

Why GAO Did This Study

Regional airlines have experienced the last six fatal commercial airline accidents, and pilot performance has been cited as a potential contributory factor in four of these accidents. As a result, Congress and others have raised questions about, among other issues, the initial pilot education and training required before pilots can be hired by airlines, at which time they receive further training. The initial training is provided by pilot schools overseen by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

As requested, this report discusses (1) the various types of U.S. pilot schools, how they compare, and associated issues; (2) key similarities and differences between the U.S. and international approaches to pilot training; and (3) how and to what extent FAA carries out oversight of pilot training and certification. To address these issues, GAO reviewed literature, legislation, regulations, and FAA documents and inspection and enforcement data; interviewed agency and industry officials; and studied the training approach in Europe because of the different training model and visited four European countries.

What GAO Recommends

To improve oversight of pilot certification, GAO recommends that FAA develop a comprehensive system to (1) measure its performance in meeting the agency's annual inspection requirements for pilot schools and pilot examiners and (2) better understanding the nature and scope of discretionary inspections for flight instructors. FAA generally agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-12-117](#). For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

INITIAL PILOT TRAINING

Better Management Controls Are Needed to Improve FAA Oversight

What GAO Found

The approximately 3,400 pilot schools in the United States can be divided into three types: (1) flight instructor based, (2) vocational, and (3) collegiate. The school types vary in several ways, but all pilot students must pass the same knowledge and flight tests to obtain a pilot certificate from FAA. Airline operations have evolved operationally and technologically, but the pilot training requirements for certification of commercial pilots were last revised in 1997. FAA and some industry stakeholders have indicated that current requirements for commercial pilots should incorporate additional training to improve the competency of entry-level regional airline pilots. FAA has initiated or planned a number of efforts to address these issues and recently enacted legislation requires FAA to implement regulations to increase pilot requirements for airlines by August 2013.

Example of a Single- and Multi-Engine Training and a Regional Airline Jet



Sources: Cessna (single-engine trainer), Piper (multi-engine trainer), and Bombardier (regional jet).

The U.S. and Europe both offer the same pilot certifications but the training models differ, in part, due to training philosophies and other circumstances. The U.S. training approach emphasizes proficiency on actual flight training, while Europe's approach tends to emphasize academic instruction with more knowledge training requirements and testing. European pilot schools have also developed more comprehensive student screening processes than in the U.S.

FAA has an annual inspection program that includes the oversight of pilot schools, pilot examiners, and flight instructors, the gatekeepers for the initial pilot training process. GAO analysis of FAA inspection data showed a 78 percent completion rate of the required inspections for pilot schools in fiscal year 2010, but, due to insufficient information, GAO was unable to determine completion percentages for prior years. Similarly, GAO could not determine 1) whether FAA completed the required inspections for pilot examiners or 2) the reasons that the discretionary inspections of flight instructors—which are generally optional—were conducted. Furthermore, FAA's national office does not adequately monitor the completion of annual inspection activities due, in part, to an inability to aggregate inspection data from the local district offices that conduct the inspections. Thus, FAA does not have a comprehensive system in place to adequately measure its performance in meeting annual inspection requirements, which could make it difficult to ensure regulatory compliance and that safety standards are being met.