

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107247](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD research has found that military families and children face severe barriers to accessing mental health care, harming family well-being and military readiness. Without proper treatment, children with mental health concerns are at risk of school failure, substance misuse, and suicide.

Senate Report 118-58 includes a provision for GAO to examine mental health services in DODEA schools. This review examines (1) mental health concerns of DODEA students, (2) DODEA's capacity to implement its new MTSS framework, and (3) the extent to which DOD has assessed how well mental health programs in DODEA schools meet student needs and their collaboration in doing so.

GAO analyzed suicide-related incident data collected by DODEA for school years 2022–23 and 2023–24, the most recent data available. GAO also conducted site visits to 27 schools and eight military treatment facilities on 11 military installations across DODEA's three regions. GAO interviewed DOD and DODEA officials, reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and procedures, and assessed DOD actions against policy and relevant federal standards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations to DOD, including to assess capacity to implement MTSS, to evaluate its programs that provide mental health services in DODEA schools, and assure that these programs collaborate to align their services with student needs. DOD agreed or partially agreed with six recommendations, and disagreed with one, which GAO maintains is valid.

View [GAO-25-107247](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at nowickij@gao.gov.

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K–12 EDUCATION:

DOD Needs to Assess Its Capacity to Provide Mental Health Services to Students

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) educated more than 65,000 military-connected pre-K-12 students in 160 schools worldwide in school year 2023–24. GAO found that, like U.S. public school students, DODEA students have experienced increasing mental health concerns in recent years. Per GAO analysis, DODEA schools assessed one in 50 students for suicide risk in each of school years 2022–23 and 2023–24 in response to an identified mental health concern. In all 27 DODEA schools GAO visited worldwide, school leaders described more frequent and acute concerns (see figure).

Student Mental Health Concerns Shared by Leaders in Select DOD Schools



Source: GAO interviews with Department of Defense Education Activity school leaders and support staff. | GAO-25-107247

School psychologists and school counselors told GAO they rarely had time to work with students to prevent crises due to competing responsibilities and heavy administrative workloads, such as testing coordination duties. Such staff are key to successfully implementing DODEA's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework—an evidence-based approach to help schools identify and proactively address student needs and build resilience. However, DODEA has not assessed its workforce capacity to implement MTSS with fidelity. Federal workforce planning principles include identifying and addressing human capital needs. Without a workforce plan, DODEA may be unaware of resource gaps that could hinder its success—particularly in light of DOD's recent directives to optimize its civilian workforce.

DOD has not assured that the three mental health programs it operates in DODEA schools meet student needs. First, none of the programs have been evaluated, contrary to DOD policy. The largest—Military and Family Life Counseling (MFLC)—places nonclinical counselors in nearly every DODEA school. However, school leaders raised concerns about the program, including poor collaboration with school staff and high turnover among counselors. Second, DOD has not assured that these programs provide the right mix of services to meet student needs. School leaders, parents, and military treatment facility staff all told GAO that DODEA students need additional clinical mental health care. Two programs provide clinical services in some DODEA schools. However, these programs are small—embedding one clinician in DODEA schools for every four non-clinical MFLC counselors. Further, DOD has not facilitated collaboration among these programs to assure that they provide the right mix of services to meet DODEA student needs. GAO has reported that collaboration can help agency components address cross-cutting challenges—such as responding to student mental health needs. Collaboration could help DOD better assure that these programs provide the right mix of services to meet DODEA student needs, in line with leading practices and its own goals.