

Highlights of GAO-04-659, a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

During the 2001-2002 school year, more than 400,000 special education teachers provided instructional services to approximately 6 million students with disabilities in U.S. schools. Two federal laws contain teacher qualification requirements that apply to special education teachers: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Given the committee's interest in issues related to highly qualified special education teachers, we are providing information about (1) the state certification requirements, including the use of alternative certification programs, for special education teachers, and how they relate to NCLBA requirements; (2) the factors that facilitate or impede state efforts to ensure that special education teachers meet NCLBA requirements; and (3) how different offices in the Department of Education (Education) assist states in addressing NCLBA teacher requirements.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Education provide additional assistance to states in explaining NCLBA teacher requirements and identifying implementation strategies for special education teachers, and formalize its efforts to improve the department's internal coordination related to the implementation of these teacher quality requirements.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-659.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie S. Shaul, (202) 512-7215, shaulm@gao.gov.

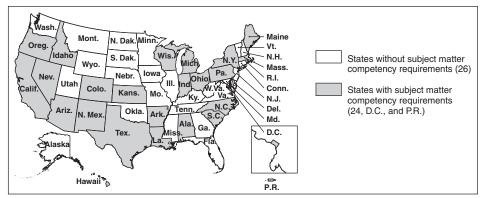
SPECIAL EDUCATION

Additional Assistance and Better Coordination Needed among Education Offices to Help States Meet the NCLBA Teacher Requirements

What GAO Found

In the 2002-2003 school year, all states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico required that special education teachers have a bachelor's degree and be certified to teach—two of NCLBA's teacher qualification requirements—and half required special education teachers to demonstrate subject matter competency in core academic subjects, which is the third requirement. Specifically, 24 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico required their teachers to demonstrate some level of subject matter competency by having a degree or passing state tests in the core academic subjects that they wished to teach. Teachers of core academic subjects in the remaining states that did not have such requirements might not be positioned to meet the NCLBA requirements. To meet NCLBA teacher requirements, teachers would need to demonstrate competency in core academic subjects by the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

Status of Special Education Teacher Subject Matter Competency Requirements for School Year 2002-2003, by State



Source: GAO analysis of survey responses from the state special education directors in the 50 states, D.C., and P.R. for the

State education officials reported that the availability of funds to support professional development facilitated implementation of the NCLBA teacher requirements, while other factors, such as uncertainty about how to apply the subject matter competency requirement to special education teachers, impeded implementation. State education officials and national education organizations' representatives we interviewed cited the need for more assistance from Education in explaining NCLBA's teacher requirements and identifying implementation strategies.

Education has provided a range of assistance, such as site visits, Webbased guidance, and financial assistance, to help states implement the highly qualified teacher requirements. However, department coordination related to the implementation of NCLBA's teacher requirements for special education teachers has been limited.