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## Report says schools need more training on handling emergencies

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USA TODAY

Eight years after the Columbine High School shootings and nearly six years after 9/11, many of the nation's public schools are short on both the equipment and expertise they'll need in case of a full-scale terrorist attack, natural disaster or biohazard emergency, a government report says.

In many cases, schools have never trained alongside local emergency response teams, and in a few districts, school officials won't even be able to use their walkie-talkies to communicate with first responders during an emergency, says the new 50-state study conducted by the Government Accountability Office.

The findings are part of testimony delivered last week before the House Homeland Security Committee, which is looking into school preparedness and emergency responses. The GAO, Congress' watchdog agency, surveyed school districts nationwide and found that:

- Of those with emergency plans, 27 percent have never trained with first responders, as the government recommends; only 29 percent train with "community partners" such as hospitals and municipalities.
- About half of districts don't have plans for continuing to educate students in the event of a lengthy school closure.
- 62 percent cite "a lack of equipment and expertise" as impediments to planning.
- 70 percent say competing priorities, such as academic demands, are "a challenge" to emergency planning.

Holly Kuzmich, deputy chief of staff for the Education Department, noted, "A lot of districts have a plan in place, (but) they put it on a shelf and don't use it." The federal government is not required to review schools' plans, only to verify that they've been filed with the state, she said.

"I assure you that we will tighten that part of the requirement up," committee Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., said.

Kuzmich said colleges and universities are not required to have emergency plans.

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