

Ware Elementary School



The Achiever is now available online as a photo essay, providing a greater focus on how successful schools across the country are working toward the goal of *No Child Left Behind*: to have every student reading and doing math at or above grade level by 2014. The first of these stories highlights how a Kansas elementary school on a military installation, where 65 percent of students transfer each year, has helped virtually all of its children to exceed state standards.

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The Achiever Ware Elementary

Grade span: K-5
Locale: Military Base
Total Students: 613
Race/Ethnicity Enrollment:
60% white, 21% black,

13% Hispanic, 4% Pacific
Islander, 1% Asian,
1% American Indian
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch
Eligible: 72%

English Language Learners: 13%
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Percentage Proficient (based on
AYP results on 2007 state exam):
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When Pvt. Justin Vail and his family were reassigned to Fort Riley—a U.S. Army installation near Junction City, Kan., in Geary County—it was their fourth move in six years. The hardest part about moving frequently, says Brandy Vail, is “uprooting the kids, especially when they have excellent teachers and a great support staff.”



1 of 17 photos ▶

Photo by Mike Burley

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Just a block away from their home is Ware Elementary School, which is part of Geary County School District #475, where 11-year-old Annette, eight-year-old Garrett and five-year-old Grace are enrolled.

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The children served by the school
reflect the racial and ethnic
diversity of the military.

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Ware has closed the achievement gap with 100 percent of students proficient in math and 99.6 percent in reading. Also, Ware has—

- > Exceeded the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for Kansas;
- > Earned a National Blue Ribbon School designation; and
- > Received a Title I Distinguished School Award.

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But just seven years ago, Ware was considered a chronically underperforming school. Principal Deb Gustafson, whose 31-year career in education has covered roles of secretary to administrator, developed a reform plan with the idea in mind that “kids have no time to wait for adults to get their act together. You’re only a third-grader once.”

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Among school reforms implemented in 2001, the class schedule was reorganized to allow:

- > 90 minutes of uninterrupted math instruction;
- > 90 minutes for reading (with an additional 30 minutes for the primary grades);
- > 60 minutes for writing; and
- > 60 minutes for lesson planning.



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To foster collaboration among teachers, Gustafson rearranged the six “pods”—or sections—of the school with lower grades on one side of the building and higher grades on the other.

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In addition:

- > Curricula were tied to state standards;
- > Student progress was measured; and
- > Interventions were provided for struggling students

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Although Ware is challenged by high student turnover (the student mobility rate is 65 percent), students show sustained academic progress. According to Principal Gustafson, "When our students perform well in Kansas, they know they can go anywhere in the nation and perform well."

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In fact, on April 9, Kansas became the first state to approve the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which is intended to ease school transfers for children of military families by making the transfer of records and graduation requirements more uniform from state to state, for instance.

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Education is customized to make sure a new enrollee does not fall through the cracks. An individualized academic plan is created for each student, based on assessments administered the second day after enrollment to identify immediately a student's skill level.

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Ware's children speak nearly 30 different languages. Anna Gfeller, a second-grade teacher, who came to the school right out of college, was attracted by the diversity of the school and the opportunity to work with bilingual students.

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Ware uses a reading plan that
groups students by skill level.

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Principal Gustafson considers the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents and students to be the greatest asset: "We know ... it's all about the human resource," she explains.

"The beauty of Dr. Gustafson is that she truly sees us as a team," says Assistant Principal Jennifer Black. So, "we stay until 6 o'clock almost every night," teacher Kim Lang affirms.



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“A lot of moms and dads are gone, so we kind of serve as role models for the kids,” says Spec. Joshua Haybarker, who is part of bike patrol unit known as “The Bumblebees,” because of the black and yellow uniforms they occasionally wear.

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“The second time I was deployed, they took it a whole lot easier than they did the first time. The adjustment was a whole lot smoother,” says Sgt. LeAndrew Young, believing his children’s transfer to Ware is partly the reason they coped better with his 13-month deployment to Iraq.

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Justin Vail also is impressed by the care that his children have received at Ware. "I never had a school that has gotten actually involved as much as they have with each kid," says the sergeant, who just returned home this past December following a second deployment to Iraq.

[17 of 17 photos](#) ▶



Photo by Mike Burley