

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD operates a worldwide school system to meet the educational needs of military dependents. Questions have arisen about whether DOD is meeting the special needs of some of these children, such as those with learning disabilities. In response to a mandate in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011, GAO reviewed (1) how DOD provides special education services; (2) how DOD entities coordinate to assign families overseas and how schools might be affected; (3) what challenges, if any, families face in accessing DOD services for their children with special educational needs and obtaining related information; and (4) what steps, if any, DOD is taking to enhance screening and overseas assignment for families with children with special educational needs. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, analyzed DOD documents and data, and conducted interviews with officials from multiple DOD entities, including schools. GAO also held 22 focus groups with parents of children with special needs during site visits and phone interviews at eight military installations worldwide.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense (1) ensure the military branches medically and educationally screen all school-age children before relocation overseas; (2) direct OSN to establish benchmarks and performance goals for the EFM program; and (3) direct OSN to develop and implement a process for ensuring the branches' compliance with EFM program requirements. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-12-680](#). For more information, contact George Scott at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov.

MILITARY DEPENDENT STUDENTS

Better Oversight Needed to Improve Services for Children with Special Needs

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) provides special education services through a complex system that varies by location. Domestically, DOD provides special education mainly within DOD schools. In contrast, DOD schools overseas vary in the types and levels of disabilities they are readily equipped to serve. For example, DOD schools in Ramstein, Germany, are equipped to serve children with severe disabilities of any type, whereas schools in some other overseas installations have no pre-established special education programs of any kind.

Overseas assignment of servicemembers with children with special educational needs requires coordination between the military branches through their Exceptional Family Member (EFM) programs and the DOD Education Activity—the office that oversees education of military dependent children in DOD schools. Each branch implements its own processes for screening military families and assigning servicemembers to locations where there are school services that can meet their families' needs. However, impediments to effective placements may strain school resources. More specifically, ineffective screenings may result in families being placed in locations where schools are not readily equipped to serve certain needs. For example, we found one case in which a school that only had programs in place for students with mild disabilities received a student with severe needs who had not been educationally screened.

Families in many of GAO's focus groups were generally satisfied with the services DOD provided their children with special needs once they received them, but they felt that the limited availability of special education and medical specialists overseas presented challenges. Some parents were concerned their children were not receiving all the services they needed, partly due to difficulties DOD schools encounter hiring and retaining special education staff, especially overseas. While the military branches provide family support services, parents in our focus groups also indicated they lacked information about obtaining special education and related medical services. DOD is taking some steps to provide better information to families, but the extent to which these efforts are helping them is unclear.

DOD's recently established Office of Special Needs (OSN) is responsible for enhancing and monitoring support for military families with special needs. OSN and the military branches have initiated efforts to improve screening and overseas assignment of military families with special needs. However, it is unclear when some of these efforts will be completed. Moreover, while OSN was established in part to enhance and monitor the military branches' support for families with special needs, it has limited enforcement authority and oversight over the branches' EFM programs. Specifically, it is limited in the extent to which it can compel the branches to comply with DOD or service-level program requirements, and it has no direct means by which to hold them accountable if they fail to do so. In addition, DOD currently lacks agencywide benchmarks and performance goals for all components of the EFM program. As a result, it cannot assess the effectiveness of the branches' EFM programs and ensure that improvements are made when needed. Without overall performance information to proactively identify emerging problem areas, some of the branches have had to conduct investigations to address problems after they have arisen.