The 21st Century Schools Initiative

In our 75 years of operation, acquiring quality classroom and school facilities has always been a top priority. Achieving this goal created major challenges. In our early days, we had to rely on whatever facilities local commands could muster. Often it was tents, Quonset huts, and buildings requisitioned from the host nation in the aftermath of World War II. As our presence overseas transitioned from occupational forces to a more stable mutual defense presence, commands and school leaders looked to the Department of Defense (DoD) and Congress to resource teaching and learning environments that were more conducive to teaching.

Prior to FY 2011, the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Military Construction (MILCON) Program was underfunded, which impeded our ability to construct schools that were modern and supported effective teaching and learning. While we made every effort to make our make-shift facilities safe, functional and aesthetically pleasing, it became increasingly difficult to maintain aging structures which were not designed originally as schools and did not have the infrastructure to support the evolving and increased requirements of modern day schools.

In a 2008 Report to Congress, DoD identified 69 percent (134 of 194 schools) as safe, but in Poor (Q3) or Failing (Q4) condition. A “Poor” rating means routine and normal scheduled maintenance is insufficient to sustain the major infrastructure building components and a major investment is required to address facility deficiencies to bring the existing facility up to a DoD acceptable condition rating (Q1 or Q2). A “Failing” rating means that it is more cost effective to replace the facility than to continue investing in repair and maintenance. Many of the deficiencies noted in the Q3 and Q4 ratings were related to infrastructure conditions and advanced building age. Neither rating is indicative of an unsafe school.

As a result of the facility analyses included in the 2008 Report to Congress, DoD programmed $3.7B over the course of six fiscal years (FY11-FY16) to fund a DoDEA plan to replace or renovate 134 of 194 DoDEA schools worldwide. Congress appropriated nearly $400M in FY 11 to begin funding this initiative. Complementing this initiative, the DoD committed to an ambitious military construction program to build or significantly renovate over 100 DoDEA schools. In January of 2011, President Barack Obama released “Strengthening our Military Families”, a report that identified education as one of his key areas.

This focus, commonly referred to as the 21st Century Schools initiative, has continued through current fiscal years, to renovate and/or replace an aging inventory of facilities with state-of-the-art schools to support dependent education. Due to the significant influx of additional funding driven by the 2008 report which allowed us to renovate or replace a number of our schools, DoDEA is better funded to support sustainment and routine repair and maintenance of its facilities.

To support our 21st Century Schools initiative, we built a team of design and instructional professionals with extensive experience in identifying educational requirements for the future and beyond. Education has evolved since our early days and there have been dramatic changes in how students communicate, interact, and learn. Schools must be flexible in the short term and adaptable in the long term, allowing us to adjust to deliver student-centric education for a 21st century, knowledge-based economy. In our school facilities projects today, DoDEA educators and design experts/engineers look at innovations in education, curriculum delivery, use of technology, and the growing expectations for sustainability and energy conservation.

The 21st Century Schools initiative has been an extraordinary and innovative journey to transform learning spaces that employ technology in ways that improve teaching and
learning. It has changed the way DoDEA teachers teach and enhanced the way DoDEA students learn. DoDEA has always been strongly committed to ensuring that the children of military families receive an excellent education that prepares them for successful careers and to be active contributors to their communities and the nation.

Sources
DoDEA Facilities Division
DoDEA Public Affairs
“Strengthening our Military Families,” January 2011