

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-432](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Education's Promise Neighborhoods program is a competitive grant program with goals to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children in distressed neighborhoods. The grants fund community-based organizations' efforts to work with local partners to develop and evaluate a cradle-to-career continuum of services in a designated geographic footprint. As it is one of several federal programs using this model GAO was asked to review the program.

This report examines: (1) the extent to which Education's strategy for awarding grants aligns with program goals; (2) how Education aligns Promise Neighborhoods efforts with other related programs; (3) how Education evaluates grantees' efforts; and (4) the extent to which grants have enabled collaboration at the local level, and the results of such collaboration.

GAO reviewed *Federal Register* notices, applications, and guidance; surveyed all 48 grantees on the application process, coordination of resources, collaboration, and early results; visited 11 grantees selected based on geography and grant type; and interviewed Education officials and technical assistance providers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education communicate grant expectations more clearly, identify federal resources that can contribute to the program's goals, and develop a strategy for evaluation. In commenting on a draft of this report, Education outlined the steps it will take to respond to recommendations.

View [GAO-14-432](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at 617-788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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EDUCATION GRANTS

Promise Neighborhoods Promotes Collaboration but Needs National Evaluation Plan

What GAO Found

The Department of Education (Education) used a two-phase strategy for awarding Promise Neighborhoods (Promise) grants, and aligned grant activities with program goals. Education awarded 1-year planning grants to organizations with the potential to effectively align services for students in their respective neighborhoods. Planning grants were generally intended to enhance the grantees' capacity to plan a continuum of services. Through a separate competition, Education awarded 5-year implementation grants to organizations that demonstrated they were most ready to implement their plans. However, Education did not communicate clearly to grantees about its expectations for the planning grants and the likelihood of receiving implementation grants. As a result, some grantees experienced challenges sustaining momentum in the absence or delay of implementation grant funding.

The Promise program coordinates with related federal efforts primarily through a White House initiative that brings together neighborhood grant programs at five federal agencies. The Promise program's efforts are focused on ensuring that grants are mutually reinforcing by aligning goals, developing common performance measures, and sharing technical assistance resources. While Promise grantees incorporate a wide range of federal programs in their local strategies, Education coordinates with a more limited number of federal programs. Officials told us that they do this to avoid spreading program resources too thin. Further, Education did not develop an inventory of the federal programs that share Promise goals, a practice that could assist grantees; help officials make decisions about interagency coordination; and identify potential fragmentation, overlap, and duplication.

Education requires Promise grantees to develop information systems and collect extensive data, but it has not developed plans to evaluate the program. Specifically, implementation grantees must collect data on individuals they serve, services they provide, and related outcomes and report annually on multiple indicators. However, Education stated it must conduct a systematic examination of the reliability and validity of the data to determine whether it will be able to use the data for an evaluation. Absent an evaluation, Education cannot determine the viability and effectiveness of the Promise program's approach.

The Promise grant enabled grantees and their partners to collaborate in ways that align with leading practices GAO previously identified for enhancing collaboration among interagency groups including establishing common outcomes, leveraging resources, and tracking performance. For example, Education required grantees to work with partners to develop common goals and a plan to use existing and new resources to meet identified needs in target areas. Grantees were also required to leverage resources by committing funding from multiple sources. Implementation grantees were required to collect and use data to track performance. Some planning grantees used a leading collaborative strategy not required by Education that produced early benefits. For example, several grantees and partners told us they completed easily achievable projects during the planning year to help build momentum and trust. Grantees told us that collaboration yielded benefits, including deeper relationships with partners, such as schools, as well as the ability to attract additional funding. However, grantees also said they faced some challenges collaborating with partners, particularly in overcoming privacy concerns related to data collection.