

Military campuses show wear and tear

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The buzz of construction fills the air at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, where dozens of marble headstones await placement as part of an expansion costing nearly \$10 million.

Across the street an aging, tattered and often-neglected Robert G. Cole Junior/Senior High School is an object lesson in the politics of Capitol Hill, where dead veterans hold greater sway than teachers and the children they nurture.

"Funding for our facilities is actually the only critical issue we have," said Anne S. Kiehle, superintendent of the Fort Sam Houston School District. "The students learn in spite of us."

At the Fort Sam, Lackland and Randolph Field school districts, students are among the highest-achieving in the Alamo City, posting above-average scores on state-mandated tests and the SAT. But many of their schools are run-down.

Nationwide, there are seven "coterminous" school districts — independent systems operating exclusively on military bases. The districts, which have no tax authority, depend entirely on federal and state funding to operate.

Three of them are in San Antonio and account for 3,387 students, all military dependents. Another 6,000 or so military children attend classes at schools in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., Grand Forks, N.D., Minot, N.D. and Fort Huachuca, Ariz., and the \$6,600 a year per pupil they receive is about the national average.

Still, it's roughly \$2,000 under that spent by the Defense Department itself, which runs a 100,000-student school district at bases worldwide, said John Deegan, CEO of the Military Impacted Schools Association.

Like San Antonio's, the other coterminous school districts are aging and poor, having received little money from Congress to repair and upgrade their facilities.

What money they get is directly related to how well-connected they are on Capitol Hill, Deegan said, listing Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and San Antonio Reps. Ciro Rodriguez and Henry Bonilla as key champions for the city's coterminous school districts.

"Instead of somebody getting lucky once in awhile with an effective congressman or senator that happens to be on the right committee, it should be an organized approach where the federal government really does help with schools that serve concentrations of federal students," said Deegan, whose group represents schools serving 500,000 children, both military and civilian, in 440 school districts.

As it stands, the schools make do.

At Cole, which is famed for producing basketball superstar Shaquille O'Neal, students contend with leaky roofs, decrepit labs and overcrowded classrooms — one of them a converted closet.

Students in Cheryl Pritts' Spanish class at Randolph High School go into the hallway, turn down the lights and use a wall to project a video presentation because there's not enough space in the classroom.

At Lackland AFB an increase in base housing means more children for the schools but no place to put them on campus. Already some of the elementary school's 366 students attend class in a wing of the junior/senior high school. To comply with state-mandated class limits of 22 in the lower grades, Superintendent David Splitek said, the district will need about 15 more classrooms.

Other school districts can raise money to take care of an increasing population by selling bonds and raising property taxes.

But unlike most districts, coterminous schools are on federal land and can't levy property taxes or issue bonds. They receive only limited federal funding allocated to schools heavily affected by military installations. In practice this means that they receive enough from the state and federal governments to operate the schools and maintain them, but not enough to modernize or renovate them.

Until the past few years, the government had given virtually no construction funding to any of San Antonio's military schools, even though all of them have

deteriorated from time, weather and overcrowding.

"We take care of what we have," Splitek said. "But eventually you reach a point where you have to replace your equipment, because maintaining it won't make it last indefinitely."

School buildings typically get a makeover once every 10 years, but Fort Sam's schools — built during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations — have never been renovated.

"It's never been a priority of the military or the Department of Education. They've always blamed one department or the other," Rodriguez said.

"It's inexcusable that the military school districts have been so neglected," Hutchison said.

A tour of Cole explains their anger.

Mops line a series of windows overlooking the junior high school's first-floor courtyard because rain leaks through the caulk. A pair of space heaters glow atop tables in the biology classroom of Cole's science building, where the heating and air conditioning system leaves some areas too hot and others too cold.

Cole Principal McMorris Mitchell laughs while noting that the chemistry lab equipment "looks like the same stuff I had back in the '60s."

It is. The equipment dates to the high school's opening in 1962.

Though older, Fort Sam Elementary is aging with more grace. Jan McMurray's third-grade classroom is small and cramped, but drooping ceiling tiles are the most obvious sign of decline. Elsewhere, patches work as Band-Aids for cracking walls, but in a world where buildings are meant to last 38 years, the elementary school is holding up well while going on 50.

"It's a good old structure, it really is," said Scott Cheney, assistant principal for student services. "But it needs constant work to keep it up."

There has been progress. More than \$1 million has been spent to renovate 22 restrooms in the elementary school. Construction on a \$2.5 million science building will begin later this year, thanks to efforts by Hutchison, Bonilla and Rodriguez.

Despite the successful bipartisan campaign on the part of Bonilla and Rodriguez to give Cole its first construction project in decades, the Education Department didn't release the money for two years.

Kiehle said the agency gave no reason for the delay but finally released the

money after Rodriguez demanded action in a letter to then-Education Secretary Richard Riley.

An agency official, in a letter to Rodriguez, blamed the delay on red tape.

Fort Sam, with 1,240 students, is used to the waiting. Its improvements come slowly, in baby steps, because there isn't enough money for all of the needs.

The result, Kiehle said, is that the district must cope with rising maintenance costs and indefinitely defer other projects — one of them a new gym to replace one overtaxed by competing demands, including theater and sports.

At Randolph, high school drama students have to wait until after athletic teams practice in the gym in order to use the nearby stage because they don't have enough space in their classroom.

Some of the high school's kitchen equipment dates back to the beginnings of the district 50 years ago.

Randolph, with 1,167 students, was able to save some of its operating money and combine that with a \$500,000 grant and a loan to build a \$3 million structure for its early childhood and kindergarten classes. The district is buying the building through a lease-purchase arrangement. That, however, only makes the contrasts even starker with its middle and high school facilities.

Until a few years ago Lackland, which has 980 students, operated most of its classes out of temporary buildings. But under former Superintendent Virginia Stacey the district received an \$8 million grant from the Defense Department, which paid for some work on the elementary school and a new junior/senior high school that was named after her.

Still, the elementary school needs work on antiquated air conditioning systems, it needs to renovate bathrooms to comply with federal disability laws and upgrade its gym — to name only a few of the projects.

"Despite the conditions, our kids are able to accomplish so much," Randolph Superintendent Barbara Maddox said. "Just think — what could they do if they had appropriate facilities?"

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