

Why GAO Did This Study

No federal law requires testing of drinking water for lead in schools that receive water from public water systems, although these systems are regulated by the EPA. Lead can leach into water from plumbing materials inside a school. The discovery of toxic levels of lead in water in Flint, Michigan, in 2015 has renewed awareness about the danger lead exposure poses to public health, especially for children.

GAO was asked to review school practices for lead testing and remediation. This report examines the extent to which (1) school districts are testing for, finding, and remediating lead in drinking water; (2) states are supporting these efforts; and (3) federal agencies are supporting state and school district efforts. GAO administered a web-based survey to a stratified, random sample of 549 school districts, the results of which are generalizable to all school districts. GAO visited or interviewed officials with 17 school districts with experience in lead testing, spread among 5 states, selected for geographic variation. GAO also interviewed federal and state officials and reviewed relevant laws and documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that EPA update its guidance on how schools should determine lead levels requiring action and for EPA and Education to collaborate to further disseminate guidance and encourage testing for lead. EPA and Education agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-382](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov or J. Alfredo Gomez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

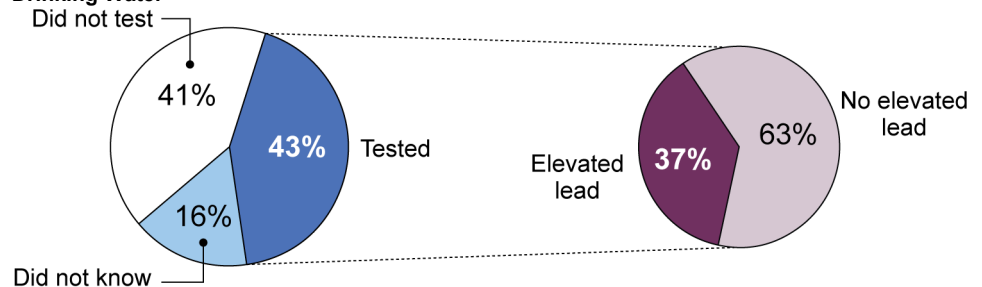
K-12 EDUCATION

Lead Testing of School Drinking Water Would Benefit from Improved Federal Guidance

What GAO Found

An estimated 43 percent of school districts, serving 35 million students, tested for lead in school drinking water in 2016 or 2017, according to GAO's nationwide survey of school districts. An estimated 41 percent of school districts, serving 12 million students, had not tested for lead. GAO's survey showed that, among school districts that did test, an estimated 37 percent found elevated lead (lead at levels above their selected threshold for taking remedial action.) (See figure.) All school districts that found elevated lead in drinking water reported taking steps to reduce or eliminate exposure to lead, including replacing water fountains, installing filters or new fixtures, or providing bottled water.

Estimated Percentage of Public School Districts Reporting Lead Testing and Results for Drinking Water



Source: GAO survey of public school districts. | GAO-18-382

Note: GAO's survey was administered from July to October 2017 and asked school districts to report information based on the 12 months prior to their completing the survey. Testing estimates have a plus or minus 7 percent margin of error; elevated lead estimates have a plus or minus 10 percent margin of error at a 95 percent confidence level. Elevated lead refers to levels of lead above the school district's threshold for taking remedial action.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), at least 8 states have requirements that schools test for lead in drinking water as of 2017, and at least 13 additional states supported school districts' voluntary efforts with funding or in-kind support for testing and remediation. In addition, the five states GAO visited provided examples of technical assistance to support testing in schools.

EPA provides guidance and other resources to states and school districts regarding testing and remediating lead in drinking water, and the Department of Education (Education) provides some of this information on its websites. School district officials that used EPA's written guidance said they generally found it helpful. Although EPA guidance emphasizes the importance of addressing elevated lead levels, GAO found that some aspects of the guidance, such as the threshold for taking remedial action, were potentially misleading and unclear, which can put school districts at risk of making uninformed decisions. In addition, many school districts reported a lack of familiarity with EPA's guidance, and their familiarity varied by region of the country. Education and EPA do not regularly collaborate to support state and school district efforts on lead in drinking water, despite agreeing to do so in a 2005 memorandum of understanding. Such collaboration could encourage testing and ensure that more school districts will have the necessary information to limit student and staff exposure to lead.