

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106182](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

DODEA is required to protect students from discrimination based on sex, which can include sexual harassment.

Senate Report 117-130 and House Report 117-397 include a provision for GAO to examine DODEA's response to unwanted sexual behaviors. This report examines (1) the information DODEA collects to identify unwanted sexual behavior and (2) the availability of support services to students that are harmed by or exhibit such behavior.

GAO analyzed the most recent available DODEA data on reported incidents of unwanted sexual behavior among students in school years 2019–2020 through 2022–2023. GAO also conducted site visits to 11 DODEA schools and the FAP agencies serving five military communities in the U.S. and Europe, selected for geographic, grade level, and service branch variation. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws and agency policies and interviewed agency officials from DODEA, Child and Youth Advocacy, and FAP.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations to DOD, including to (1) assess reporting processes for normative behaviors, (2) monitor DODEA inclusion in response efforts, (3) monitor efforts to increase FAP clinical expertise, (4) assess efforts to improve participation in FAP support services, and (5) assess its policy to exclude civilian-dependent students from receiving most FAP services. DOD generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106182](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

February 2024

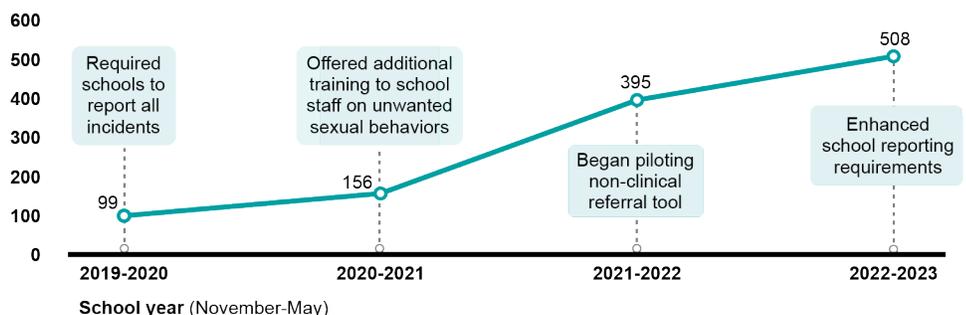
K-12 EDUCATION

DOD Has Taken Steps to Support Students Affected by Problematic Sexual Behaviors, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA), which educates over 66,000 military-connected pre-K through grade 12 students worldwide, collects detailed information about reported incidents of unwanted sexual behavior among students. These behaviors include those that are normative (but inappropriate), like unwanted touching in younger grades. It also includes behaviors that are severe and problematic at any age, like sexual assault. Since 2019, unwanted sexual behavior reports at DODEA schools have increased substantially due to enhanced reporting requirements. However, DODEA has not sought feedback on its updated reporting requirements from school leaders, who raised concerns about significant administrative burden with formally reporting normative behaviors, and stigma for students involved in them.

DODEA School Incident Reports and Key Efforts to Enhance Reporting



Source: GAO analysis of DODEA incident reporting data and agency documentation. | GAO-24-106182

Note: DODEA school closures during the pandemic may also have contributed to fewer reports of unwanted sexual behaviors during school years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021.

DODEA students who are harmed by or exhibit problematic sexual behaviors face challenges accessing appropriate support services. DOD policy directs the Military Community Advocacy Directorate's Family Advocacy Program (FAP) to implement a consistent response strategy. However, GAO identified various weaknesses hindering these efforts. Specifically, the Military Community Advocacy Directorate:

- has not monitored how consistently FAP includes DODEA in multidisciplinary teams, which are installation-wide response efforts, despite known issues;
- has not monitored its efforts to close the gap in the number of FAP clinicians with expertise needed to treat children with problematic behaviors;
- has not assessed the effectiveness of its efforts to address low participation in FAP clinical support services among eligible military families; and
- chose to exclude the nearly one in five DODEA students who are children of civilian defense workers from accessing most FAP services and has not assessed whether this policy meets the needs of military communities.

Without addressing these weaknesses, DOD risks ongoing challenges in ensuring that students who are harmed by or exhibit problematic sexual behavior receive the support needed to assure the safety of the DODEA community.