

A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

Under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA), states are required to measure the performance of their public schools. They must also identify three categories of low-performing schools for support and improvement, including those that need comprehensive support and improvement (CSI)—among the lowest-performing schools in the nation.

- The number of CSI schools increased from 6.5 percent of all public schools in school year (SY) 2019–20 to 7.3 percent in SY 2022–23. Most of this increase was due to schools that were recategorized from needing additional targeted support and improvement (ATSI) to needing CSI because they did not meet their state’s criteria to exit ATSI.
- CSI schools in SY 2022–23 were more academically challenged and economically disadvantaged than the CSI schools identified in SY 2019–20. For example, more CSI students experienced deep poverty in SY 2022–23 than in SY 2019–20.
- Overall, 46 percent of CSI schools identified in SY 2019–20 had exited improvement status by SY 2022–23. Factors influencing the chances of a school exiting CSI status included student characteristics and size. For example, large- and medium-sized schools had increased chances of exiting, while schools with a higher percentage of poor students had decreased chances of exiting.

Educators GAO interviewed commonly identified six strategies as key to exiting CSI, with effective leadership critical to all of them (see figure). Many of these strategies are interrelated. For example, schools can use data to measure changes in school culture and monitor sustained improvements. Educators GAO interviewed also described various ways to sustain improvements. For example, in an elementary school that had recently exited CSI, school leaders said they continued to observe and provide feedback to teachers even though this type of monitoring was no longer required. Educators also described persistent challenges to exiting CSI related to student attendance and teacher shortages and turnover.

Key Strategies Educators Identified to Help Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools Exit



Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected state, district, and school officials; and teacher discussion groups. Adobe Stock (icons). | GAO-26-107849

Why GAO Did This Study

Decades of educational reforms have demonstrated that turning around the lowest-performing schools in the U.S. remains a complex challenge. Schools identified for CSI must include (1) not fewer than the lowest-performing 5 percent of all Title I schools in the state, (2) all public high schools failing to graduate a third or more of their students, and (3) Title I schools previously identified as needing additional targeted support that have not improved within a state-determined number of years. Senate Report 115-289 includes a provision for GAO to review school improvement activities.

This report examines (1) the national landscape of school improvement, such as characteristics associated with schools identified for and exiting CSI; and (2) strategies that helped schools exit CSI and challenges faced, according to selected educators.

To describe the national landscape of school improvement, GAO used SY 2019–20 and SY 2022–23 Department of Education data (the most recent available). GAO used these data to estimate which school characteristics increased or decreased a school’s chances of being identified for and exiting CSI status. GAO also interviewed Education officials and reviewed relevant federal laws and state documents. To identify strategies that helped selected schools exit improvement status, GAO analyzed responses from interviews with educators in three states, eight districts, and 14 schools and held five discussion groups with teachers in selected schools. GAO selected (1) states and districts to reflect variation in approaches to school improvement and (2) schools to provide a mix of current and exited CSI schools in urban, rural, and suburban locations.