

OVERVIEW

THE AUDITOR
STATE OF HAWAII

Management Audit of Hawaii's Student Transportation Safety Program

Summary

Our 1978 audit of Hawaii's student transportation service program reported many deficiencies affecting the safety of student passengers. This reexamination of the State's program revealed that in many respects student safety is still a concern despite improvements made over the past 12 years.

One problem is the ongoing use of school buses built before 1977. These "pre-1977" vehicles do not meet federal safety standards for school bus construction and are a danger to passengers in the event of accidents and sudden stops. Students also travel in van-like "Type-III" school buses that do not meet some of the safety requirements for passenger cars and in other vehicles granted statutory or administrative exemption. Hawaii lags behind other states in not requiring all school buses to be equipped with stop signal arms.

The number of inspections of vehicles and drivers by the Department of Transportation has diminished in the past two years. The department also does not have an information system for keeping track of school bus vehicles and drivers. Authority to regulate school bus aides who help in the transport of special education students was allowed to lapse. The department's appeals process in this area does not comply fully with the Hawaii Administrative Procedure Act.

More attention needs to be given to the training and discipline of students and to the handling of school-related transportation--areas where educational personnel have important roles to fulfill. A void in the statutes has meant that private schools are not required to have safety training for their students. In the public schools there is need for more direction and support, especially for emergency evacuation drills and the management of transportation for school-related activities.

Although they significantly affect student transportation safety, such factors as school bus routes, stops, and schedules receive little attention. Of particular concern is the problem of traffic passing school buses stopped for the loading and unloading of students.

Recommendations and Response

Our major recommendations were to bring an early halt to the use of pre-1977 school buses, to phase out the "Type III" school buses, and to narrow the exemptions for non-standard school buses. The Department of Transportation should require all school buses to have stop signal arms, should step up its enforcement activities, and should develop an information system to support its enforcement program. The department should also establish regulatory control over special education school bus aides and bring its appeals process into conformity with the Hawaii Administrative Procedure Act.

We also recommended several improvements in the area of training and discipline. Chief among these was that the Department of Education develop a safety training program for public school students and join with the Department of Accounting and General Services to bring about a program of emergency drills. Both these departments should join with the Department of Transportation in overseeing school bus routes, stops, and schedules.

Of the three departments affected by the audit, only the Department of Transportation responded. It concurs fully with the recommendations as they pertain to the department.

Background

In 1988-89, more than 200,000 students attended almost 400 public and private schools. Of some 168,000 public school students, almost 40,000 were transported daily to and from school on school buses. Including school-related trips, almost all students at one time or another are passengers on school buses.

Three state departments are involved in Hawaii's student transportation program. The Department of Transportation, through its Office of Highway Safety, has prime responsibility for safety regulation, standard setting, and enforcement. The Department of Education is responsible for the safety training and discipline of public school students and for the management of public school-related transportation. The Department of Accounting and General Services handles the subsidized transportation of public school students to and from school, mainly through contracts with private bus companies.

Office of the Auditor State of Hawaii

465 South King Street, Suite 500
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
(808) 548-2450
FAX (808) 548-2693