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Military Recruiters Get School Directories

Pentagon says it needs to fill the ranks, but critics complain about aggressive sales pitches

By Douglas Holt
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When an Air Force recruiter recently strode out of Evanston Township High School with a student directory, it marked a major turning point for a school that had long resisted handing over the highly coveted information to the military.

The brief exchange last month came only after loud protests from some parents who opposed releasing the directory, a list of roughly 1,000 names, addresses and telephone numbers of juniors and seniors.

But under a little-noticed provision tucked into the No Child Left Behind Act--the sweeping education-reform law designed to identify and overhaul failing schools--school administrators had little choice. The law gives the military unprecedented access to all high school directories of upperclassmen--a mother lode of information used for mass-mailing recruiting appeals and telephone solicitations.

"You can touch a person that may not have known we were out there," said Air Force Sgt. Derrick Russ, who recruits in the Chicago area.

Before the law took effect last July, 12 percent of the nation's public high schools--some 2,500, including Evanston--denied the military access to student databases, according to the Pentagon. Now, only six high schools are holding out, said a spokeswoman, who declined to identify the schools.

School districts in the Chicago area are dealing with the law in distinctly different ways--particularly in how aggressively they have informed parents of its provisions. Some have done little to tell parents of their legal right to have their children's names withheld from recruiters.

No questions asked

For example, at Naperville District 203, Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire and Elgin-based Unit School District 46, officials stressed they have long provided the lists to the military, no questions asked. Parental notification often has amounted to a brief mention in newsletters and a disclosure statement included among student registration papers.

It's a different story at Evanston, where high school officials repeatedly informed parents of their rights. Responding to complaints, the district even extended the deadline for parents to have their children's names removed from the list. Nearly one-third of them, 491, did so at the school, which has 1,509 juniors and seniors.

Similarly, parents at Lake Forest and New Trier High Schools can choose to have the information withheld from the military, but turned over to colleges and universities.

Driving the provision was the concern that federally funded schools have an obligation to cooperate with the armed forces and provide students with information on military careers, said U.S. Rep. David Vitter (R-La.), who sponsored the recruiting amendment to the No Child Left Behind Act.

"I think it's a disservice to the country and the military to shut down access to qualified young kids who may be very interested in military service," said Vitter, who was concerned some high schools had slammed the door shut on recruiters.

The law is designed to help the nation maintain an all-volunteer military force that requires nearly 210,000 young people to enter full-time service annually, with 150,000 more joining the reserves or National Guard.

Over the last decade, the cost of recruiting nearly doubled from \$6,500 to \$11,600 a recruit as an increasing percentage of high school graduates opted for college and as unemployment rates were relatively low, defense officials said.

The issue of military recruiting has provoked little discussion at many Chicago-area schools.

Patriotism cited in Elgin

Elgin District 46 spokesman Larry Ascough ridiculed schools that take issue with providing student directories.

"I could never imagine this being a controversy here," he said. "This town, they're very patriotic."

Stevenson High School put a two-paragraph item in its "Minuteman" newsletter last January noting the law. "While this has been an unusual development for some schools, it is not for Stevenson. The school has willingly provided names and addresses [but not phone numbers] to the armed forces for more than two decades," the notice said.

In the Chicago Public Schools system--home to 99,000 high school students--only 17 parents have opted to have their children's names removed from recruiting lists, said spokeswoman Joi Mecks. Parents were notified of the law in a school newsletter, a memo

to parents and on the district's Web site, she said.

"They may have received information and didn't pay attention to it," she said. "Or it may be a non-issue."

The law also applies to private schools that get federal funds, such as the prestigious Chicago Latin School, which received about \$40,000 in federal money last year. But so far, military recruiters have evinced little interest in the school, officials said.

"In the last six years, we've never received a request of information from a military recruiter," spokeswoman Evelyne Girardet said. "It's a little embarrassing."

Concerned about the law's impact, some educators complain recruiters oversell the military's benefits, downplay the risks, use dogged sales tactics and prey on poor students.

"I think they glorify the military," said Marilyn Madden, Evanston Township High School's director of pupil personnel services, who opposes turning over student lists. "I don't think it's a good idea. I think it's more kids of color who feel like this is the only way to go to college. They may not make it to college if there's going to be a war."

Some educators say they've seen too many students come away feeling misled. Students have been told they could train as pilots or nuclear engineers, only to learn after enlisting that they don't qualify, said Michael Johnson, executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards.

Recruiters also have come under fire for unscrupulous tactics.

About 50 recruiters in the Navy's Chicago district faced disciplinary action in 2001 after an investigation found they falsified records to qualify recruits who didn't meet education requirements.

Completing medical forms

Two recent recruits interviewed by the Tribune said they were urged to answer "no" to potentially disqualifying medical questions when they reported for military physicals.

Evanston resident William Hicks, 18, said recruiters in Virginia, where he lived until this year, gave him a practice medical questionnaire "so you know what to put on the paper."

Waukegan resident Ari Soto, 19, said, "The recruiters actually told me to say 'no' to everything."

On her military entrance physical, she said she concealed that she had been hospitalized for a dislocated knee and had chickenpox twice. She also didn't mention a slight case of asthma, she said.

Bill Kelo, spokesman for the Army's Chicago recruiting effort, declined to comment on Soto's allegations.

Soto also learned firsthand another concern voiced by educators: It's hard to change your mind after an initial commitment.

She signed up for the Delayed Entry Program, which allows recruits as young as 17 to agree to join the military within one year.

Soto broke her agreement with the military, which wasn't legally binding, and had a baby girl in January. But not before recruiters repeatedly called her, requesting that she submit to a physical to prove she was pregnant, she said.

The experience left her embittered. "I think they sugarcoated everything and told lies just to get you to sign up," she said.

Though declining to speak about any specific recruit, Kelo stressed that high school students who commit to the all-volunteer armed forces but change their plans typically can get out of it. In most cases, all it takes is a letter, he said.

"It doesn't serve our purposes to do anything to put people in the services who don't want to be there," he said.

Dickell Fonda, an Evanston Township High School parent, said a Navy recruiter called on the telephone last winter and asked to talk to her 17-year-old son.

Angered by phone call

"They asked him what he wanted to do after high school," Fonda said. "He said he was planning on going to college. The recruiter said very clearly to him, 'Now, do you really think your parents are going to pay for that?'"

Fonda said the exchange left her so enraged that she went to a Navy recruiting station and had them delete her son's name from their computer.

"We're in a mode of war without end, I'm afraid, so it's a pertinent issue," she said. "It's a dangerous time for children to be making these choices."

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