

Facility Issues Led About One in Five Districts to Cancel School in 2024-25, Affecting 2 Million Students

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A report to congressional requesters

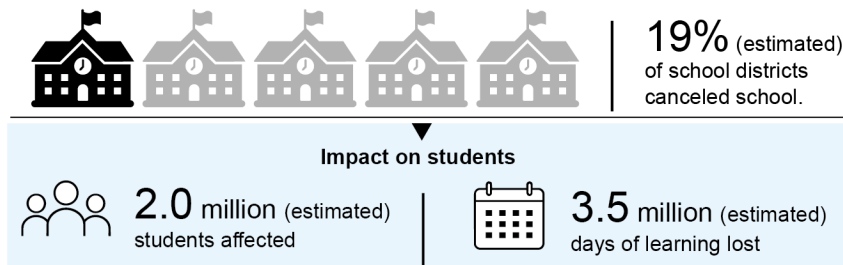
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What GAO Found

Chronic facility issues disrupted teaching and learning in schools nationwide in school year 2024-25, according to GAO's nationwide survey of districts. GAO estimates that nearly one in five districts (19 percent) canceled school that year due to a facilities issue. These cancellations affected an estimated 2 million students, who lost an estimated 3.5 million days of learning as a result. Top reasons districts canceled school included plumbing emergencies and extreme classroom temperatures. One district GAO visited canceled school after classroom temperatures reached 110 degrees. GAO also estimates that nearly half of districts (47 percent) had chronic facility issues that often disrupted learning.

Estimated Percent of School Cancellations Due to a School Facilities Issue

Nearly **one in five** districts canceled school in the 2024-25 school year due to a school facility issue.



Source: GAO analysis of survey data. GAO (icons). | GAO-26-107970

Note: The 95 percent confidence intervals for these estimates are 15 to 24 percent of districts; 1.5 to 2.4 million students affected; and 2.5 to 4.5 million days of learning lost.

Districts frequently face funding constraints and have used strategies like investing in preventive maintenance to manage costs and better meet facility needs. GAO estimates that 55 percent of districts considered their most recent facilities budget insufficient to meet their needs. Districts often faced difficulty implementing capital projects and many deferred maintenance, which can lead to higher costs in the longer term. GAO found that districts with limited capacity to conduct preventive maintenance had more chronic facility problems and more disruptions to instruction. School leaders described taking steps to help address these challenges. They included making strategic investments in preventive maintenance and cost-saving measures, engaging in careful facilities planning efforts, leveraging expertise, and building community buy-in for capital projects.

Nationwide, district leaders had mixed views on the efficacy of state and federal policies related to school facilities. For example, an estimated 73 percent said that limited state formula funding for facilities hindered their ability to meet their facility needs. However, some states have implemented practices that survey respondents and others found helpful. For instance, according to research we reviewed, some states directed dedicated revenue sources to school facilities (e.g., from excise taxes), which helped support facilities funding. Others provided incentives to encourage districts to prioritize preventive maintenance. Finally, some states helped districts keep capital projects on track and on budget through steps like offering adaptable building design plans and expediting permitting.

Why GAO Did This Study

Public school facilities are critical in supporting student learning, civic life, and the long-term economic growth of the nation. Research has demonstrated that modern, well-maintained facilities with healthy indoor environments yield better student performance and health, higher teacher retention, and reduced absenteeism. When schools with outdated or improperly maintained facilities temporarily close buildings or classrooms, instruction and learning are disrupted.

GAO was asked to review lost instructional time associated with facility-related school cancellations across the U.S. This report addresses (1) the extent to which facility issues disrupt instruction in public schools; (2) facilities challenges school districts face and strategies they use to address them; and (3) district leaders' views on state and federal policies related to school facilities and how states can help districts address systemic issues.

GAO conducted a nationally representative survey of public school districts (overall weighted response of 62 percent). Unless otherwise noted, estimates presented have a margin of error of no more than plus or minus 7 percentage points. In addition, GAO visited nine districts across Alabama, Maine, and Oregon. GAO selected states for variation in average spending per student, geographic region, and receipt of federal Supporting America's School Infrastructure grant funds. Within these states, GAO selected districts for variation in urbanicity, poverty, and size. GAO also reviewed reports by state agencies, commissions, and legislative committees from 2016 through 2026 that examined school facility issues and potential solutions. GAO also interviewed officials from the Department of Education and from stakeholder groups, selected to capture a range of perspectives.