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[Problems in the Federal Funding of School Bus Driver Training Programs]. CED-77-60; E-164497(3). April 26, 1977. 6 pp.

Report to Secretary, Department of Transportation; by Henry Eschwege, Director, Community and Economic Development Div.

Issue Area: Transportation Systems and Policies: Federal Programs to Promote Transportation Safety (2404).

Contact: Community and Economic Development Div.

Budget Function: Commerce and Transportation: Ground Transportation (404).

Organization Concerned: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Congressional Relevance: House Committee on Public Works and Transportation; Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Authority: Highway Safety Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-564). Federal-Aid Highway Amendments of 1974 (P.L. 93-643; 23 U.S.C. 406). Highway Safety Act of 1976, title II (P.L. 94-280).

Federal and State agencies' efforts to carry out the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's school-bus-driver training programs were surveyed in eight states with driver-training programs. The investigation centered on funding provisions of section 406 of the 1974 Federal Highway Amendments, which authorized the Secretary of Transportation to make grants for school-bus-driver training and specified a level of funding of not less than \$7.5 million in fiscal year 1976. Findings/Conclusions: The State programs varied in approach and depth, but State transportation officials believed them to be adequate within the context of their total highway safety programs. Transportation officials in the eight states believed that enlargement of the programs to meet the funding requirements is impractical because: (1) school bus transportation is relatively safe, and driver training has a lower priority than other highway safety programs; (2) established driver-training programs could not be expanded effectively by using the section 406 funds; and (3) developing a more costly and sophisticated training program would be economically unsound. Portions of section 406 funds could be better used in other pupil transportation areas. Concerns over section 406 center around its funding rather than its objective of providing adequately trained bus drivers. Recommendations: The Secretary of Transportation should submit proposed legislation to repeal the funding subsection of section 406, and should direct the Safety Administration to continue to emphasize the importance of school-bus-driver training programs through review of the states' annual work programs. (RRS)



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

APR 26 1977

B-164497(3)

The Honorable
The Secretary of Transportation

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Safety on the Nation's highways has been a matter of considerable concern to the Congress for many years. This concern has led to the enactment of several laws since 1966 which have contributed to the overall improvement in the Nation's highway safety record. One of the laws, the Federal-Aid Highway Amendments of 1974 (P.L. 93-643), contained a provision designed to improve the safe transportation of school children by encouraging all States to have a school bus driver training program.

We surveyed the Federal and State agencies' efforts to carry out the school bus driver training programs as mandated by the 1974 amendments and administered by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

To develop data on school bus driver training programs, we interviewed officials and reviewed documents at (1) the Safety Administration's headquarters, Washington, D.C. and (2) the Administration's regional offices in Chicago Heights, Illinois; and Linthicum, Maryland. We also visited the State Offices of Education and Transportation in California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas to determine the status of their driver training programs.

PROGRAM EVOLUTION

The Highway Safety Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-564) required all States to develop highway safety programs to reduce accident, injuries, and deaths. In developing these programs, the States were to follow uniform standards issued by the Secretary of Transportation. Since the passage of the act, 18 Federal Highway Safety Standards have been issued covering the driver, the vehicle, and the roadways. The Safety Administration is responsible for the driver and vehicle-related standards, while the Federal Highway Administration is responsible for the roadway-related standards.

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States prepare a comprehensive safety plan and an annual work plan tailored to their highway safety priorities and needs, referred to as Section 402 highway safety programs. The Safety Administration manages these programs through the review and approval of a State's comprehensive and annual work plans.

States and their local communities are responsible for the development and operation of their own programs and, as such, are the primary funding sources for the total safety program. However, Federal aid is provided through cost-sharing grants apportioned to each State on the basis of its population and road mileage. Such grants are used to encourage the States and local communities to accelerate their safety programs to bring them into conformance with the federally established standards. According to available data at the Safety Administration, the Federal grants represent about 2 percent of the programs' total cost.

Section 402 grant funds have been available for States to use in school bus driver training programs since 1967. At that time, such programs were categorized under a general driver education standard (Standard Number 4--Driver Education). In 1972, the Safety Administration issued a new standard under Section 402 (Standard Number 17--Pupil Transportation Safety) providing specific guidance to States on school bus driver training. The States were encouraged to use the Section 402 grants for that purpose.

The Federal-Aid Highway Amendments of 1974 emphasized the development of school bus driver training programs. It added Section 406 which (1) authorized the Secretary to make grants for school bus driver training, (2) set basic criteria for the training programs, and (3) specified a funding level of not less than \$7.5 million in Federal grants for fiscal year 1976. Title II of P.L. 94-280 (The Highway Safety Act of 1976) extended the Section 406 funding to fiscal years 1977 and 1978, requiring the obligation of \$7 million to the program for each of those years. The Federal grants can be used to pay a maximum 70 percent of the cost of any project undertaken by the States.

Separate funds were not authorized for the Section 406 program; instead, portions of the funds authorized to carry out Section 402 programs were restricted for use only in school bus driver training. Section 406 of title 23 U.S.C. is the only statutory provision that directs the obligation of a minimum amount of Section 402 funds in a specific safety

area. The Safety Administration further restricts Section 406 funding to levels greater than that supported by State or local governments in school year 1974-75 or in calendar year 1974, whichever is greater.

The Section 406 funds are available for obligation by the States and apportioned among them in the same manner as Section 402 funds. The apportionment formula does not consider the States' current school bus driver training programs. States lose the Section 406 funds if they do not use them.

STATES' CONCERNS IN IMPLEMENTING SECTION 406

Each of the eight States we visited had driver training programs or were developing them before the 1974 amendments were passed. These programs varied in approach and depth of training, but State transportation officials believed they were adequate within the context of their total highway safety programs. For example, California initiated a training program for school bus drivers in 1970 with the aid of Section 402 grant funds. The program now requires that a driver complete an initial 40-hour training course before obtaining a license and a 20-hour refresher course every 2 years for license renewal. Texas initiated a training program in 1973, in response to Standard 17. Their program requires an initial 20-hour training course and an 8-hour refresher course every 3 years.

Transportation officials of the eight States believe that enlargement of the programs to meet the Section 406 funding requirements is impractical. Some reasons cited were:

- School bus transportation is relatively safe and driver training has a lower priority than other highway safety programs such as:
 1. Emergency medical assistance training and equipment.
 2. Improved traffic record systems for better problem area identification.
 3. More enforcement of the 55 MPH speed limit and the driving under the influence laws.
 4. Training for novice motorcycle drivers.

5. Increased emphasis on high school driver training programs.
 6. Repair and replacement of impact attenuators near bridge abutments and guard rails.
 7. Selective traffic enforcement.
- Established driver training programs could not be expanded effectively by using Section 406 funds;
- Developing a more costly and sophisticated training program than they can independently support when the Section 406 funds are used up, would be economically unsound for the States.

Most of the State pupil transportation officials (primarily from State Offices of Education) were also concerned about the funding aspects of Section 406. Several indicated that in view of the ongoing driver training programs, portions of Section 406 funds could be better used in other pupil transportation areas, such as (1) training bus mechanics, (2) training pupil transportation supervisors, and (3) improving accident data collection systems.

The National Conference of Governors' Highway Safety Representatives (NCGHSR) issued a position paper criticizing categorical funding of highway safety projects, which includes the Section 406 program. The paper stated highway safety problems vary among the States, and each State should be given greater flexibility in determining which specific safety areas should be emphasized and funded to get the best results locally.

The Safety Representatives adopted a resolution in October 1976 to modify or repeal the Section 406 provisions. The resolution states:

"WHEREAS, the National Governors' Conference has adopted a policy position expressing concern over the requirements of 23 USC 406 as being rigid and narrowly defined, and

WHEREAS, the National Governors' Conference and NCGHSR are vitally concerned with the entire issue of school bus safety, not just the training of drivers, and

WHEREAS, funds allocated to 23 USC 406 can be used to train school bus drivers only without regard to the previous or present status of school bus driver training in the several states,

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the NCGHSR seek relief from Congress by modification or repeal of 23 USC 406, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that NCGHSR pledges its full support for comprehensive pupil transportation safety programs in the several states as it seeks relief from the narrow restrictions imposed by 23 USC 406."

Conclusions

Concerns over Section 406 center around its funding mechanism, rather than its objective of producing adequately trained school bus drivers. The funding provision directs every State to spend a specific amount of its Section 402 highway safety money for school bus driver training regardless of the level of its existing training programs. This aspect of the provision appears to be especially inequitable for those States that have relatively sophisticated programs. Based on concerns expressed by State officials, we doubt that the funding restriction allows for the most effective use of available highway safety funds in all cases.

The intent of the Section 406 program was to make riding school buses safer for children. Since States without programs can use Section 402 funds to train school bus drivers, we believe that the congressional intent can be carried out within the framework of the Section 402 highway safety program. If the Safety Administration provides proper guidance and emphasis for these training programs, we believe that the funding subsection of Section 406 can be eliminated without jeopardizing the safety of the children riding school buses.

Recommendations

We recommend that you

--submit proposed legislation to repeal the funding subsection of Section 406 and

--direct the Safety Administration to continue to emphasize the importance of school bus training programs through their review and approval process on the States' annual work programs.

Agency comments

We discussed this report with Safety Administration officials. The officials stated that the funding restriction has caused problems and generally agreed with our recommendations. They stated a legislative proposal similar to our recommendation has already been drafted by the Safety Administration. While their proposal does not call for the repeal of the Section 406 funding subsection, they stated our recommendation for such a repeal would be considered in finalizing their legislative proposal.

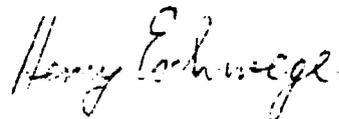
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We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs; and the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations.

Section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the Federal agency to send a written statement on the action taken with respect to our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the Agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesy of the Safety Administration staff during our visits and would like to know your reaction to our recommendations.

Sincerely yours,



Henry Eschwege
Director