

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106264](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

During school year 2021–22, around 7.3 million children ages 3 through 21 received special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act is the primary federal special education law for children and youth with disabilities. Last reauthorized in 2004, IDEA was enacted to ensure access to a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. One of IDEA’s stated purposes is to assess, and ensure the effectiveness of, efforts to educate children with disabilities.

GAO was asked to review obstacles to providing special education and how the distribution of resources for educating students with disabilities varies across states and school districts. This report addresses obstacles to educating students with disabilities and efforts to mitigate those obstacles, as well the availability of resources for special education.

GAO visited states and school districts selected based on experts’ recommendations of states with notable strategies for providing special education. GAO interviewed Education officials and analyzed the most recent available national data on special education resources and expenditures.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that Congress consider granting Education authority to collect school- and district-level data, where feasible, on special education and related resources.

View [GAO-24-106264](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline Nowicki at (202) 512-7215 or nowickij@gao.gov

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

Education Needs School- and District-Level Data to Fully Assess Resources Available to Students with Disabilities

What GAO Found

All 32 entities GAO visited—including 16 school districts, four state educational agencies, and 12 special education organizations across four states—said personnel shortages were a key obstacle to educating students with disabilities. This is consistent with GAO’s 2022 work on teacher shortages, which showed a nationwide shortage of special education teachers. Other obstacles cited by officials in most districts were insufficient time for professional development, challenges communicating with parents, and insufficient collaboration between general and special education staff. The snowball effect of these obstacles may result in some students not receiving needed education and services (see figure). Officials said some students do not receive high-quality education, some receive delayed services, and some do not receive services at all. State and school district officials described strategies to mitigate these obstacles, including mentorship programs and ways to grow the teacher pipeline.

Snowball Effect of Reported Obstacles to Educating Students with Disabilities



Source: GAO analysis of interviews and supporting documentation. GAO (background); stock.adobe.com (icons). | GAO-24-106264

Department of Education data showed that many students with disabilities attend schools without key personnel. In the 2021–22 school year, just 20 percent of public-school students with disabilities attended a school having a social worker, school psychologist, school nurse, and counselor. GAO also found variation across states in student with disabilities-to-staff ratios (ranging from 9 to 1 in one state to 30 to 1 in another). Although research suggests that resources are often distributed unequally across schools within districts, most data—such as the number of certain special education staff—are not available at the school level. These data gaps hinder Education’s ability to assess the distribution of resources in its efforts to address a stated purpose of IDEA. Education officials told GAO that, in general, they do not have the statutory authority to collect such data. By granting Education authority to collect school- and district-level data, Congress could enable Education to better assess how special education resources are distributed at these levels, and why any disparities exist.