

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-585](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Although nursing homes typically care for elderly or disabled adults, some children with disabilities also live in these homes. Because these children live away from their families, they may be less connected to local schools and may not receive the education benefits to which they are entitled. GAO was asked to study the delivery of education to children in nursing homes.

GAO examined (1) the characteristics of children in nursing homes, (2) how such children are referred for and receive education, (3) the challenges in delivering services to these children, and (4) monitoring of the education of children in nursing homes. GAO analyzed national nursing home data on children, surveyed all state special education directors, reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, and interviewed federal officials. GAO also visited nursing homes and school districts in three states selected to include a large percentage (42 percent) of children in nursing homes nationwide.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education develop information sharing mechanisms for teachers of these children and that Education and HHS strengthen their monitoring efforts. Education agreed with the first recommendation. For the second, Education and HHS agreed to further collaborate, but expressed concerns about creating an oversight structure. However, GAO recommends using existing means of oversight.

View [GAO-14-585](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarras@gao.gov.

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

Additional Federal Actions Could Help Address Unique Challenges of Educating Children in Nursing Homes

What GAO Found

Children in nursing homes represent a relatively small group of children whose medically complex conditions often present unique educational challenges. Of the nearly 5,000 school-age children in nursing homes nationwide, about 40 percent needed a feeding tube for nutrition and one-third needed oxygen therapy to help them breathe, according to GAO's analysis of 2012 data—the most recent data available—from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Consistent with 2012 data, GAO observed on recent site visits that these children also had conditions that affected learning. For example, many children GAO observed at the nursing homes were nonverbal and minimally responsive. Because of their complex medical needs, these children often stayed in nursing homes for long periods of time—about one-third of them for more than a year, according to GAO's analysis of HHS data.

States GAO visited required nursing homes to refer children to school districts for educational services, and in nursing homes GAO visited, staff typically collaborated with school district officials to help them understand the children's needs. Because of the children's medical fragility, education services were delivered primarily in classrooms at the nursing homes or one-on-one (often bedside), with a few children transported to local schools. Teachers that GAO observed used assistive technology and other methods to aid instruction.

State and local school officials reported challenges to serving children living in nursing homes, including curricula development and teacher training. In GAO's nationwide survey, 31 states indicated having adequate training for teachers was a challenge. According to school officials GAO interviewed, teachers may not be fully prepared to teach children with profound disabilities, and several teachers said they could benefit from the experiences of other teachers about how best to serve these children. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognizes the importance of information sharing to improve educational results for children, current technical assistance efforts supported by the Department of Education (Education) do not include mechanisms for teachers to share best practices about how to serve children with significant cognitive and multiple disabilities. Such information sharing about effective approaches and strategies could help teachers of children in nursing homes be more fully prepared to provide children with education commensurate with their unique needs.

Education and HHS have different, yet complementary, monitoring responsibilities with respect to children in nursing homes. Education monitors state compliance with the IDEA requirement to provide a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, and HHS oversees state nursing home inspections. Although collaboration between agencies with a common interest is a key practice, these agencies do not coordinate their monitoring efforts with respect to the education of these children. The relatively small size of this population makes it difficult for Education and states to gather information on whether these children receive education that meets IDEA requirements. Coordinated efforts between the two agencies could help close any potential gaps in Education's monitoring and help ensure that all children in nursing homes receive an education.