

Improved Oversight Could Help DOD Schools Better Support Students with Literacy and Math Skill Deficits

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What GAO Found

In school year 2024–2025, about 10 percent of the approximately 60,000 K-12 students attending Department of Defense Education Activity’s (DODEA) schools full time received strategic instruction. This is short-term extra help in a small group setting (see figure). About 5 percent had a “specific learning disability” (SLD). SLDs are a group of disorders, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, related to understanding language or doing mathematical calculations. The number of DODEA students with SLDs increased 29 percent from school years 2018–2019 through 2024–2025.

DODEA Instructional Materials for Students with Literacy and Math Deficits



Source: GAO pictures from site visits to Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools. | GAO-26-108038

Most staff in the 11 selected schools GAO visited—in five districts that serve 63 percent of DODEA students with SLDs—outlined obstacles to timely identifying students needing strategic instruction or special education for SLDs. These included limited screening tools, challenges with submitting complete student referrals for strategic instruction and special education, and delayed special education evaluations. For example, at nine of 11 schools, staff said they needed more or better screening tools to identify students. DODEA’s screening tools do not directly assess elementary school students’ foundational phonics skills, which help identify reading deficits. They also are not available for all students. These limitations make it difficult to identify students who are behind grade level when they arrive at a school—which is important given DODEA’s highly mobile population. In July 2026, DODEA officials said that they procured universal screening tools for all grades and plan to start administering them in late 2026. When implemented, these tools will provide key data to fill gaps in identifying students’ needs and connect them to support.

DODEA staff at all 11 schools we visited also cited obstacles to helping students meet their literacy and math goals. These included strategic instruction and special education teachers not receiving professional learning relevant to their roles, not having adequate access to data on students’ grades, and varied practices across DODEA schools that result in eligible students not receiving needed help to meet grade-level expectations. For example, during GAO’s interviews, 32 of 44 strategic instruction and special education teachers rated their professional learning opportunities as “bad” or “very bad.” Further, staff at all 11 schools said they wanted teachers to be able to provide input on needed professional learning—for example, opportunities focused on identifying students with literacy and math deficits and SLDs. DODEA guidelines say that professional learning should advance teachers’ ability to apply acquired knowledge and skills targeted to their role. Asking for and acting on teacher feedback would help DODEA advance teachers’ ability to apply the skills needed to help students with literacy and math deficits and SLDs meet their learning goals.

Why GAO Did This Study

Students in military families—many of whom attend DODEA schools—face unique challenges due to frequent moves. DODEA families have raised concerns about access to literacy and math supports and special education services. Research shows that instruction tailored to students’ needs can improve academic outcomes and reduce the number of students referred to special education.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act includes a provision for GAO to examine services for DODEA students with literacy and math deficits and SLDs. GAO examined (1) the number of students receiving strategic instruction or having an SLD, (2) the extent DODEA provides guidance and tools to identify these students, and (3) the extent DODEA supports teachers in helping students.

GAO analyzed DODEA data from school years 2018-2019 through 2024-2025 on student enrollment and reviewed relevant federal laws and DOD policies. GAO conducted in-person site visits to schools in five of nine DODEA districts, selected for variation in number of students with SLDs, among other things. GAO interviewed DODEA officials and held 47 group interviews with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. GAO also administered a nongeneralizable opt-in online questionnaire to parents of DODEA students with SLDs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations to DOD, including to (1) improve screening students for literacy and math deficits; and (2) solicit teacher input on professional learning. DOD agreed with five recommendations and partially agreed with three, as discussed in the report.