

Highlights of [GAO-10-32](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

State and local governments spend billions of dollars annually on the construction, renovation, and maintenance of public school facilities, yet concerns persist about the condition of some school facilities, particularly in school districts serving students residing on Indian lands. The Department of Education’s (Education) Impact Aid Program provides funding to school districts that are adversely impacted by a lack of local revenue because of the presence of federal land, which is exempt from local property taxes. Impact Aid can be used for school expenses, such as facilities and teacher salaries.

In response to concern about school facility conditions and concern that these conditions can affect student outcomes, GAO was asked to describe (1) the physical condition of schools in districts receiving Impact Aid because of students residing on Indian lands and (2) what is known about how school facilities affect student outcomes. GAO interviewed federal, state, and local officials; analyzed available independent school facility assessment data for three states; visited eight school districts that receive Impact Aid; and analyzed studies examining the relationship between school facilities and student outcomes.

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. Education provided technical clarifications, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

[View GAO-10-32 or key components.](#) For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

SCHOOL FACILITIES

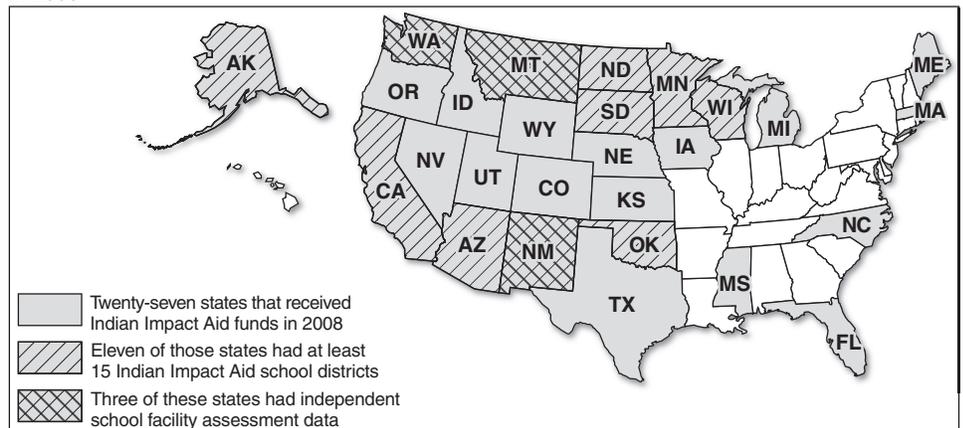
Physical Conditions in School Districts Receiving Impact Aid for Students Residing on Indian Lands

What GAO Found

Limited nationwide data are available about the physical condition of public school facilities in school districts that receive Impact Aid funding for students living on Indian lands, although data from three states indicate the conditions range from good to poor. Montana’s assessment data showed that the majority (39 of 60) of Indian Impact Aid school districts had facilities in good condition. New Mexico’s data showed that all 19 Indian Impact Aid school districts had facilities in either good or fair condition. Washington’s data—based on assessments from 9 of 29 Indian Impact Aid school districts—indicated about half (4 of 9) of the Indian Impact Aid school districts had facilities in fair condition and about half (5 of 9) had facilities in poor condition. Facility assessments are not comparable across states. School district officials from 8 districts told GAO their facility conditions are affected by factors such as fiscal capacity, the age of buildings, and remote locations.

The research studies GAO reviewed on the relationship between the condition of school facilities and student outcomes often indicated that better facilities were associated with better student outcomes, but there is not necessarily a direct causal relationship and the associations were often weak compared with those of other factors, such as the prevalence of poverty or other student characteristics. A majority of the studies GAO reviewed indicated that better school facilities were associated with better student outcomes—such as higher scores on achievement tests or higher student attendance rates. Most of the studies measured the extent to which better school facilities were associated with better outcomes, after taking into account the impact of other factors. None of the studies examined was able to conclusively determine how much school facility conditions contribute to student outcomes relative to other factors, such as student demographics, and none proved a causal relationship between school facilities and student outcomes.

States with School Districts That Received Impact Aid for Students Residing on Indian Lands in 2008



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data.