



Highlights of [GAO-11-256](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provided \$9 billion in education benefits to servicemembers and veterans in fiscal year 2010, mostly through the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. In providing education benefits, VA relies on State Approving Agencies (SAA) to approve schools; and on schools to report students' enrollment status. GAO was asked to determine: (1) what is known about the effectiveness of outreach to and support for individuals applying for VA education benefits, particularly those with disabilities; (2) the role of school officials and challenges they face in their role; and (3) how VA monitors and oversees states' and schools' implementation of these benefits. GAO reviewed VA reports and plans, conducted a nationally representative survey of school officials, interviewed VA and state officials in four states, and reviewed recent statutory changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA establish outcome-oriented performance measures for outreach and support activities; improve communication with school officials; and undertake a systematic review of its oversight of SAAs and schools. VA concurred with four recommendations and concurred in principle with one recommendation aimed at strengthening oversight. VA noted a number of actions already taken in this area. GAO encourages VA to address all aspects of this recommendation moving forward.

View [GAO-11-256](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

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VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

Actions Taken, but Outreach and Oversight Could Be Improved

What GAO Found

VA has various activities to reach out to and support individuals who are eligible for education benefits. For example, VA reaches eligible servicemembers through military separation briefings and has sponsored national marketing campaigns for the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. General awareness of VA education benefits among servicemembers and veterans is high, according to program stakeholders. In fiscal year 2010, more than 700,000 individuals were served by these programs. However, stakeholders also identified some limitations with VA's outreach and support. For instance, veterans' service organizations and school officials stated that some servicemembers and veterans may have difficulty determining which of VA's various programs may be right for them. In addition, VA primarily targets its outreach and support for its education benefits to the general population of servicemembers and veterans, not necessarily those with disabilities, because eligibility is based on length of military service and not disability status. Finally, little is known about the effectiveness of VA's outreach and support because VA has not established performance measures for these activities.

School certifying officials' core responsibilities—primarily certifying student enrollment to VA and reporting enrollment changes—have become more complex under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and officials identified challenges such as obtaining timely, comprehensive policy guidance and training from VA. For example, school officials must determine the tuition and fees that the Post-9/11 GI Bill will cover, which varies based on the length of active-duty military service and other factors. In our survey, school officials reported performing roles beyond those specifically required by VA, such as helping students apply for benefits. Although the majority of school officials were generally satisfied with VA's implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, they cited a range of challenges, such as the lack of a Post-9/11 GI Bill policy manual. In addition, although VA provides training through conferences and its Web site, many officials did not participate due to other job responsibilities, travel costs, and lack of awareness about training opportunities.

VA lacks comprehensive information on the effectiveness of its oversight of SAAs and schools. VA monitors SAAs, in part, by reviewing reports on the number of approved schools and completed site visits, but this approach has limitations. For example, VA has not set minimum standards for SAAs' reviews of student files during their site visits to schools and, therefore, lacks assurance that data collected from these file reviews are valid and comparable. Also, VA has not completed its own required school audits in recent years. Most recently, VA suspended its audits during fiscal year 2010 in order to reassign compliance staff to help process a backlog of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims. Although VA has resumed its audits, there are indications that it may not be able to complete all required audits in fiscal year 2011. Moreover, VA does not compile and review findings from its own or other entities' audits of schools that would, going forward, allow it to identify trends and better target its oversight of schools.