



Highlights of [GAO-07-821T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Status of School Districts' Planning and Preparedness

Why GAO Did This Study

Events such as the recent shootings by armed intruders in schools across the nation, natural disasters, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and potential pandemics have heightened awareness for the need for school districts to be prepared to address a range of emergencies within and outside of schools buildings. Congress has raised concerns over school preparedness, with a particular interest in how federal agencies provide assistance to school districts.

This testimony discusses preliminary findings related to GAO's review of emergency management in school districts, including (1) the roles of federal and state governments 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 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 agencies that administer federal grants that can be used for school emergency management planning, conducted site visits to school districts, and reviewed relevant documents.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-821T.

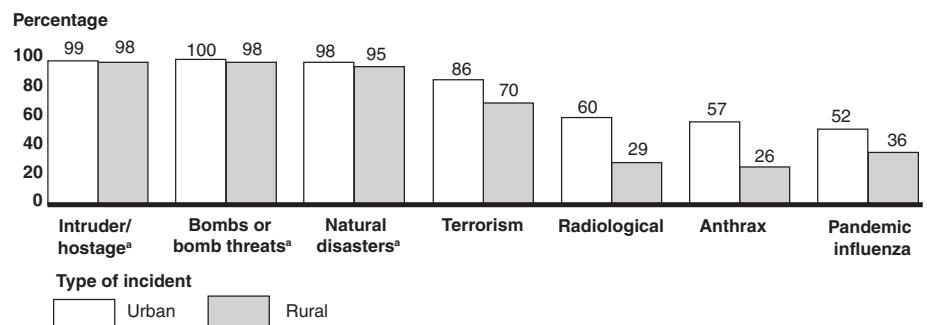
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Federal and state governments have a role in supporting emergency management in school districts. While no federal laws require school districts to have emergency management plans, 32 states reported having laws or policies requiring school districts to have such plans. The Departments of Education and Homeland Security (DHS) provide funding for emergency management planning in schools. However, some DHS program guidance, for specific grants, does not clearly identify school districts as entities to which state and local governments may disburse grant funds. Thus, states receiving this funding may be uncertain as to whether such funding can be allocated to school districts or schools and therefore may not have the opportunity to benefit from this funding. States also provide funding and other resources to school districts to assist them in planning for emergencies.

School districts have taken steps to plan for a range of emergencies, as most have developed multi-hazard emergency management plans; however some plans and activities do not address federally recommended practices. For example, based on GAO's survey of a sample of public school districts, an estimated 56 percent of all school districts have not employed any procedures in their plans for continuing student education in the event of an extended school closure, such as might occur during a pandemic, and many do not include procedures for special needs students. Fewer than half of districts with emergency plans involve community partners when developing and updating these plans. Finally, school districts are generally not training with first responders or community partners on how to implement their school district emergency plans.

Estimated Percentages of Urban and Rural Districts' Multi-Hazard Emergency Management Plans that Include Specific Types of Incidents



Source: GAO analysis of survey data.

^aDifferences between urban and rural districts are not statistically significant.

Many school district officials said that they experience challenges in planning for emergencies and some school districts face difficulties in communicating and coordinating with first responders and parents, but most said that they do not experience challenges in communicating with students. For example, in an estimated 62 percent of districts, officials identified challenges stemming from a lack of equipment, training for staff, and personnel with expertise in the area of emergency planning as obstacles to implementing recommended practices.