

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-144](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The 2012 school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut and the 2013 tornado in Moore, Oklahoma stress the need for schools to prepare for emergencies to help protect the 50 million students in K-12 public schools. In 2007, GAO found that most districts developed emergency operations plans and GAO made recommendations to improve school emergency planning. In 2013, the President directed Education, DHS, HHS, and Justice to help schools with their plans. GAO was asked to report on these efforts.

This report examines (1) how federal agencies support school emergency management planning and the extent to which they coordinate efforts; (2) the extent to which states require and support efforts to plan for school emergencies; and (3) what districts have done to plan and prepare for school emergencies and challenges faced. GAO interviewed federal officials and surveyed relevant state agencies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. GAO also surveyed a generalizable random sample of 573 districts (70 percent response rate), and visited 5 districts and 12 schools in 3 states selected to reflect diverse locations and characteristics.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education convene its federal interagency partners to develop a strategic approach to interagency collaboration on school emergency preparedness, consistent with leading practices. Education agreed that such improved federal coordination will better assist schools in preparing for emergencies.

View [GAO-16-144](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (202) 512-7215 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

March 2016

## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

### Improved Federal Coordination Could Better Assist K-12 Schools Prepare for Emergencies

## What GAO Found

The Departments of Education (Education), Health and Human Services (HHS), Homeland Security (DHS), and Justice (Justice) support K-12 schools in preparing for emergencies with various resources, including training, technical assistance, and funding, but their efforts are not strategically coordinated. Since jointly issuing a *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* in 2013 in response to a presidential plan, individual agencies have continued to work on a range of emergency preparedness initiatives, sometimes collaboratively; however, with the guide completed and no strategic coordination of agency efforts particular to schools, federal agencies have taken a piecemeal approach to their efforts. GAO found gaps in coordination that suggest recent efforts are insufficient: not all relevant agencies and officials are included in collaborative efforts or are aware of related efforts and resources, and agencies are offering different interpretations of the same federal guidance—all of which risks wasting limited federal resources on duplicative, overlapping, or fragmented efforts. Education officials said that although agencies discussed the need to continue coordinating following the guide, the presidential plan did not designate a lead agency going forward, nor give any agency direct authority or responsibility over an interagency effort, or require agency participation. However, these officials said Education has general authority to collaborate with other federal agencies to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of its programs and to serve as the lead agency, where warranted and agreed upon. Leading practices on federal interagency collaboration include identifying leadership, relevant participants, and resources, and agreeing on outcomes. Absent a well-coordinated effort, agencies will continue to determine their priorities individually, which may hinder assistance to schools.

In GAO's survey of 51 state educational agencies, 32 states reported that they require districts to have emergency operations plans, 34 reported they require schools to have plans, and almost all states reported providing training, technical assistance, or guidance to support districts in developing or implementing plans. GAO's survey also found that 32 states reported requiring districts to conduct emergency exercises, such as drills, and 40 states reported requiring individual schools to do so. In addition, many states reported allowing districts and schools to determine specific plan content, with fewer than half reporting that they required districts or states to review district or school plans.

GAO's generalizable survey of school districts estimates that most districts updated and practiced their emergency operations plans with first responders, but struggled to balance emergency planning with other priorities. GAO's survey results also found that most districts had plans addressing multiple hazards and emergency procedures, such as evacuation. However, GAO estimates about half of districts included procedures on continuing operations or recovering after an incident. GAO also found most districts conducted emergency exercises, such as fire drills, and about half did so annually with police and fire department officials. However, an estimated 59 percent of districts had difficulty balancing emergency planning with higher priorities, such as classroom instruction time.