
MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION

4.15—Monitoring School Purpose Vehicle Safety

(Follow-up to VFM Section 3.15, *Special Report on Accountability and Value for Money—2000*)

BACKGROUND

In conjunction with our audit of pupil transportation grants provided to school boards by the Ministry of Education, we determined that it was important to also consider the Ministry of Transportation's role in ensuring that pupil transportation is safe.

We concluded that the Ministry could and should strengthen its systems and procedures for ensuring that operators of school purpose vehicles comply with legislative and regulatory safety requirements. In particular, the Ministry had not captured the information needed to ensure that:

- all school buses were subject to being selected for inspection; and
- those operator facilities and inspection stations posing the highest risk of non-compliance were selected for audit.

We also concluded that the Ministry had not sufficiently communicated the nature, extent, and results of its enforcement activities to school boards and needed to co-ordinate efforts with them so that all safety risks are addressed and appropriate actions taken.

We made several recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry that it would take corrective action.

CURRENT STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information provided to us by the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry has taken some action to implement each of the recommendations made in our *Special Report on Accountability and Value for Money* (2000). The current status of each of our recommendations is outlined below.

STRENGTHENING ENFORCEMENT PROCEDURES

Recommendation

To obtain reasonable assurance that school bus operators are complying with legislative and regulatory requirements, the Ministry should:

-
- *establish assurance objectives for its audit/inspection program and determine resource requirements based on these objectives;*
 - *document and periodically assess whether its audit and inspection methods are appropriate and sufficient;*
 - *make greater use of information systems technology to better focus audit and inspection activities on high-risk operators;*
 - *establish reporting and monitoring procedures that allow management to ensure enforcement personnel throughout the province are conducting audit/inspection activities in accordance with the Branch's policies; and*
 - *establish follow-up procedures to verify that school bus operators take timely action to correct problems detected by audits of facilities and Motor Vehicle Inspection Stations.*

Current Status

The Ministry advised us that it had addressed our recommendations through revisions to its audit/inspection procedures, improvements in management review and results-reporting procedures, and the development of a Bus Information Tracking System (BITS). The Ministry expected to complete the input of detailed information about each bus operator and each vehicle in the operator's fleet by the end of 2002. Enforcement officers are to input the results of their enforcement activities into the BITS starting in September 2002.

The Ministry was expecting that by mid-2004 the BITS would contain a sufficient history of enforcement results to enable the Ministry to utilize the system to help identify and target high-risk operators and to contribute to earlier intervention by enforcement officers where warranted. Until that time, the Ministry advised us that its enforcement staff will continue to target high-risk operators using local knowledge of operators in their area.

ESTABLISHING A PROTOCOL FOR CO-OPERATION WITH SCHOOL BOARDS

Recommendation

To better ensure that timely action is taken to enforce pupil transportation safety requirements, the Ministry should work with school boards to develop a protocol that sets out the expectations of each party and establishes procedures to co-ordinate activities and exchange the results of their work.

Current Status

The Ministry had developed, in co-operation with the Ontario Association of School Business Officials, a protocol that, when fully implemented, would address our recommendation. This protocol has been shared with the Ontario School Bus Association and is intended to serve as an effective deterrent to the operation of unsafe school purpose vehicles. The Ministry was expecting that the protocol would be in force starting in the 2002/03 school year.