



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE EDUCATION ACTIVITY

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## **DoDEA Teacher of the Year facilitates unique student engagement with Pentagon officials**

During her visit to the Pentagon as part of her year of service, 2024 DoDEA Teacher of the Year Kerrie Gill quickly realized the eagerness of Pentagon officials to partner with DoDEA students.

“Our students are known not just for their resiliency and adaptability, but for their bright minds, curious nature, and desire to learn,” stated Gill. “Yes, those I interacted with at the Pentagon were excited to have me in the building as the DoDEA ambassador, but they were even more excited to create a partnership with our students.”

In collaboration with Jonathan Evenson from the Community Engagement Directorate with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Gill organized a 45-minute virtual engagement in late May with Pentagon officials and students from DoDEA schools in Europe and the United States.

The session initially built on themes from the NATO Youth Summit, emphasizing the crucial role of youth as ambassadors for the United States. However, most of the webinar was dedicated to a dynamic Q&A session where students interacted with Pentagon speakers, including Sabrina Singh, the deputy press secretary with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs; Alton Buland, the principal director for European and NATO Policy with Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; and Melanie Fonder Kaye, the deputy assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Strategic Engagement.



Students from AFNORTH Middle High School in the Netherlands participate in the webinar with Pentagon leadership.

DoDEA students engaged in discussions on mental health, leadership, crisis management, and the impact of social media. The event was attended by grades 6-12 students from SHAPE American Middle School and SHAPE American High School in Belgium; Albritton Middle School in Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Antilles Middle School in Puerto Rico; Spangdahlem Middle School in Germany; AFNORTH Middle High School in the Netherlands; and Lakenheath Middle School in the United Kingdom.

Gill plans to continue this partnership with Pentagon leaders and expand these learning opportunities to more students throughout DoDEA in the upcoming school year.

“Our students deserve learning experiences that engage them, motivate them, and make them eager to learn more. With continuing this partnership, my hope is students are able to find value in authentic and real-world conversations, building on topics they learned about within our DoDEA classrooms.”

## Student reactions

**Camilla Weyland, grade 7, Spangdahlem Middle School:** “I would love to do this again. It was an interactional, informational opportunity for people to look into their future, and see the reality of important jobs.”

**Emelee Ramos, grade 7, Antilles Middle School:** “This experience was amazing! I would’ve never known in a million years that I would’ve ever talked with the Pentagon Leadership Webinar! I was so excited when Ms. Lopez informed me that I was going to witness a Q&A with the Pentagon. I had an amazing time in this one-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet them and I will hope to do it again in the future.”

Students from Antilles Middle School in Puerto Rico pose for a picture after participating in the webinar with Pentagon leadership.



**Aren Claussen, grade 8, SHAPE American Middle School:** “I think the Pentagon Webinar was an amazing opportunity for me to be able to learn about the way the inside of the Pentagon works. It was also really cool to hear about all the precautions they have for overseas schools like ours. I would love to have an opportunity like this again.”

**Livia Karafili, grade 8, SHAPE American Middle School:** “This unique opportunity made me realize how important it is to have an extended view of an important horizon, such as the Pentagon. The DoDEA and Pentagon Webinar taught me the importance of security and the reason behind each step we take to build a safe future for our community. Thank you for this remarkable opportunity!”

**Henri Main, grade 11, AFNORTH Middle High School:** “The briefing was very informative and interesting to attend. I'm honored I got the chance to spend time with everyone there and to expand my knowledge of how our government works.”