

This article was previously published in Military Money magazine. Used with permission.

Educators on the Move

By Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer

Wordcount: without reader note: 1297

Army wife Berkeley McHugh got tired of the question, "What can you DO with an English degree?" so she got her teaching certification. Since that decision in 1985, she's found a teaching position every place she has wanted to teach as she moved with the military. Many military spouses have found the field of education a good professional fit with the mobile military life. There is always a demand for teachers and child development specialists both on and off post or base, the teaching schedule offers flexibility that ties in well with family life, and there are many places you can apply teaching skills outside of traditional schools. Of course, that's not to say there aren't challenges as well.

Adopt a Mindset that Opens You Up to Possibilities

As Peggy Frede, Air Force spouse and long-time educator recommends, "Accept jobs that stretch you professionally. Take the opportunity of a forced move to learn and try new techniques and methods." Frede emphasizes, "I am an educator. Notice I didn't say teacher." It's a mindset that opened her to opportunities outside traditional schools, from managing a retraining program at a computer-learning center to teaching technology at a law firm.

Many of the spouses we interviewed pointed to similar flexibility and openness to different venues where they could use their education skills.

- Army wife Sherri Miller's degree in Elementary Education opened doors to positions in Child Development Centers. Starting as an assistant director, she was later promoted to a training and curriculum specialist position. She has taught 3rd grade and kindergarten at other times. When she chose not to pursue fulltime teaching in order to stay home with her first child, another venue opened up. "Word got out that I was a certified teacher and I began getting calls to tutor. I do no advertising, but have enough students to allow me to stay in touch with my teacher side, and to only work a few hours a week."

- When McHugh was going to be at Ft. Sill for only six months, she knew she couldn't teach a full year. Instead, she found a position teaching in the Basic Skills Education Program, helping soldiers prepare for their GT testing.

- Army wife Lindsay Pousson couldn't always get certified quickly enough in her chosen field as she moved with the military since states require social studies teachers to take a course in the state's history. She turned instead to work as an AVID tutor and long-term substitute at a school instead. "As a tutor, I have the flexibility to work reduced hours but the time I do work is spent helping kids, not in piles of paperwork," she adds.

As Marine spouse and long time educator Cydnee Gentry says, "You have to have a lot of flexibility and multiple certifications. As the Marines say, *Semper Gumby, Always Flexible.*"

Network and Stay in Touch with Other Educators

When asked for the best source of positions, the most frequent response was "other teachers." The examples these educators shared involved both formal and informal networking with colleagues.

Gentry has moved 10 times in 15 years with her Marine husband and has been able to find jobs teaching or working with children in some way with every move. She has been a member of the National Educators Association and the National Association of Young Children. "Memberships in professional organizations can help with resource and recertification issues," she says.

McHugh has moved 13 times in 22 years and found work every place she wanted to teach. Asked what resources have been the best for her she points to informal networking. "Really the best thing I did for myself, and I didn't do it knowingly," she says, "was to keep in touch with teachers after I left schools. I have been to Texas twice and to Virginia three times, and each time it was helpful knowing people when I returned."

Army wife Anita Russell has moved seven times in 19 years and found it easy to get work at Child Development Centers as she moved. She considers networking with other folks in Army Child and Youth Services key to her career.

Networking can open up other venues for your skills. Kathie's friend Linda teaches writing at a community college, a position she learned about through a writing friend. Through other teachers at the school, she found out about and was hired on as a contractor with the Films for Humanities project, where teachers are hired to break down each film into teaching objectives of several minutes each. It's work that pays well and can be done at home and on your own schedule. Network with other teachers, and ask them about their career paths. You just might learn about something you would never have thought of that will work for you.

Take Advantage of the Internet to Start Your Job Search Before You Move

"Most school districts have a web site," says Leslie Torres, longtime Army spouse and Special Education teacher. "They will send you preliminary information. In some cases, I did initial interviews over the phone and had appointments lined up before I arrived in town."

The same is true for Child Development Centers. "Most installations have websites with contact numbers for Non-Appropriated Fund and Appropriated Fund Civilian Personnel Offices as well as for Child and Youth Services facilities," says Russell. "You can call or email ahead of your move to let them know you are coming and to send a copy of your resume." Russell also points out that most military child development centers will put you on "leave without pay" when you move, making you an internal rather than an external hire at the new post, which can speed up your hiring.

Additionally, she points out, you can use your “military spouse preference” for the positions.

So What About those Challenges?

The spouses we interviewed pointed out three main challenges to this career.

1. You can't always move up as you move. Especially in school districts, you often get placed lower on the pay scale, not because you are a new teacher but because you are new to the district. A related challenge is that the higher you go, the more challenging it becomes to find a position as you move.
2. You don't stay in a school district long enough to be eligible for retirement, so you need to set aside your own retirement funds.
3. You have to research certification requirements and spend time and money to get certified in each new state. (And Torres cautions, “Be sure to keep your certification current – it's much easier to get certified if you hold a current certification in another state.”)

The Department of Defense hopes to provide help with that third challenge. The new “Spouses to Teachers” program is currently being piloted in six states: California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Texas and Virginia. The program will offer information, counseling, and guidance to teachers as they move, along with limited financial assistance to help defray the costs of meeting state certification requirements. The program will also provide information on available jobs. (Check out www.spousetoteachers.com)

McHugh asked that we point out one big benefit to this lifestyle, something that applies to other career fields as well as teaching. “I think I have had some fabulous opportunities because I moved around and taught at different schools,” she said. “I went back to Texas ten years after I first taught there and many of my former co-workers were still there – teaching the same subject in the same room. I feel I had additional opportunities to grow and be challenged because of my new environments.”

Frede echoes that sentiment. “I have a variety of great experiences that I wouldn't trade for a 30-year career in any school district.”

©2004, Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer

Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer lead workshops and are the authors of *Help! I'm a Military Spouse – I Want a Life Too!*
For more information, go to: militaryspousehelp.com