

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107053](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities attending DODEA schools poses unique challenges. For example, children in military families often relocate frequently, which requires finding appropriate special education and related services each time.

Senate Report 118-58 includes provisions for GAO to examine special education and related services at DODEA schools. GAO examined (1) the extent to which DOD makes these resources available to meet the needs of DODEA students and (2) key obstacles to providing these resources to DODEA students that were reported by DOD staff and families.

GAO analyzed DODEA data on student enrollment, staffing, and service provision. GAO also visited 14 DODEA schools in seven military communities worldwide, selected for variation in number of students with disabilities and location. Across the visits, GAO held 98 group interviews with DODEA teachers, principals, and other stakeholders. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws and policies and interviewed DOD and DODEA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to DOD, including to (1) incorporate students' required service minutes into special education staffing formulas, (2) ensure paraeducators receive required crisis training, and (3) communicate the resources staff should currently use to interpret DOD special education policy. DOD partially agreed with all five recommendations, as discussed in the report.

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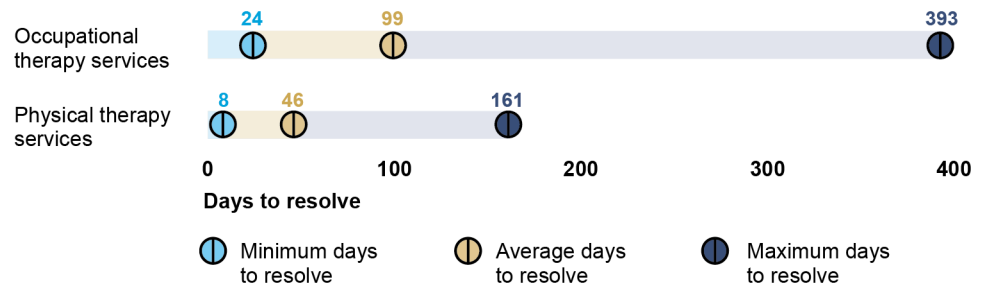
SPECIAL EDUCATION

Improved Allocation of Resources Could Help DOD Education Activity Better Meet Students' Needs

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) operates DOD's school system and provides special education and related services for about 15 percent of its students worldwide. However, GAO found that related services provided by the military branches for students in overseas locations—such as physical therapy—were often limited or unavailable, resulting in service delays or disruptions. These services are required by students' individualized education programs—legally binding written plans describing the services students are to receive. GAO found delays in service delivery for students in 44 of DODEA's 114 overseas schools for 2022–2023 (see figure). Further, from school years 2018–2019 through 2022–2023, at least six cases took more than a year to resolve. Service delays and disruptions can negatively affect students' academic progress, according to related service providers and parents GAO interviewed.

Days Taken to Resolve Services Delays for DODEA Students' Physical and Occupational Services, School Year 2022–2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) administrative data. | GAO-25-107053

GAO also found that DODEA's staffing formulas for special education teachers are based on student headcounts and do not consider the required service minutes (i.e., minutes of specialized instruction) specified in students' individualized education programs. Because required service minutes can vary widely among students, allocating staff without considering them may contribute to staffing shortages and to delays in delivering required services.

DODEA school staff and parents at the schools GAO visited identified several key obstacles to providing special education, including insufficient training and guidance. First, at 12 of 14 schools, paraeducators (staff providing extra help to students) reported receiving little to no onboarding training for special education. For example, paraeducators across all three DODEA regions told GAO they had not received DODEA-required crisis training, despite working with students with behaviors needing crisis response. Further, all regional officials and DODEA staff in 13 of 14 schools described insufficient procedural guidance on how to implement DOD's special education policies. School staff at seven schools said that without clear guidance, service delivery is inconsistent across schools. DODEA officials said they will update procedural guidance by school year 2025–2026, and staff should refer to DOD policy in the interim. Communicating which resources staff should currently use to interpret DOD policy—consistent with DODEA's goals for internal communication—would help promote a shared understanding of how to comply with DOD special education policy.