

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-43](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, almost all school districts rapidly shifted to distance learning in spring of the 2019-2020 school year. This shift laid bare both the logistical and instructional challenges of distance learning, particularly for English learners and students with disabilities, both of whom have faced persistent achievement gaps.

This work was conducted as part of GAO's COVID-19 monitoring and oversight responsibilities under the CARES Act. It examines what is known about the challenges of and lessons learned from providing distance learning to English learners and students with disabilities during school building closures in spring 2020.

GAO reviewed distance learning plans from a nongeneralizable group of 15 school districts, selected for their high proportion of either English learners or students with disabilities. GAO also interviewed district officials in four of these 15 districts, selected based on the districts' detailed plans for distance learning for either group of students; interviewed advocates, researchers, and representatives of associations of school administrators and related service providers; reviewed relevant federal laws including IDEA, regulations, and guidance; and interviewed federal officials.

View [GAO-21-43](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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DISTANCE LEARNING

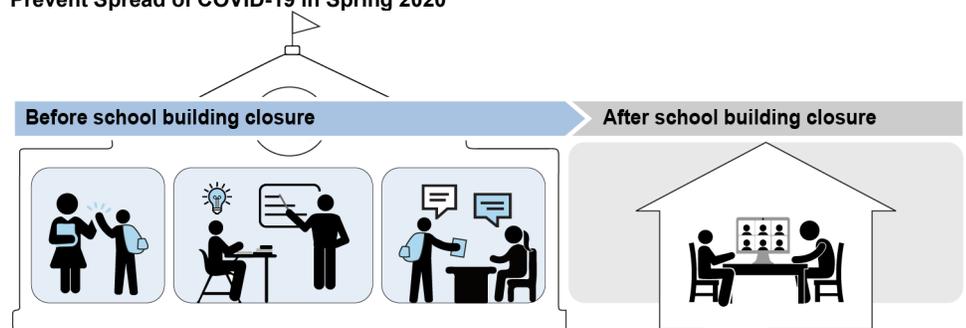
Challenges Providing Services to K-12 English Learners and Students with Disabilities during COVID-19

What GAO Found

Some English learners and their families had difficulty fully participating in distance learning during spring 2020 due to a lack of necessary technology, language barriers, and the demands of meeting basic family needs. English learners lost opportunities to practice their language skills, according to school district officials and representatives of professional associations. Also, limited English comprehension affected the ability of families to assist students with the curriculum, according to representatives of professional associations and a technical assistance center. Stakeholders also told GAO that some school districts addressed aspects of these challenges by, for example, increasing access to the internet and devices and adapting materials and instructional methods. One school district partnered with a Spanish language TV network to broadcast curriculum for an hour every day. However, many of the major challenges with engaging English learners in distance education remained. For example, one district mailed home a workbook in both English and Spanish to help students access online learning, but this did not address the needs of students who speak one of the other approximately 90 languages in the district.

Similarly, a variety of factors complicated the delivery of special education services during distance learning, according to officials from the four districts selected by GAO and representatives of national organizations of school administrators and service providers. Such factors included: the wide range of needs of students with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA); the services specified in their individualized education programs; and the capacity of parents or caregivers to assist teachers and service providers in delivering general education, specialized instruction, and related services to their children. Delivering related services—such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech therapy—for students with complex needs was particularly difficult to do remotely. School district officials we spoke with said they successfully addressed some challenges by modifying instruction, holding virtual meetings with parents, and encouraging collaboration between general and special education teachers. For example, some districts altered students' goals and services in temporary distance learning plans. Officials from two districts told us they are considering using virtual meetings after returning to in-person education and would use them, as warranted, during future school closures.

Delivery of K-12 Special Education Services before and after School Buildings Closed to Prevent Spread of COVID-19 in Spring 2020



Source: GAO analysis of interviews. | GAO-21-43