

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-297](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

As of March 2018, more than 1.2 million foreign students in the United States were enrolled in 8,774 schools certified by SEVP. ICE is responsible for managing SEVP, which certifies schools to enroll foreign students. Various ICE offices have a role in preventing, detecting, and responding to potential fraud in the program. GAO was asked to review potential vulnerabilities to fraud in SEVP. GAO examined, among other things, the extent to which ICE (1) implemented controls to address fraud risks in the school certification and recertification processes and (2) implemented fraud risk controls related to DSO training.

GAO analyzed ICE policies and documentation, including fraud risk guidance and procedures for school certification and recertification; analyzed 2013 through 2017 recertification data; and interviewed officials from five ICE field offices that GAO selected based on their experience investigating program fraud. GAO also interviewed officials from 17 selected schools located near these ICE field offices. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in November 2018. Information that DHS deemed sensitive has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that ICE (1) notify schools 180 days prior to the 2-year certification expiration date, as required, and evaluate whether additional resources for recertification are needed, and (2) develop a plan to implement fraud-specific training for DSOs. ICE concurred with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-297](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Shea at (202) 512-6722 or shear@gao.gov, or Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

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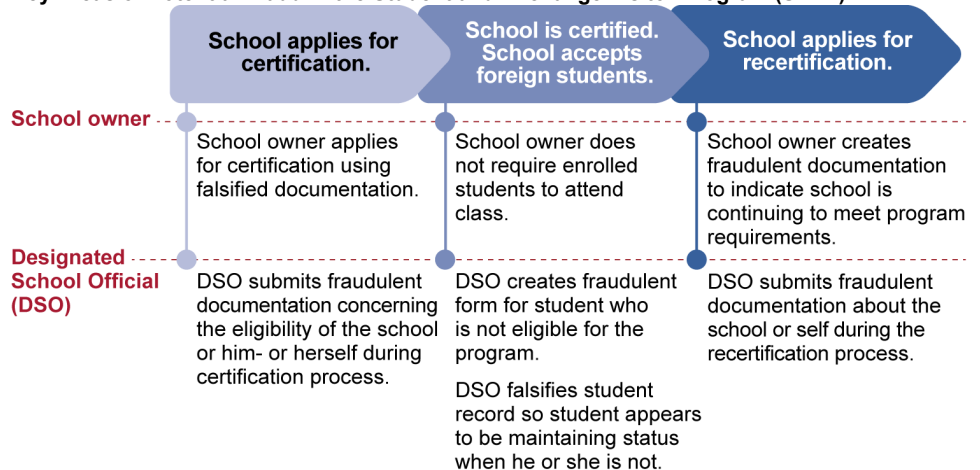
STUDENT AND EXCHANGE VISITOR PROGRAM

DHS Can Take Additional Steps to Manage Fraud Risks Related to School Recertification and Program Oversight

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has identified several fraud risks to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). As shown in the figure below, these include risks associated with school owners and designated school officials (DSO) who help ICE oversee students in the program. These fraud risks may occur as schools apply to become SEVP-certified, accept foreign students, and apply for recertification every 2 years.

Key Areas of Potential Fraud in the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)



Source: GAO analysis of SEVP information. | GAO-19-297

ICE has implemented controls to address fraud risks related to school certification, but long-standing delays in recertifying these schools exacerbate fraud risks. By statute and regulation, ICE must conduct recertification reviews every 2 years to ensure that schools continue to meet program requirements—an important fraud risk control. Between 2013 and 2017, ICE recertified about 12,900 schools. However, according to ICE officials, they have been unable to meet the 2-year time frame and, as of June 2018, had 3,281 recertification petitions waiting for review. To help manage its queue, ICE has lengthened the period between recertification reviews by extending schools' certification expiration dates by 180 days, which is inconsistent with its regulation and may allow fraudulent schools to operate longer without detection. Although ICE is taking steps to increase resources for recertification, it is unclear whether these steps will ensure recertification is conducted consistently with ICE regulations.

ICE relies on DSOs to, among other things, update and maintain foreign-student data in ICE's foreign-student information system and report suspected fraud to ICE. However, ICE does not provide DSOs with training that addresses fraud risks to the program. In June 2018, ICE officials stated that they plan to develop this fraud training for DSOs, but do not have documented plans or timelines for when it would be completed. By developing these plans, the agency would be better positioned to ensure that DSOs receive the training needed to address potential fraud in the program.