

Ohio will soon allow military children to open enroll in school of their choice

By **Jessie Balmert**
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When Air Force Col. Cassie Barlow moved to Ohio to become the base commander at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, her teenage daughter enrolled in her 10th school in 16 years.

"The first thing I always thought about when we moved was: 'Where is my daughter going to go to school?'" Barlow said.

Barlow's daughter excelled in smaller schools but that wasn't an option for those living on base, so Barlow enrolled her in a private school instead.

A new change in state law, which will take effect on April 9, will allow children of active-duty military parents to enroll in any public school – as long as the district has space for them.

Sen. Kristina Roegner, R-Hudson, championed the changes in Senate Bill 208, which passed with unanimous, bipartisan support. She said the new law is both a tool to recruit military families to Ohio and a way to express gratitude for their service.

"Education is one of the most important things that families care about because it defines the future for their children," Roegner said. "We're hoping that this will make it better for those people who are willing to lay their lives down for our country."

Barlow's daughter has already graduated high school. But she wears another hat as president of the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education focused on workforce development. This bill will help recruiting military families to come and stay in Ohio.

"We are in an incredibly competitive workforce market right now. To be able to have something like this make us much more attractive to military members and to veterans," Barlow said.

How would the change help military families?

Under current law, school districts must decide if they will allow students to enroll from other school districts under any circumstances. If districts allow open enrollment, the option can be limited to surrounding school districts. Soon, schools will make an exception for children in military families.

It's not clear how many students might take advantage of the option. More than 7,300 students from military families were enrolled in Ohio schools during the 2022-2023 academic year, according to a legislative analysis. Many live near Wright-Patterson Air Force Base just east of Dayton or the Defense Supply Center Columbus in Whitehall.

School districts that enroll military children could see a bump in state money while districts that students leave might lose some funding, according to an analysis of the bill's financial impact.

Ohio will join 17 other states that offer open enrollment for children of military families. The change will help military families, whose children change schools up to 10 times before graduation, said Shane Preston, the Great Lakes Region liaison at the U.S. Department of Defense-State Liaison Office.

"Military families are at a disadvantage when it comes to enrollment options available to their children, due to the timing of military-directed moves," Preston told lawmakers.

Roegner introduced the bill to help military children after passing about a dozen laws that allow nurses, physical therapists, counselors, audiologists and other professionals to use their licenses from other states in Ohio. These licensure compacts help anyone considering a move to Ohio, she said.

When deciding where to move, families consider how hard it will be for their spouses to find work and their children to find a school, Roegner said. "Hopefully, this will make it easier."