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Public Military Academies Put Discipline in the Schools

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On one side of the middle school in Philadelphia, students wearing the teenage uniform of baggy jeans and faded T-shirts shout down the locker-lined halls at each other.

On the other side, there is a different uniform: short-sleeved, pale green Army shirts, crisply pressed olive trousers, shiny black shoes and black nametags ending with 08, for the year they expect to graduate.

"Looking sharp," says the principal, Ozzie Wright, a Desert Storm veteran, as the ninth-grade cadets march smartly down the hall, following the barked orders of their classmate, the platoon leader.

This is the Philadelphia Military Academy, set in a wing of Leeds Middle School, in the Mount Airy neighborhood. Started in September, the school, the only public military school in Philadelphia, enrolls 157 ninth graders., and eventually will include grades 9 through 12.

The academy is part of a growing trend, in Philadelphia and other cities, of military schools that are part of the public school system, most of them in low-income areas with black and Hispanic residents. Two more public military academies are scheduled to open in Philadelphia in the next two school years, and student interest is already overwhelming. According to Col. Russell Gallagher, director of Philadelphia's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, some 2,000 applicants have applied for 125 spots for September in the city military academies.

Chicago now has three public Army-oriented high schools with more than 1,600 students, and officials plan to open a public naval academy in September. The city also has eight military academies within regular high schools.

"I'm the biggest fan of small schools everywhere, and the military academy option is very attractive," said Arne Duncan, chief executive officer of the Chicago public schools. "It helps to define a culture, and many students thrive in that culture."

In recent years public and charter military academies have also opened in California, Minnesota, Maryland and Florida, and officials say there is interest elsewhere.

"We get phone calls all the time from schools -- I've had visits from Alabama, Texas, Atlanta," said Col. Rick Mills, director of the Department of Military Schools and the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps for Chicago public schools. "I've even received a call from London."

Current interest in public military schools is a marked contrast to the public's cool attitude toward private military academies, many of them boarding schools, after the Vietnam War. There were more than 270 private military secondary schools and colleges 40 years ago, but there are fewer than 40 today. The decline in the number of private academies has stabilized in recent years, but the growth is occurring in the public sector.

Those gains are fueled by the urgent desire of many parents and students for an orderly, safe academic environment, and by some funds from the Department of Defense.

"Most people take a look at today's political situation -- Iraq and all -- and don't want to come," said Louis Adams, 14, a student at the Philadelphia Military Academy who was hesitant when he first heard about the school. "They don't know this isn't a boot camp but a controlled environment, where you don't worry about the kid next to you pulling a knife on you."

But if supporters look at public military schools in Philadelphia and elsewhere and see islands of stability in chaotic urban seas, critics view them -- and the Pentagon's material support for them -- as little more than a means to market the military to poor and working-class minority children.

Chris Inserra, who is part of a coalition to block the proposed naval academy in Chicago, said in a telephone interview that high school "is not the time to be indoctrinated into the military. "The growth in military academies is an extension of a national trend over the past decade as high schools have become more accepting of a military presence on campus.

Army, Air Force and Navy junior reserve officer training corps programs, in which students take military-oriented classes and wear a uniform at least once a week, have expanded over the last 10 years across the country, from 2,410 a decade ago to 3,189 programs in high schools today, according to a Department of Defense spokeswoman. In contrast, students in military academies wear uniforms every day and are always expected to observe military courtesy, including addressing their teachers with "sir" or "ma'am."

Public military academies are not a completely new idea. Franklin Military School in Richmond, Va., opened in 1980.

It was the Chicago public school system that most fully embraced the concept, and when Paul Vallas, the former chief executive officer for Chicago's schools, moved to head Philadelphia's public school system three years ago, he brought his enthusiasm for the military model.

"The programs teach individuals teamwork and personal responsibility," Mr. Vallas said. "I think it's a very effective character-building experience."

Contrary to popular perception, these military schools are not reform schools. Nor are they merely pipelines to the military, according to school officials. Philadelphia Military Academy,

for example, considers itself a college preparatory school where a student must have a 3.0 grade point average. Some 82 percent of seniors at the Chicago Military Academy, which has 502 students, go on to higher education, although the numbers are lower at the other academies.

Michael McConnell, regional director of the American Friends Service Committee in Chicago, said his organization's research has yet to find statistics that prove that students who go through a military program have better grades or are more likely to go on to college than those who do not.

In addition, Mr. McConnell said, comparisons between small specialty high schools and large comprehensive high schools are misleading.

"If you have small schools and the money to help kids specialize in something, of course that's going to help," he said. "But you have to compare apples to apples."

But officials say students do appear to be highly motivated. They note that at Philadelphia Military Academy, many students live far away but are willing to get up at 5 or 6 a.m. and endure an hour-and-a-half bus ride to get to the school.

"This is a school where people feel safe from violence, from obstructions," said Paul Maiellano, 15. "This is a learning environment."