

# **MID-PLACER PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRANSPORTATION AGENCY**

## **TRANSPORTATION OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN**

Complaint Number 2000A-11

### **Summary/Background**

The 2000-2001 Placer County Grand Jury requested additional follow-up and monitoring of the Mid-Placer Transportation Agency (Mid-Placer, the Agency, or MPPSTA) by the 2001-2002 Grand Jury. The Agency had received numerous complaints from employees of Mid-Placer as well as from parents and teachers of special needs children whose transportation to and from school is provided by the agency. The complaints ranged from a severe lack of staffing of bus drivers and poor management practices, to failure to provide legally mandated transportation of special needs children, including disregard of the Montoya Law requiring criminal background clearances of personnel who come in contact with school children.

Mid-Placer is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) whose members serve the following five school districts: Ackerman Elementary, Colfax Elementary, Loomis Union, Alta-Dutch Flat, and Placer Union High. Each school district has two representatives serving on the Governing Board of Mid-Placer Transportation Agency. Two representatives from the Placer County Office of Education (PCOE) also serve on the Governing Board with meetings that are held once a month. In addition to fulfilling the transportation needs for the member districts, the Agency also has contracts with Newcastle Elementary District and Ophir Elementary District.

The Agency transports nearly 2000 regular home-to-school students and 300 special needs students daily. The special needs routes translate to 600 home-to-school trips per day and 108,600 trips per year. There are a total of 70 employees. The Agency has 47 drivers and 43 bus routes with 4 substitutes, some who work full time and others part time. One aide is currently on duty full time and another is in the hiring process. MPPSTA also provides after school sports buses and transportation for field trips as needed.

Since the 2000-2001 Grand Jury study of Mid-Placer, the former CEO resigned in October of 2000. A new CEO was hired in January of 2001.

The current Grand Jury interviewed the new CEO in September 2001 and again in February 2002. Also interviewed was the Placer County Board of Education (PCOE) Assistant Superintendent of Special Education.

The new management has implemented improvements. The 2000-2001 Grand Jury made recommendations and the 2001-2002 Grand Jury has the following findings.

### **Finding 1**

The Agency has minimized the use of outside contractors for Special Needs transportation. Although not totally eliminated, they have reduced outside contracting by a large margin. Last year approximately 40 to 50 students were transported by outside contractors. As of February 2002 the Agency has five students on MediCab. As personnel becomes available, that number should drop.

Reducing cab services was accomplished through more personnel, better routing, and utilizing three new vans that meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards safety regulations for school buses.

Mid-Placer has formal written contracts with each contractor. Employees of these companies go through Mid-Placer pre-employment requirements of drug testing and fingerprinting.

The recommendations of Finding 1 have been implemented.

### **Finding 2**

The Agency maintains the policy of background checks through the Department of Justice "Live Scan" fingerprinting before any employee transports students. (The California Education Code §45125.1 was amended by the Montoya Law and is included in these background checks.)

The recommendations of Finding 2 have been implemented.

### **Finding 3**

Mid-Placer Board maintains that it fully complies with all established policies and state law concerning the transportation of special needs children. The board appears to be active in providing direction and oversight.

The recommendations of Finding 3 have been implemented.

### **Finding 4**

Accountability for Special Needs Students is in effect. New emergency forms were developed for students' families and schools to fill out so that MPPSTA has the latest up-to-date information on each student.

Emergency forms are kept in three different areas: a master file in the office, the route books for substitute drivers, and on the bus with the regular driver. These forms are updated as changes occur.

The recommendations of Finding 4 have been implemented.

### **Finding 5**

PCOE is highly involved in the Agency and is fully represented on the governing board. PCOE is proactive with the Agency by providing training for employees, including but not limited to CPR and training of related student services such as aides trained in mental health. Aides on buses that transport the emotionally disturbed are decreasing instances of disruption. The Agency is getting positive feedback from families of Special Needs students.

The recommendations of Finding 5 have been implemented.

### **Finding 6**

Regarding the complaint procedure that showed Mid-Placer was failing to respond in a timely manner to complaints by teachers and parents, the board adopted a more proactive Uniform Complaint Procedure, Board Policy #2080. This current procedure closely aligns itself with several California school districts and allows the complaint to be resolved at the lowest possible level or be escalated to the State level if necessary.

Mid-Placer management has developed a new method of monitoring and tracking complaints. Incidents are logged electronically in the PCOE office and are immediately dispersed to the Mid-Placer office. The reports are saved on the computer with 'hard copies' also making it easy to track each complaint from receipt to resolution. Concerns called into the agency are to be returned within one business day or sooner whether or not the issue has been solved. Complaints received by PCOE have dropped from a high of nearly 400 in 1999-2000 to just over 50 in 2000-2001.

The recommendations of Finding 6 have been implemented.

### **Finding 7**

Possibly for the first time in a long time the Agency has more drivers than routes. Although the Agency is reporting more drivers than routes it does face the issue of a 5% to 15% daily absenteeism rate and a need to cover routes for requested field trips. MPPSTA still is in need of more qualified drivers. Mid-Placer will continue to maintain an aggressive campaign to recruit and train more drivers. In the past year drivers have negotiated an increase of 3.17% and have a tentative

agreement for another 3% on the salary schedule. Drivers are now being paid \$10.75 to \$13.06 per hour.

Recruiting, training and hiring are top priority. Strategies for gaining new hires include job fairs, local college contacts, direct mailers, word of mouth, and local newspaper ads.

The recommendations of Finding 7 have been implemented.

### **Finding 8**

Radio equipment has been updated to meet the needs of communications between the school buses and the dispatch office. Two handheld radios for supervisors have been added for times when they are called out on emergencies. Also a new repeater system has been installed with an antenna mounted on a higher hilltop so that the area of coverage is expanded. New digital radios have been installed and programmed in the buses. A communications vendor makes certain all of the equipment is functioning well.

The recommendations of Finding 8 have been implemented.

### **Finding 9**

All relevant information, including IEP protocols, is current and available for internal or external drivers. The information does not breach confidentiality but is adequate to ensure the safety of the special needs children.

The recommendations of Finding 9 have been implemented.

### **Commendation**

New management for the Mid-Placer Transportation Agency implemented and exceeded the recommendations of the prior Grand Jury. No further oversight is necessary by the succeeding Grand Jury.

**No response is required.**