

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent literature shows that poor and minority students may not have full access to educational opportunities. GAO was asked to examine poverty and race in schools and efforts by the Departments of Education and Justice, which are responsible for enforcing federal civil rights laws prohibiting racial discrimination against students.

This report examined (1) how the percentage of schools with high percentages of poor and Black or Hispanic students has changed over time and the characteristics of these schools, (2) why and how selected school districts have implemented actions to increase student diversity, and (3) the extent to which the Departments of Education and Justice have taken actions to identify and address issues related to racial discrimination in schools.

GAO analyzed Education data for school years 2000-01 to 2013-14 (most recent available); reviewed applicable federal laws, regulations, and agency documents; and interviewed federal officials, civil rights and academic subject matter specialists, and school district officials in three states, selected to provide geographic diversity and examples of actions to diversify.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education more routinely analyze its civil rights data to identify disparities among types and groups of schools and that Justice systematically track key information on open federal school desegregation cases to which it is a party to better inform its monitoring. In response, both agencies are considering actions in line with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-345](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

K-12 EDUCATION

Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination

What GAO Found

The percentage of K-12 public schools in the United States with students who are poor and are mostly Black or Hispanic is growing and these schools share a number of challenging characteristics. From school years 2000-01 to 2013-14 (the most recent data available), the percentage of all K-12 public schools that had high percentages of poor and Black or Hispanic students grew from 9 to 16 percent, according to GAO's analysis of data from the Department of Education (Education). These schools were the most racially and economically concentrated: 75 to 100 percent of the students were Black or Hispanic and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—a commonly used indicator of poverty. GAO's analysis of Education data also found that compared with other schools, these schools offered disproportionately fewer math, science, and college preparatory courses and had disproportionately higher rates of students who were held back in 9th grade, suspended, or expelled.

In the three districts GAO reviewed as case studies, officials reported implementing various actions to increase economic and racial diversity to address racial or other demographic shifts in school composition. For example, in one predominantly low-income, Black and Hispanic school district, the state and district created state-of-the-art magnet schools to attract students from more economically and racially diverse groups. However, these three districts faced challenges. For example, one state devoted funding to magnet schools while the district's traditional schools declined in quality, according to local officials. Further, according to officials, some magnets with openings could not accept minority students because doing so would interfere with the ratio of minority to non-minority students that the district was trying to achieve.

The Departments of Education and Justice have taken a range of actions to identify and address racial discrimination against students. Education has investigated schools, analyzed its data by student groups protected under federal civil rights laws, and found discrimination and disparities in some cases. GAO analyzed Education's data among types of schools (charters, magnets, and traditional public schools) by percentage of racial minorities and a proxy for poverty level and found multiple disparities, including in access to academic courses. Education does not routinely analyze its data in this way. Conducting this type of analysis would enhance Education's ability to target technical assistance and identify other disparities by school types and groups. The Department of Justice (Justice) has also investigated discrimination claims, and it monitors and enforces 178 open federal desegregation court cases to which it is a party, many of which originated 30 or 40 years ago to remedy segregation. However, GAO found that Justice does not track key summary case information, such as the last action taken in a case. As a result, some may unintentionally remain dormant for long periods. For example, in one case the court noted there had been a lack of activity and that if Justice had "been keeping an eye" on relevant information, such as test score disparities, the issue could have been addressed in a more timely way. Federal internal control standards state that agencies should use information to help identify specific actions that need to be taken to allow for effective monitoring. Without tracking key information about open cases, Justice's ability toward effectively monitor such cases is hampered.