.

Where military children go to school depends on circumstances often beyond families' control. More than 500,000 children, the largest proportion, live off base and go to local

schools in their urban or suburban communities, with classrooms that often have significantly more resources.

But families who live on military installations—either for economic, career, or security reasons—send their children to one of the 194 base schools operated by the Pentagon, mostly overseas, or the 159 base schools operated by local school districts in the U.S. Those students—about 150,000 in all—are more likely to attend schools nearing a half-century old and suffering from significant structural deficiencies.

The Pentagon reports that 39 percent of the schools it runs on bases were graded in the worst category of “failing,” which means they should be replaced, and 37 percent were classified in “poor” physical shape, meaning they will require significant renovation to meet the standards.

Schools run by public systems on Army installations didn’t fare much better: at least 39 percent fell in the failing or poor categories.

“There are so many needs,” says Whitney Gee, a psychologist who deals with the double punch of overcrowding and the effects of multiple deployments at three elementary schools at Fort Riley.

Those realities hit home in Catie’s family recently, when her 16-year-old sister, Amanda, an honor-roll student, received her first F shortly after the start of her father’s latest extended trip overseas. “It can be overwhelming,” says Amanda, her hazel eyes welling with sadness.

A March 2011 Army study by the RAND Corporation found that children with parents deployed for at least 19 months had “modestly lower” test scores than their peers without such deployment stress. With deployments already a factor, the decrepit-facility conditions “do have an impact” on academic performance, says Marilee Fitzgerald, acting director of Department of Defense Education Activity, which runs the base-school system.

The Pentagon now estimates it will take \$3.7 billion and as many as seven years to renovate or rebuild most of its schools, a backlog that accumulated over the last decade as defense officials failed to press for the funds they needed in stretched military budgets.

To put that cost in perspective, the amount is about the same spent this year on drone aircraft, or half the cost of NASA’s Hubble telescope, which scans distant galaxies from Earth orbit. Essentially, fixing military schools is a small-ticket item in a country that spends \$2 billion a week on the wars alone but is trying to trim that cost with President Barack Obama’s withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

“I would feel disrespected if I were on my second or third tour of duty and then my kids were in a school that was dilapidated and too small or falling apart,” says Chet Edwards, a former Democratic congressman from Texas who chaired the House Appropriations Military Construction Subcommittee that was dealing with the school issue before he lost reelection last year.

The problem, Edwards says, is that military families with few resources face a “stacked deck” and must compete for budget dollars with the well-oiled lobbying machines of the military-industrial complex.

"I had hundreds of representatives and lobbyists come into my office fighting for multibillion-dollar weapons programs," he recalls. "But I only had a handful who ever walked in and said...our kids deserve better education."

This year Congress allotted nearly \$750 million to fix problems at some schools—largely intended as a down payment on the larger blueprint to replace or renovate the most deficient schools over the next five to seven years. But the effort will succeed only with substantially more funding from a Congress increasingly wary of new spending.

The administration is striving for "significant changes of which our community will be proud, and which will provide a world-class educational environment for our kids," says Robert Gordon, the current official overseeing military family affairs.

There's little doubt what a Defense Department task force now studying the base schools run by local districts will find. A preliminary assessment of Catie's school in Oklahoma, for instance, notes it is in "failing condition" and "should be considered for replacement."

At an Army post two miles outside Stuttgart, Germany, children attend an elementary school built 73 years ago by the Nazis and used by German Gen. Erwin Rommel's tank division as barracks during World War II.

The school, the military's oldest, is so cramped that some students are shifted to trailers. Some modifications, including the addition of fire escapes, took place only after the facility was cited in 2006 for nine fire-safety violations. The school is due to be replaced in 2014.

At Diamond Elementary School at Fort Stewart in Georgia, leaks from a rotting roof have caused lights in classroom G3 to spark—"a serious safety hazard," according to an Aug. 24, 2010, inspection report—forcing administrators to evacuate the classroom.

The leaks and antiquated ventilation units are also blamed for air-quality and related health problems.

"The conditions scare me," says Michelle Sherman, whose two sons, ages 6 and 4, attend Diamond. She attributes her kindergartner's two bouts of pneumonia to conditions at the school. And her preschooler's teacher filed a complaint about "black stuff" blowing from vents, emails show.

Administrators are scrambling for temporary fixes until the 56-year-old school can be replaced in 2015.

"All we're doing is putting Band-Aids on the problems," says Robert Heffley, who manages school facilities at Fort Stewart.

[Read a longer version of this story at the Center for Public Integrity.](#)