



July 2022

# K-12 EDUCATION Teachers Generally Responded Positively to Professional Learning at DOD Schools

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlight

Highlights of [GAO-22-105464](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

DODEA provides pre-kindergarten through grade 12 education to about 70,000 children of military service members and Department of Defense (DOD) civilian employees serving domestically and overseas. Similar to civilian school districts, DODEA requires its 5,800 teachers to engage in professional learning that helps them hone their knowledge and skills to better help students meet academic standards.

Senate Report 117-39 and House Report 117-118 include provisions for GAO to assess professional learning at DODEA schools. This report describes: DODEA's professional learning approach, results of DODEA teacher surveys, and how DODEA has addressed barriers teachers anticipated when implementing professional learning in the classroom.

GAO analyzed about 130,000 closed-ended responses from DODEA's professional learning teacher surveys that covered summer 2018 through the end of 2021, the most recent period available. GAO also analyzed a nongeneralizable sample of open-ended survey comments on anticipated implementation barriers for the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent period available. In addition, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and agency guidance, and interviewed agency officials. GAO held four discussion groups with DODEA officials, which were selected for their

View [GAO-22-105464](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

July 2022

## K-12 EDUCATION

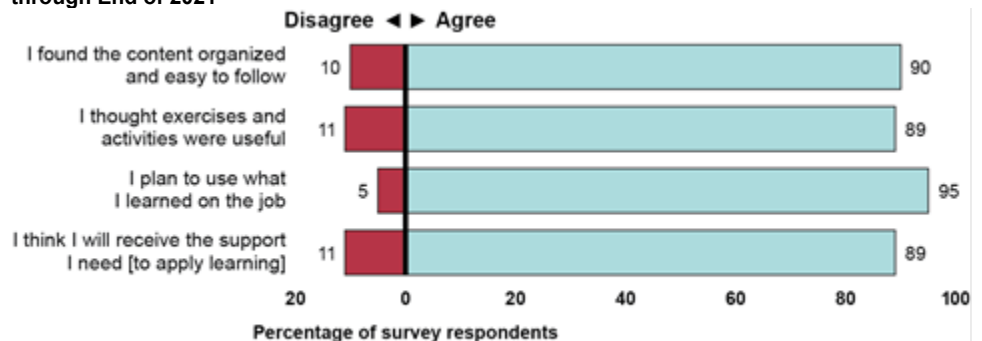
# Teachers Generally Responded Positively to Professional Learning at DOD Schools

## What GAO Found

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA), which educates children of military families, has implemented a unified approach for offering teacher professional learning to facilitate implementation of College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). These standards are intended to help students succeed in the global economy. According to DODEA officials, having a common set of academic standards and a consistent approach to professional learning helps ensure educational continuity for DODEA's mobile student population. Key components of DODEA's approach include annual professional learning plans, consistent training on standards, and evaluation of professional learning results.

DODEA teachers generally reported positive views of agency-wide professional learning events, according to GAO's analysis of closed-ended teacher survey data from summer 2018 through the end of 2021. For instance, the large majority of respondents reported that professional learning events were useful and that they planned to use what they learned on the job (see figure).

Teacher Survey Responses to DODEA-Wide Professional Learning Events, Summer 2018 through End of 2021



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) teacher survey data. | GAO-22-105464

## Accessible Data Table for Highlight Figure Percentage of survey respondents

	Disagree	Agree
I found the content organized and easy to follow	10	90
I thought exercises and activities were useful	11	89
I plan to use what I learned on the job	5	95
I think I will receive the support I need [to apply learning]	11	89

However, DODEA teachers reported some anticipated barriers when implementing professional learning in the classroom, which DODEA officials have acknowledged and taken steps to address. The most common barriers GAO identified in its analysis of open-ended teacher survey comments were related to time and resources. DODEA officials recognized these barriers and described their responses to them.

- **Time.** Officials acknowledged that the pace of CCRS implementation has been challenging for some teachers. To support them, officials said the agency implemented the standards over multiple years and professional learning specialists provided classroom-based assistance.
- **Resources.** Officials said they understood that teachers may not have access to all desired technological resources, but said the agency's goal is to support teachers within existing resource constraints. For instance, district professional learning specialists said they have developed guidance to help teachers use available technology resources, and provide just-in-time technological assistance.

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	<b>Abbreviations</b>	
	CCRS	College and Career Readiness Standards
	DOD	Department of Defense
	DODEA	Department of Defense Education Activity
	ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965,

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NDAA as amended  
National Defense Authorization Act

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July 18, 2022

The Honorable Jack Reed  
Chairman  
The Honorable James M. Inhofe  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith  
Chairman  
The Honorable Mike Rogers  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
House of Representatives

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) manages a federally operated school system that provides pre-kindergarten through grade 12 education, primarily for the children of military service members and Department of Defense (DOD) civilian employees.<sup>1</sup> Similar to civilian school districts, DODEA requires its more than 5,800 teachers to engage in professional learning (also known as professional development). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA), defines professional development to include activities that provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and meet challenging academic standards.<sup>2</sup> It may include activities that improve teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach, understanding of how students learn, and ability to analyze student work, among other things. DODEA's professional learning standards note that teachers' ability to implement professional

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<sup>1</sup>See 10 U.S.C. § 2164, 20 U.S.C. §§ 921-932. See also Department of Defense Directive 1342.20, *Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA)* (July 7, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>See 20 U.S.C. § 7801(42).

learning in their classrooms requires sustained commitment from school leaders and ongoing support for teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Senate Report 117-39 and House Report 117-118 accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022 include provisions for GAO to assess professional learning at DODEA schools.<sup>4</sup> This report describes: (1) DODEA's approach for providing professional learning to teachers; (2) what DODEA's teacher surveys and implementation studies have found about the effectiveness of professional learning; and (3) what barriers DODEA teachers anticipated when implementing professional learning, and how DODEA has addressed them.

To describe DODEA's professional learning approach, we interviewed agency officials and reviewed agency documentation, such as professional learning guidance, annual professional learning plans, and recent training curricula. We also interviewed officials from Learning Forward, the organization whose educational professional learning standards DODEA has adopted, to better understand DODEA's professional learning framework.

To describe the effectiveness of DODEA professional learning activities, we analyzed results of DODEA teacher satisfaction surveys and implementation studies. First, we analyzed teacher responses to a six-question survey DODEA administers following each required training.<sup>5</sup> Our analysis covered responses from the summer of 2018 through the end of 2021, the most recent period available at the time we conducted

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<sup>3</sup>DODEA adopted professional learning standards from Learning Forward, a national educator professional learning membership organization whose mission is to set the standard for professional learning and build the capacity of educators to equitably serve all students. Its Standards for Professional Learning were developed in collaboration with over 40 professional associations and education organizations, including the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, and have been adopted in many states and by DODEA. See Learning Forward, *Standards for Professional Learning* (2022).

<sup>4</sup>S. Rep. No. 117-39 at 165 (2021) and H.R. Rep. No. 117-118 at 160 (2021).

<sup>5</sup>DODEA requires teachers and other school-based staff to participate in six professional learning days each school year that cover concepts set by DODEA's Professional Learning Division. At the end of each day, DODEA asks participants to complete a survey about the training.

our work.<sup>6</sup> To assess the reliability of teacher survey data, we interviewed agency officials; reviewed documentation; and reviewed the data for obvious errors, outliers, or missing information. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable to report teacher views on recent training shared in survey responses. Second, we reviewed recent DODEA implementation studies that used classroom observations to describe possible effects of professional learning on teacher and student behavior.

To describe what barriers DODEA teachers anticipated when implementing professional learning and how DODEA has addressed them, we first analyzed a random sample of teacher survey comments from the 2021-2022 school year to a question asking what barriers they anticipated in applying what they learned.<sup>7</sup> We categorized these comments into common themes. While the results of our analysis are not generalizable, they provide insights into teacher views of professional learning and commonly reported barriers. Second, we held four discussion groups with DODEA officials to discuss these barriers and obtain their perspectives on how teachers experience these barriers and how DODEA responds to them.<sup>8</sup> Third, we held a discussion group with Learning Forward affiliate members in Virginia and Georgia to obtain perspectives from civilian professional learning specialists on the barriers

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<sup>6</sup>We analyzed all survey responses covering school years 2018-2019 through 2020-2021, and for the first four professional learning days held during the 2021-2022 school year, excluding responses from school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and other education specialists.

<sup>7</sup>Specifically, our analysis covered survey comments provided during summer through the end of 2021. We randomly selected 25 percent of these nonblank survey comments to analyze (1,145 out of 4,580).

<sup>8</sup>We held a discussion group with each of the following four types of officials: (1) district professional learning specialists who support teachers, (2) district leaders, (3) regional professional learning specialists who support district leaders, and (4) DODEA headquarters professional learning staff. To solicit participants for our discussion groups, we asked DODEA to provide a list of the four types of officials noted above. We then considered various factors when inviting officials to participate, as appropriate, such as location, length of service, supervisory role, and subject matter expertise (e.g., K-5 literacy or 6-12 mathematics).



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DODEA teachers identified.<sup>9</sup> Any comparisons between DODEA and public school experiences are descriptive and not generalizable.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2021 to July 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

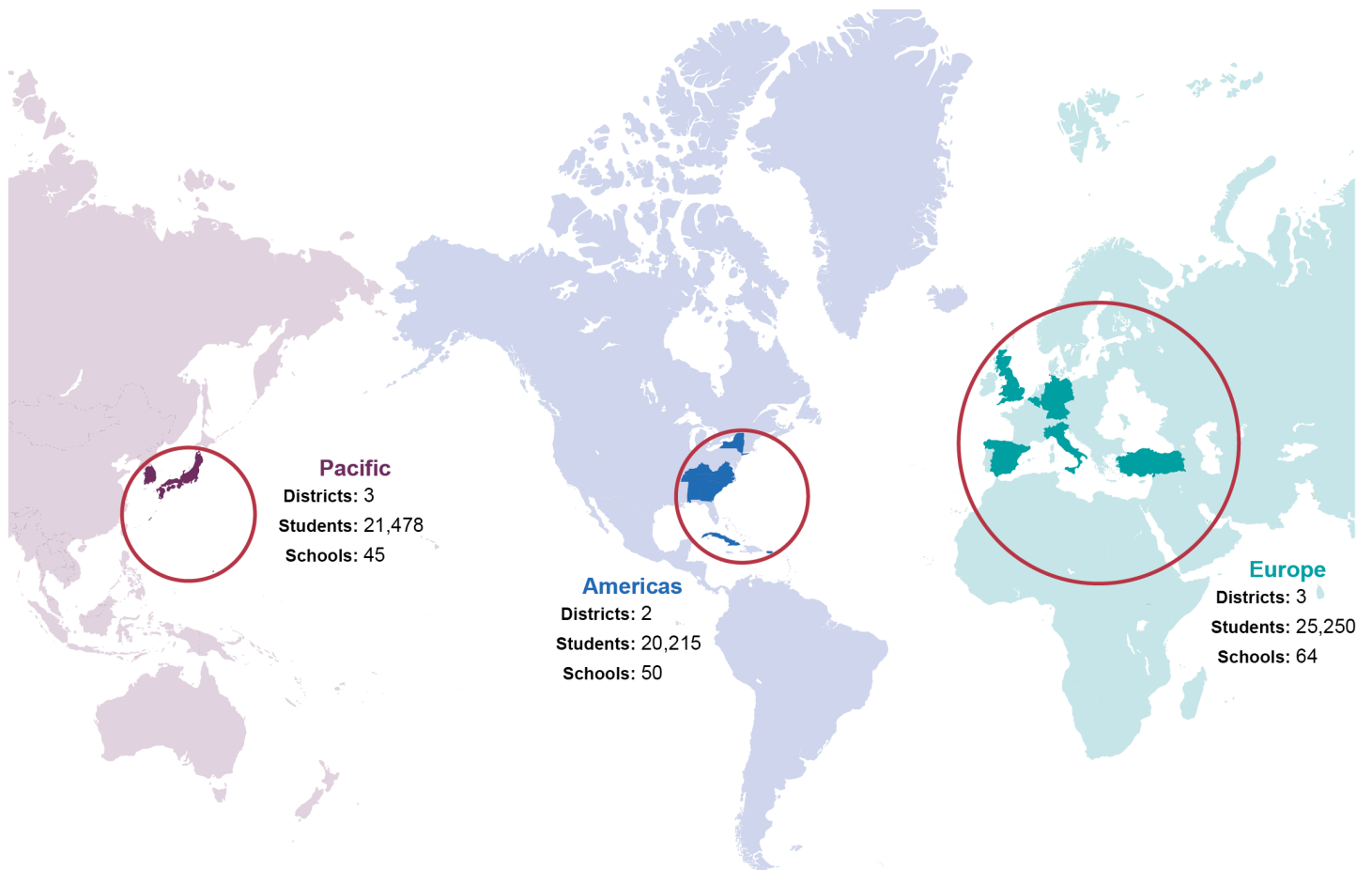
During the 2021-2022 school year, DODEA operated 160 schools worldwide that served almost 70,000 students.<sup>10</sup> All dependent children of U.S. military and DOD civilian employees who live on a military installation with a DODEA school are eligible to attend. DODEA schools are organized into eight districts located within three regions—Pacific, Americas, and Europe (see fig. 1).

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<sup>9</sup>We invited Learning Forward affiliate members to this discussion group because they had familiarity with DODEA's adopted professional learning standards and experience with professional learning in civilian school settings. We focused our efforts in Virginia and Georgia because both states have DODEA schools (11 in total) and Learning Forward affiliate organizations.

<sup>10</sup>One DODEA school is fully virtual.

**Figure 1: DODEA Regions, Districts, Students, and Schools, School Year 2021-2022**



Source: GAO presentation of general locations of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) facilities; Map Resources (base map). | GAO-22-105464

**Accessible Data Table for Figure 1**

Region	Districts	Students	Schools
Pacific	3	21,478	45
Americas	2	20,215	50
Europe	3	25,250	64

Professional learning at DODEA is administered by the agency's Professional Learning Division, located in its U.S.-based headquarters, with some additional professional learning functions handled by other headquarters-based divisions.<sup>11</sup> Professional learning support for teachers and administrators is provided at the regional and district level. Specifically, each of DODEA's three regions has a Center for Instructional Leadership that provides professional learning, coaching, and mentoring for district and school leaders. Further, DODEA school districts have professional learning specialists who provide on-the-ground coaching, mentoring, and resources to teachers in areas such as math, science, and literacy.

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## DODEA Provides Professional Learning to Help Teachers Incorporate College and Career Readiness Standards, Using a Unified Approach

DODEA has established a unified professional learning approach to facilitate consistent worldwide implementation of academic standards known as College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). In 2015, DODEA began implementing CCRS for students in grades K-12.<sup>12</sup> DODEA made this shift, in part, to improve educational rigor at DODEA schools and to increase continuity of educational experiences for DODEA's highly mobile student population. Specifically, DODEA officials said CCRS helps ensure that students learn from the same curriculum

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<sup>11</sup>For instance, DODEA's Research, Accountability, and Evaluation Division collects and analyzes data to assess the effectiveness of professional learning. The Curriculum and Instruction Division supports districts and schools in implementing academic standards and instructional practices. The Technology and Innovation Division supports virtual delivery of professional learning and associated classroom tools and technology.

<sup>12</sup>DODEA states that CCRS are aligned with college and work expectations; are clear, understandable, consistent, and evidence-based; and include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills, so that all students are prepared to succeed in the global economy and society. A variety of CCRS exist. For more information on CCRS, see GAO, *College and Career Readiness: States Have Made Progress in Implementing New Standards and Assessments, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-15-104R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2014).

regardless of their location within DODEA, facilitating transitions between regions or districts as families redeploy.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to CCRS implementation in 2015, DODEA officials said the agency had an ad-hoc professional learning approach that focused on classroom tools and materials instead of rigorous teaching practices. Because the agency had not yet implemented a common set of academic standards, professional learning often varied across regions and districts as well, and supported different learning goals. DODEA officials said they realized establishing a unified professional learning approach would be critical to successfully implementing CCRS agency-wide. To do so, DODEA issued professional learning guidance in 2017 that established a common definition of professional learning, announced the agency's adoption of professional learning standards, established implementation expectations, and laid out a continuous process for planning and evaluation.<sup>14</sup>

Under DODEA's new unified approach, the agency produces an annual professional learning plan for all agency-wide teacher professional learning, broken out by subject matter and grade level (e.g., K-5, 6-12). DODEA officials said they typically start drafting the annual learning plan in February or March and then share a preliminary draft with region and district officials and teachers for feedback before sending out a revised version in July before the school year begins. Teachers participate in the activities included in the plan over the course of 6 professional learning days held each school year. DODEA officials said students are not present during these days so that teachers can focus on professional learning. The first 2 learning days are typically held just before the school year begins, followed by 1 additional day each quarter. Professional learning events held during these 6 days are led by DODEA staff or by contracted professional learning providers.

These agency-wide professional learning days focus on implementing CCRS, which DODEA has been phasing in over time, beginning with

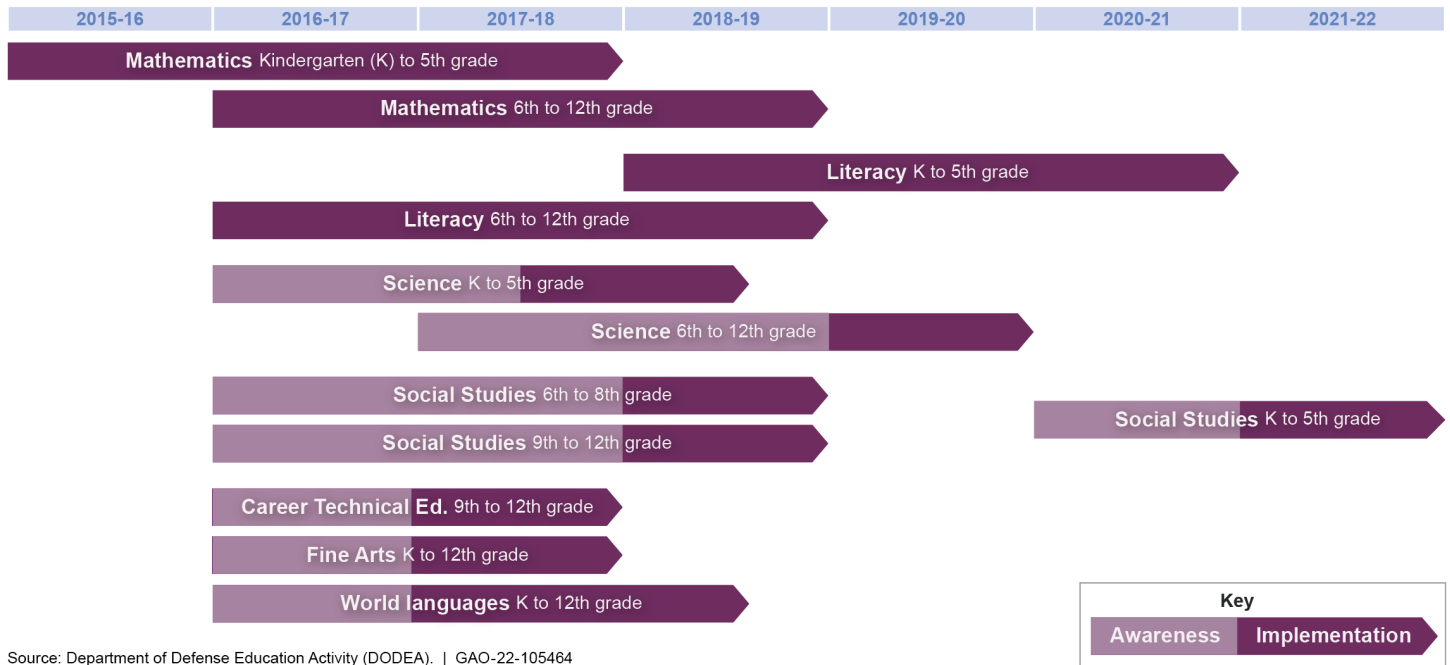
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<sup>13</sup>These officials said CCRS also promotes smoother student transitions to civilian public school districts, which commonly use similar standards as well.

<sup>14</sup>DODEA adopted professional learning standards from Learning Forward, a national educator professional learning membership organization, as previously mentioned.

elementary mathematics in 2015 (see fig. 2).<sup>15</sup> DODEA plans to finish implementing CCRS in the 2021-22 school year, ending with elementary social studies.

**Figure 2: DODEA Implementation of College and Career Readiness Standards**



Source: Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA). | GAO-22-105464

<sup>15</sup>DODEA officials said they start by building standards awareness among teachers before implementing each standard fully. DODEA first began building awareness about CCRS in mathematics and literacy prior to the 2015-2016 school year.

**Accessible Data Table for Figure 2**

	<b>Awareness</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
Mathematics Kindergarten (K) to 5th grade		2015-16 to 2017-18
Mathematics 6th to 12th grade		2016-17 to 2018-19
Literacy K to 5th grade		2018-19 to 2020-21
Literacy 6th to 12th grade		2016-17 to 2018-19
Science K to 5th grade	2016-17 to 2017-18	2017-18 to 2018-19
Science 6th to 12th grade	2017-18 to 2018-19	2019-20 to 2020-21
Social Studies K to 5th grade	2020-2021	2021-22
Social Studies 6th to 8th grade	2016-17 to 2017-18	2018-19 to 2019-20
Social Studies 9th to 12th grade	2016-17 to 2017-18	2018-19 to 2019-20
Career Technical Education 9th to 12th grade	2016-17	2017-18
Fine Arts K to 12th grade	2016-17	2017-18
World languages K to 12th grade	2016-17	2017-18 to 2018-19

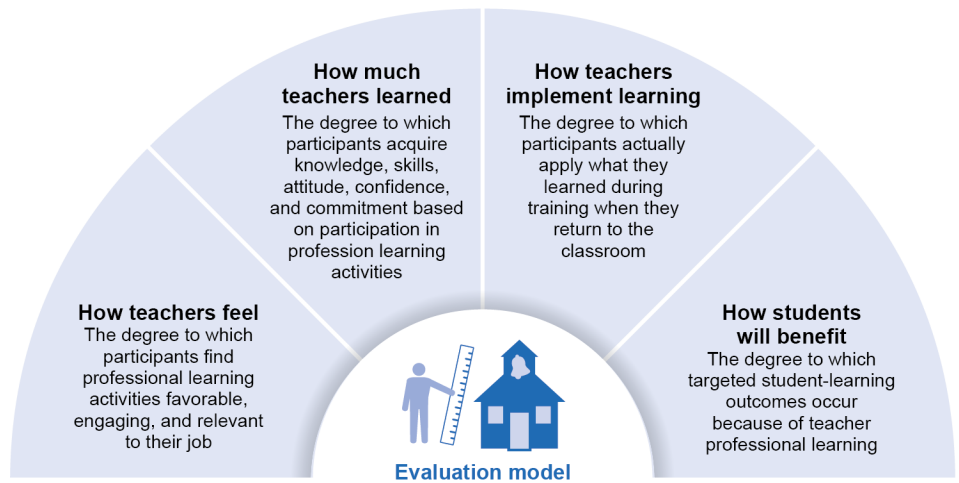
In addition to agency-wide professional learning directed by headquarters, DODEA districts deliver 2 additional professional learning days in support of learning objectives tailored to the district. Under this system, districts develop an improvement plan that establishes learning needs and goals based on student achievement in the district and other inputs. DODEA officials said districts develop learning activities based on these plans. As an example, to address its goal of improving elementary math reasoning scores, one district delivered targeted professional learning to address specific weaknesses in the assessment results of elementary schools within the district.

DODEA also provides on-demand and in-person professional learning opportunities for teachers. For instance, DODEA makes online training courses available and creates opportunities for teachers to share information and resources with each other virtually, such as through moderated discussion groups via DODEA's online learning platform. In addition, district professional learning specialists provide one-on-one support, such as coaching and mentoring, to teachers in the classroom to help guide their professional learning and reinforce key professional learning concepts.

Finally, DODEA's unified professional learning approach also includes ongoing evaluation of agency-wide professional learning activities. To

guide its efforts, DODEA uses an evaluation model that assesses (1) how teachers feel about the professional learning, (2) what teachers learned, (3) how teachers implement what they learned, and (4) how students benefit from teacher professional learning (see fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> As a part of this evaluation approach, DODEA surveys teachers after they complete CCRS-related professional learning to seek their views on the effectiveness of each learning activity. DODEA also conducts regular CCRS implementation studies by subject area to assess, among other things, how professional learning affects the behaviors of teachers and students. Contracted professional learning providers have also surveyed teachers and evaluated the effectiveness of the professional learning events they led.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 3: DODEA’s Evaluation Model for Professional Learning**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) professional learning guidance. | GAO-22-105464

<sup>16</sup>Specifically, DODEA has adopted the Kirkpatrick Model, which includes four levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. The Kirkpatrick Model can be applied to evaluation of professional learning across a variety of sectors.

<sup>17</sup>DODEA officials said they plan to deliver and evaluate professional learning in-house going forward based on the experience they gained during prior years of CCRS implementation.

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## Teachers Have Generally Responded Positively to DODEA Professional Learning in Surveys, but Studies Show Variation in Classroom Implementation

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### In Surveys, Teachers Generally Responded Positively to Professional Learning Events

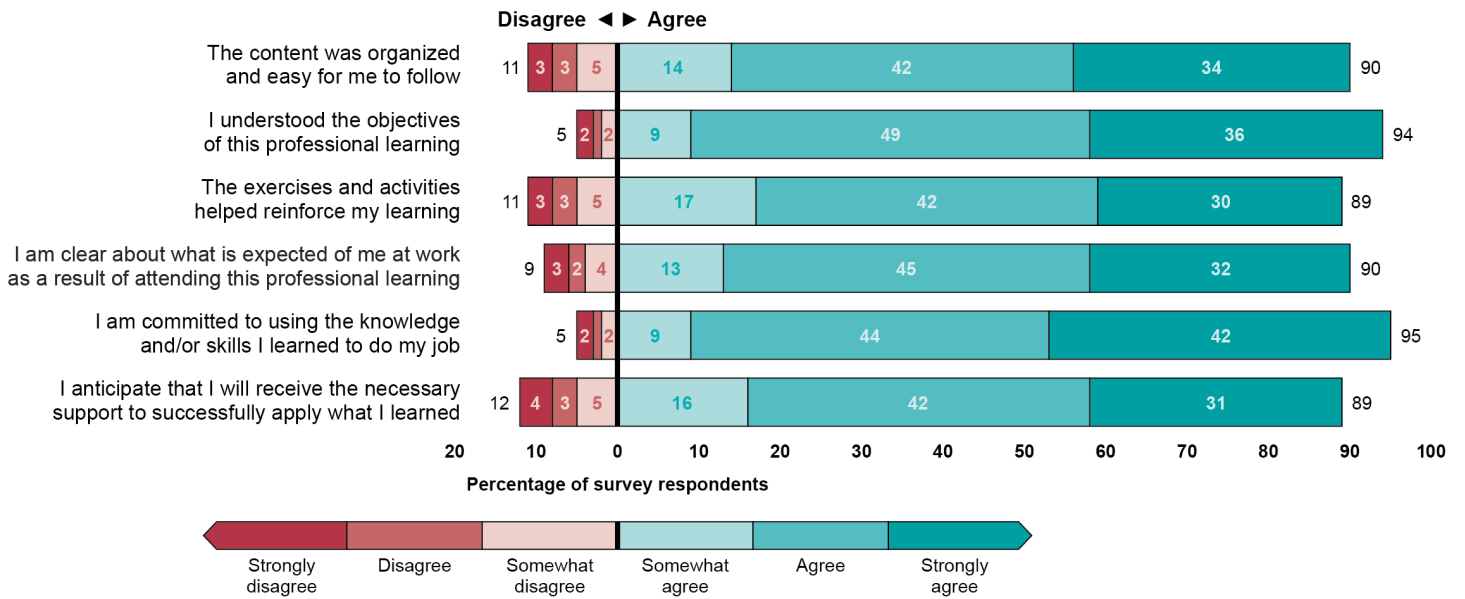
In surveys, DODEA teachers generally reported positive reactions to professional learning events. We analyzed DODEA teacher responses to six-question surveys administered after CCRS professional learning events from the summer of 2018 through the end of 2021, the most recent period available at the time of our review.<sup>18</sup> These survey questions covered how teachers felt about the professional learning event, what they learned, and their ability to implement what they learned in the classroom. We found that nearly all DODEA teachers who responded to these surveys reported that they strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that training content was organized and easy to follow (90 percent), that they understood the objectives of the professional learning (94 percent), and that they intended to apply what they had learned in the classroom (95 percent) (see fig. 4).

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<sup>18</sup>We focused our analysis of teacher feedback on the surveys provided after CCRS professional learning because DODEA officials told us that teacher feedback on other professional learning is captured in a more ad-hoc and informal manner. While we focused our analysis on the six primary questions included in every survey, DODEA sometimes included additional survey questions based on the targeted needs of professional learning staff.



**Figure 4: Teacher Survey Responses to DODEA College and Career Readiness Standards Professional Learning Events, Summer 2018 through End of 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) teacher survey data. | GAO-22-105464

**Accessible Data Table for Figure 4**

**Percentage of survey respondents**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
The content was organized and easy for me to follow	3	3	5	14	42	34
I understood the objectives of this professional learning	2	1	2	9	49	36
The exercises and activities helped reinforce my learning	3	3	5	17	42	30
I am clear about what is expected of me at work as a result of attending this professional learning	3	2	4	13	45	32
I am committed to using the knowledge and/or skills I learned to do my job	2	1	2	9	44	42
I anticipate that I will receive the necessary support to successfully apply what I learned	4	3	5	16	42	31

Note: GAO analyzed nearly 130,000 DODEA teacher responses to these six statements, comprising all teacher responses to these statements in surveys delivered after professional learning events from summer 2018 through the end of 2021. GAO did not include responses from DODEA staff who are not classroom teachers. Some totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Similarly, evaluations conducted by contractors who facilitated DODEA professional learning also indicate that teachers had positive reactions to the CCRS literacy and math professional learning events they facilitated. One evaluation showed that each contractor-led literacy event held in the 2020-2021 school year had an average participant satisfaction score of at least 4 out of 5, indicating that teachers agreed or strongly agreed with a series of statements such as “I understood the objectives of this professional learning.” Another 2018 evaluation showed that participants in contractor-led elementary math professional learning events reported that they were highly satisfied with, learned from, and were motivated to apply what they learned in those professional learning sessions.

One evaluation of contractor-led professional learning also included tests of teacher learning. For instance, the contractor that facilitated literacy professional learning in the 2020-2021 school year used pre- and post-

learning tests in its assessments, enabling the contractor to confirm that teachers had attained new skills or knowledge during the professional learning events it facilitated. While DODEA's teacher survey does not currently assess what teachers actually learned during DODEA-facilitated professional learning events, agency officials told us they recognize that an opportunity exists to gather better information on teacher learning. As a result, DODEA officials said they plan to add knowledge checks to next school year's survey. Such information should enable the agency to better measure this key aspect of professional learning success.

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### DODEA Studies of Professional Learning Implementation Show Teachers Applied What They Learned to a Varying Extent to Enhance Student Learning

DODEA studies of professional learning implementation show that teachers varied in how much they applied what they learned in the classroom to enhance student learning. These studies are based on classroom observations conducted shortly after the new standards were rolled out. The purpose of these observations was to better understand how teachers were applying instructional practices from CCRS training that DODEA considers desired or undesired. Such practices include asking students questions that encourage problem solving.<sup>19</sup> For example, a 2020 CCRS literacy implementation study indicated that about half of observed teachers gave students enough time to think, reason, or analyze for themselves before offering hints—a desired instructional practice. In contrast, about one-fifth of teachers observed engaged in behaviors that decreased the challenge of tasks—an undesired instructional practice.

DODEA's implementation studies also showed that students varied in their use of desired classroom behaviors. For example, DODEA's 2020 CCRS literacy implementation study found that students in about half of observed classrooms engaged in collaborative discussions with each other—a desired student behavior. That study also reported that in schools where DODEA students performed better on assessments, teachers were more likely to display desirable instructional practices,

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<sup>19</sup>Additional desirable instructional practices include using words such as "explain," "why," or "how" to encourage communication about problem solving and reasoning; presenting learning objectives and standards; and demonstrating high expectations for all students by giving them tasks slightly beyond their abilities.

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which may indicate a link between instructional practices and student outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

DODEA officials said the results of these CCRS implementation studies indicate that teachers are applying what they learn to the classroom, but that there is room to increase the use of desirable practices. Officials further said the agency will continue to use classroom observation to measure growth in teacher performance against the baseline set through these initial observations. DODEA officials said they also plan to use observation results to identify areas where they should provide additional supports to teachers.

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## Teachers Anticipated Barriers When Implementing Professional Learning, and DODEA Provides Support to Enhance Instruction

Some DODEA teachers reported barriers they anticipated when implementing professional learning, including time constraints and technology issues—barriers DODEA officials said they recognize and provide supports to address. We analyzed a nongeneralizable sample of over a thousand teacher comments to an open-ended survey question asking what barriers they anticipated in applying what they learned.<sup>21</sup> Over one-third of respondents in our sample said they anticipated no barriers, while the remaining respondents named one or more barriers.

We categorized teacher comments into common themes. Over a quarter (29 percent) of all respondents in our sample reported that they

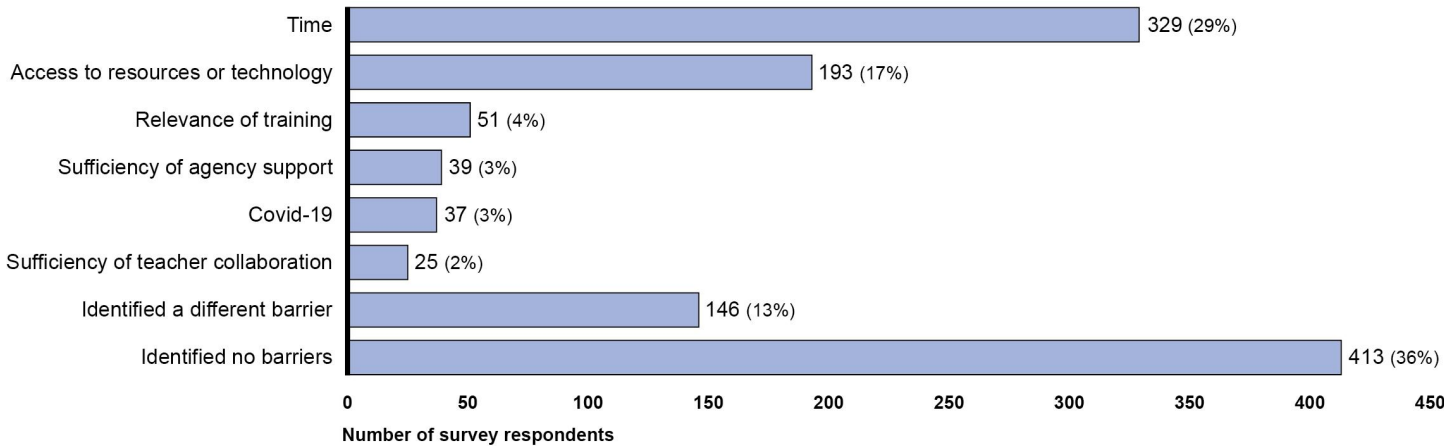
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<sup>20</sup>GAO has previously reported that DODEA students generally perform well on assessments compared to their peers in civilian public schools. For instance, we found that from 2011 to 2019, DODEA students in the fourth and eighth grades received among the highest assessment scores nationwide in mathematics and reading compared to civilian school districts. See GAO, *K-12 Education: Students in DOD Schools Generally Score Higher Than Public School Students on National Assessments*, [GAO-22-105058](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 21, 2022). However, test results are not the sole determinant of student success, and DODEA officials interviewed for this review stated that their goals include greater prevalence of desirable classroom behaviors among students in the future.

<sup>21</sup>This random sample included 1,145 DODEA teacher responses to a question asking what barriers they anticipated in applying what they learned—25 percent of the total 4,580 responses to surveys administered in the summer through the end of 2021. Results from our analysis are nongeneralizable.

anticipated time-related barriers to implementing professional learning in the classroom. About one-sixth (17 percent) of respondents in our sample reported that they anticipated barriers related to access to resources or technology. Respondents also cited barriers related to the relevance of training and other issues (see fig. 5).

**Figure 5: Number of Teacher Survey Comments that Reported Anticipated Barriers to Implementing Professional Learning, by Type, Summer 2021 through End of 2021**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) teacher survey data. | GAO-22-105464

**Accessible Data Table for Figure 5**

	Number of survey respondents	Percentage of survey respondents
Time	329	29
Access to resources or technology	193	17
Relevance of training	51	4
Sufficiency of agency support	39	3
Covid-19	37	3
Sufficiency of teacher collaboration	25	2
Identified a different barrier	146	13
Identified no barriers	413	36

Note: GAO analyzed a nongeneralizable sample of 1,145 of 4,580 (25 percent) DODEA teacher comments—provided during the summer through the end of 2021—to a survey question asking what barriers they anticipated in applying what they learned. GAO categorized the barriers teachers identified into six common themes, and some respondents identified more than one barrier. As a result, percentages sum to greater than 100.

We discussed these three most common themes—time, access to resources, and relevance of training—with four groups of DODEA

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officials, each with its own distinct perspective on professional learning at DODEA.<sup>22</sup> Officials in all four groups confirmed that the themes we identified captured common implementation barriers experienced by teachers. They also described ways the agency helps teachers work through these barriers and expressed commitment to improving supports in the future. Likewise, participants in a fifth discussion group composed of Learning Forward affiliate members affirmed that these themes captured common barriers for teachers in civilian—or “outside the gate”—school districts as well.<sup>23</sup> Some highlights from that discussion group are in sidebars below.

**Observation from “Outside the Gate”**

**Time** is the biggest barrier teachers face in implementing professional learning. Teachers never have enough time to implement everything.

Source: Discussion with civilian professional learning specialists. | GAO-22-105464

Note: The selected observation reflects themes raised in GAO’s discussion group with civilian professional learning specialists and is not generalizable.

**Time.** DODEA officials in all four discussion groups acknowledged that some teachers may face time constraints as they seek to incorporate what they have learned into their instruction. For instance, district professional learning specialists said DODEA’s pace of CCRS implementation has been a barrier for some teachers—particularly elementary teachers, who have had to implement a new set of content-specific standards each year since 2015.<sup>24</sup> Headquarters officials acknowledged that CCRS implementation has required teachers to make many changes to their teaching methods. However, officials said the agency rolled out the standards over the course of multiple years as part of a systematic process that included various teacher supports, such as classroom-based assistance from district professional learning specialists and regular opportunities to collaborate with other teachers. U.S.-based district leaders also told us they provide substitute coverage for a half-day every quarter, during which time the teachers work with district professional learning specialists to implement standards into their classrooms. In addition, officials from all four discussion groups acknowledged that teachers may face difficulty incorporating back-to-

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<sup>22</sup>We held a discussion group with each of the following four types of officials: (1) district professional learning specialists who support teachers, (2) district leaders, (3) regional professional learning specialists who support district leaders, and (4) DODEA headquarters professional learning staff. In addition to time, access to resources and technology, and relevance of training, we discussed barriers related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>23</sup>We held a discussion group with Georgia and Virginia state affiliates of Learning Forward, the organization whose educational professional learning standards DODEA has adopted, to understand how the barriers to implementing professional learning that DODEA teachers identified compare to those of public school teachers.

<sup>24</sup>As of the 2021-2022 school year, DODEA has trained elementary school teachers in all CCRS subject areas, so the 2022-2023 school year will be the first time teachers will not receive training on a new content area since 2015.

school training concepts into instructional practices before the school year starts. In particular, district professional learning specialists told us that teachers often do not have sufficient time to digest what they have learned in CCRS training before they are expected to implement it—often just days later. DODEA headquarters officials said the agency has experimented with introducing new standards at the end of one school year rather than immediately before the next one begins, with mixed results. While teachers had more time over the summer to absorb information and incorporate it into their instructional practices, officials said they noticed a decrease in the quality of implementation due to the long lag time between training and the start of the school year.<sup>25</sup>

**Observation from “Outside the Gate”**

**Access to resources and technology** can be a barrier for civilian schools and districts providing teachers with professional learning. Building a plan that involves all relevant parties and communicating around scheduling can help schools and districts smoothly implement technology during and after professional learning events.

Source: Discussion with civilian professional learning specialists. | GAO-22-105464

Note: The selected observation reflects themes raised in GAO’s discussion group with civilian professional learning specialists and is not generalizable.

Access to resources and technology. DODEA officials in all four discussion groups said that some teachers may face difficulty accessing online platforms during CCRS training, hindering their ability to benefit from professional learning events. For instance, district leaders told us that teachers in some training sessions were unable to access needed technology during professional learning in the summer of 2021, which headquarters officials told us was due to challenges associated with introducing a new digital learning platform. Headquarters officials stated that they expect some technological challenges when new technology is rolled out. These officials said that district professional learning specialists monitor teacher forums during training to identify challenges and communicate with school-embedded educational technology specialists, who can help teachers access technology during training. District professional learning specialists also said they have built platforms and developed directions and how-to guides to help teachers use available technology resources, in addition to providing just-in-time technological assistance in some cases.

Officials in all four groups also acknowledged that teachers may face barriers bringing professional learning to the classroom due to resource limitations, particularly when students must take turns accessing those resources. For example, classrooms may not have enough computers for all students to be online at the same time, which district professional learning specialists told us can impede teachers’ ability to effectively deliver instruction. However, headquarters officials told us that procuring a one-to-one ratio of computers to students had not been an agency

<sup>25</sup>Further, DODEA officials noted that some teachers were reassigned to a new subject or grade level over the summer, making the training irrelevant.

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priority.<sup>26</sup> Further, they said that differentiated instruction—during which some students may be working with technology while others use other resources—is their preferred teaching approach. They stated that professional learning should help teachers better provide differentiated instruction to students within the agency’s existing technology constraints. Headquarters officials told us they will continue to examine technological challenges as they arise and consider how they affect teachers.

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<sup>26</sup>DODEA officials subsequently told us that they would phase in the purchase of computers for all students beginning in the 2022-2023 school year.



**Observation from “Outside the Gate”**

**Making training feel relevant** starts by honoring the skill sets of the people in the room and differentiating training. Teachers should have input in what they want to learn, and the training should model effective learning behaviors – which teachers can then bring to their classrooms.

Source: Discussion with civilian professional learning specialists. | GAO-22-105464

Note: The selected observation reflects themes raised in GAO’s discussion group with civilian professional learning specialists and is not generalizable.

**Relevance of training.** Finally, DODEA officials in all four discussion groups said that some teachers may feel that training is insufficiently tailored to meet their specific learning needs. For example, pre-kindergarten teachers participated in mandatory back-to-school CCRS social studies training during the 2021-2022 school year even though DODEA has a separate curriculum and set of standards for pre-kindergarten. Headquarters officials clarified, however, that these pre-kindergarten standards align with and set the foundation for CCRS. Further, officials said that pre-kindergarten teachers also received professional learning targeted to them for the majority of the CCRS training day. More broadly, headquarters officials noted that the agency’s model of professional learning focuses on how students develop, rather than grade- or subject-specific content, making professional learning concepts broadly applicable across grade levels and subjects. Officials in all four discussion groups also told us that beyond training, the agency provides one-on-one professional learning support throughout the school year to help teachers incorporate the concepts from professional learning into instruction.<sup>27</sup> In addition, both headquarters officials and district professional learning specialists affirmed their responsibility to ensure that teachers understand how training relates to their specific classroom experiences, and expressed continued commitment to doing so.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Defense (DOD) for review and comment. DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

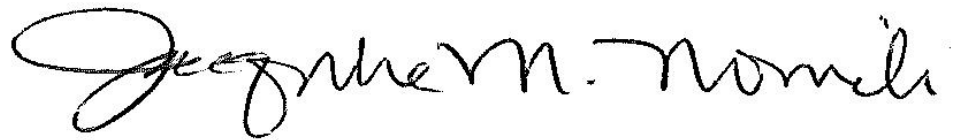
We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on GAO’s web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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<sup>27</sup>These supports include work that district professional learning specialists do with teachers in classrooms, as well as other opportunities like online teacher forums to facilitate communication about curriculum and resources.

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If you or your staff should have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix I.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jacqueline M. Nowicki". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a distinct "M".

Jacqueline M. Nowicki  
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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# Appendix I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO contact

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, (617) 788-0580, or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contacts named above, Ellen Phelps Ranen (Assistant Director), Justin Dunleavy (Analyst-in-Charge), Angelica Guarino, and Jon Muchin made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were James Bennett, Charlotte Cable, John Karikari, James Rebbe, Monica Savoy, Almata Spencer, and Christopher Zbrozek.

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