



Highlights of [GAO-07-609](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress has raised concerns over emergency management in school districts, with a particular interest in how federal agencies provide assistance to school districts. GAO was asked to assess (1) the roles of federal and state governments and school districts in establishing requirements and providing resources to school districts for emergency management planning, (2) what school districts have done to plan and prepare for emergencies, and (3) the challenges, if any, school districts have experienced in planning for emergencies, and communicating and coordinating with first responders, parents, and students. To obtain this information, GAO interviewed federal officials, surveyed a stratified random sample of all public school districts, surveyed state education agencies and state administering agencies, conducted site visits to school districts, and reviewed relevant documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making several recommendations to DHS, Education, and HHS aimed at improving school district emergency management planning and preparation. Education and HHS generally agreed with GAO's recommendations. DHS generally agreed with the intent of GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-609.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov or William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8757 or jenkinsw@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Most School Districts Have Developed Emergency Management Plans, but Would Benefit from Additional Federal Guidance

What GAO Found

Although there are no federal laws requiring all school districts to have emergency management plans, most states and school districts reported having requirements for such planning, and federal and state governments and school districts provide financial and other resources. Thirty-two states reported having laws or other policies requiring school districts to have emergency management plans. The Departments of Education (Education) and Homeland Security (DHS) and state governments as well as school districts provide funding for emergency management planning in schools. DHS awards grants to states and local jurisdictions that may provide some of these funds to school districts and schools for emergency management planning. However, DHS program guidance for certain grants does not clearly identify school districts as entities to which state and local governments may disburse grant funds. Thus, states receiving DHS funding may not be aware that such funding could be allocated to school districts or schools.

Most school districts have taken federally recommended steps to plan and prepare for emergencies, including the development of emergency management plans, but many plans do not include recommended practices. Based on GAO's survey of school districts, most school districts, those with and without plans, have undertaken a variety of recommended practices to prepare for emergencies such as conducting school drills and exercises. In addition, based on GAO's survey of school districts, an estimated 95 percent of all school districts have written emergency management plans, but the content varies. While most school districts have procedures in their plans for staff roles and responsibilities, for example, school districts have not widely employed such procedures as, academic instruction via local radio or television, for continuing student education in the event of an extended school closure, such as might occur during a pandemic. Likewise, while many districts have procedures for special needs students, GAO found during site visits that some of these procedures may not fully ensure the safety of these students in an emergency. Finally, while most school districts practice their emergency management plans annually within the school community, GAO estimates that over one-quarter of school districts have never trained with any first responders and over two-thirds of school districts do not regularly train with community partners on how to implement their school district emergency management plans.

Many school districts experience challenges in planning for emergencies, and some school districts face difficulties in communicating and coordinating with first responders and parents, but most do not have such challenges with students. Based on GAO's survey of school districts, in many school districts officials struggle to balance priorities related to educating students and other administrative responsibilities with activities for emergency management and consider a lack of equipment, training for staff, and personnel with expertise in the area of emergency planning as challenges. In an estimated 39 percent of school districts with emergency management plans, officials experienced a lack of partnerships, limited time or funding to plan, or lack of interoperability between equipment used by school districts and first responders. In interviews, about half of the officials in the 27 school districts GAO visited reported difficulty in ensuring that parents received consistent information from the district during an emergency.