



Highlights of [GAO-09-955](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Proficiency in foreign languages is a key skill for U.S. diplomats to advance U.S. interests overseas. GAO has issued several reports highlighting the Department of State's (State) persistent foreign language shortages. In 2006, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to improve the language proficiency of its staff. State responded by providing examples of activities it believed addressed our recommendation. In this report, which updates the 2006 report, GAO (1) examined the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfall, (2) assessed State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and described the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assessed the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements. GAO analyzed data on State's overseas language-designated positions; reviewed strategic planning and budgetary documents; interviewed State officials; and conducted fieldwork in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey.

What GAO Recommends

To address State's persistent foreign language shortfalls, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, strategic plan that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. State generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-955](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

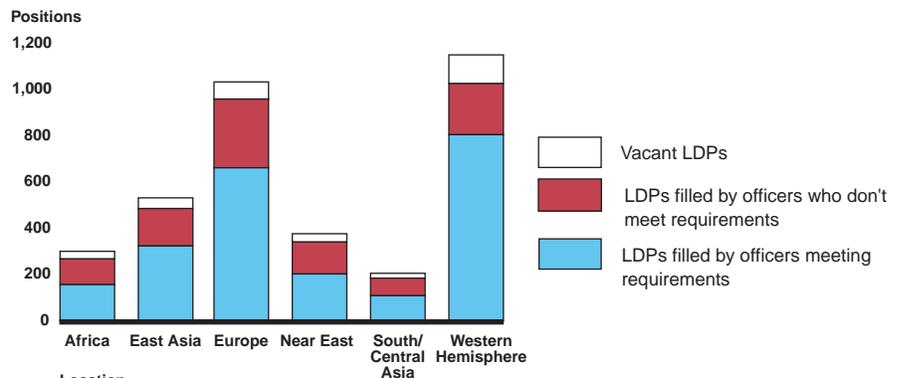
Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls

What GAO Found

As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of Foreign Service officers in overseas language-designated positions (LDP) did not meet both the foreign languages speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions. State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in regions of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in LDPs did not meet requirements. Despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in critical languages, shortfalls in supercritical languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent. Past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, and others have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. activities overseas. Overseas fieldwork for this report reaffirmed this conclusion.

State's approach to meeting its foreign language requirements includes an annual review of all LDPs, language training, recruitment of language-proficient staff, and pay incentives for language skills. For example, State trains staff in about 70 languages in Washington and overseas, and has reported a training success rate of 86 percent. Moreover, State offers bonus points for language-proficient applicants who have passed the Foreign Service exam and has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004. However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, a primary challenge is overall staffing shortages, which limit the number of staff available for language training, as well as the recent increase in LDPs.

State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements have yielded some results but have not closed persistent gaps and reflect, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach. State officials have said that the department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these needs; however these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, or milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. Because these gaps have persisted over several years despite staffing increases, we believe that a more comprehensive, strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide its efforts and assess its progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.



Source: GAO analysis of State data.