

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-7](#), a report to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

## Why GAO Did This Study

Geography—the study of places and the relationship between people and their environment—is present across many facets of modern life, from tracking lost cell phones to monitoring disease outbreaks like Ebola. The growing use of geographic information and location-based technology across multiple sectors of the American economy has prompted questions about whether K-12 students’ skills and exposure to geography are adequate for current and future workforce needs. Senate Report 113-71 included a provision for GAO to report on the status of geography education and challenges elementary and secondary schools face in providing geography education with limited resources.

In this report, GAO examined (1) the extent that eighth grade students are proficient in geography; (2) the challenges selected school officials and teachers face in providing geography education; and (3) the role of the Department of Education with respect to geography education. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws; analyzed nationally representative Education data on student proficiency and instruction time in geography; interviewed education officials in four states selected, in part, for varying K-12 geography requirements; reviewed key studies and research reports, including a 50-state 2013 survey of geography requirements; and interviewed agency officials and researchers. We also leveraged a professional association to identify and interview 10 K-12 teachers.

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. Education provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-16-7](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov)

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## K-12 EDUCATION

### Most Eighth Grade Students Are Not Proficient in Geography

#### What GAO Found

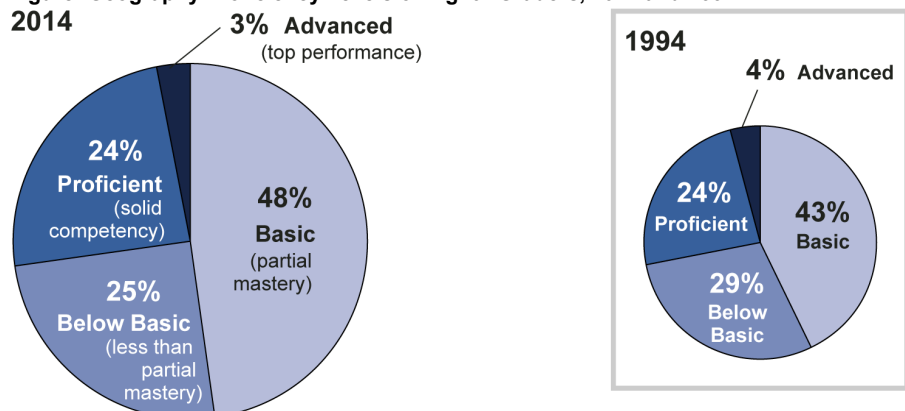
About three-quarters of eighth grade students—the only grade for which trend data are available—were not “proficient” in geography in 2014, according to GAO’s analysis of nationally representative data from the Department of Education (Education). Specifically, these students had not demonstrated solid competence in the subject, and the proficiency levels of eighth grade students have shown no improvement since 1994 (see figure). Geography is generally taught as part of social studies, but data show that more than half of eighth grade teachers reported spending a small portion (10 percent or less) of their social studies instruction time on geography. Further, according to a study by an academic organization, a majority of states do not require geography courses in middle school or high school.

A key challenge to providing geography education is the increased focus on other subjects, according to officials in selected states and K-12 teachers GAO interviewed. These officials and teachers said spending time and resources on geography education is difficult due to national and state focus on the tested subjects of reading, math, and science. GAO’s interviews and review of relevant reports identified a range of other challenges, as well, including:

- misconceptions about what geography education entails;
- lack of teacher preparation and professional development in geography;
- poor quality of geography instructional materials; and
- limited use of geographic technology in the classroom.

Education’s role with respect to geography education primarily involves assessing student performance in the subject, and providing data and the results of its analyses to the public. Education periodically assesses student achievement in geography, and other areas, but not with the same regularity as other subjects it is required by law to assess. Beyond assessments, Education officials said that absent funding specifically for geography-focused programs, the agency is hindered in its ability to support geography education.

Figure: Geography Proficiency Levels of Eighth Graders, 2014 and 1994



Source: GAO analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Geography Assessment data for 1994 and 2014. | GAO-16-7