

AUDIT REPORT



CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
BUREAU OF MANAGEMENT AUDIT
WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR., COMPTROLLER

Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Education in Following Up and Resolving School-Bus-Related Complaints

MH08-068A

June 30, 2008



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
1 CENTRE STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10007-2341

WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR.
COMPTROLLER

To the Citizens of the City of New York

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In accordance with the Comptroller's responsibilities contained in Chapter 5, §93, of the New York City Charter, my office has conducted an audit on the effectiveness of the Department of Education (DOE) in following up and resolving school-bus-related complaints.

DOE's Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) is responsible for ensuring that clean, safe, and reliable bus service is provided to and from school for students who are New York City residents. OPT maintains a Customer Service Unit to address transportation concerns raised by callers and to assist in the resolution of complaints. Audits such as this provide a means of determining whether agencies are properly providing services to the public.

The results of our audit, which are presented in this report, have been discussed with DOE officials, and their comments have been considered in the preparation of this report. Their complete written response is attached to this report.

I trust that this report contains information that is of interest to you. If you have any questions concerning this report, please e-mail my audit bureau at audit@comptroller.nyc.gov or telephone my office at 212-669-3747.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William C. Thompson, Jr.'.

William C. Thompson, Jr.

WCT/ec

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ADDENDUM DOE Response

*The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
Bureau of Management Audit*

**Audit Report on the
Effectiveness of the Department of Education in Following
Up and Resolving School-Bus-Related Complaints**

MH08-068A

AUDIT REPORT IN BRIEF

The Department of Education (DOE) provides education to children from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. The Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) is responsible for ensuring that clean, safe, and reliable bus service is provided to and from school for students who are New York City residents. OPT maintains a Customer Service Unit (CSU) to address transportation concerns raised by callers and to assist in the resolution of complaints. CSU agents are responsible for recording all school-bus-related complaints received by telephone into a Call Recording System, which is to be used to track and manage complaints.

According to the Call Recording System, a total of 376,257 school-age complaints were recorded during the period July 1, 2006, through January 15, 2008, and a total of 815 pre-k complaints were recorded during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008. Our audit determined whether the OPT is effectively recording, following up, resolving, and closing school-bus-related complaints.

Audit Findings and Conclusions

Based on our observations of CSU agents and our review of complaint data from the Call Recording System, we conclude that, in general, OPT did not effectively record, follow up, resolve, and close school-bus-related complaints. As a result, there is limited assurance that complaints brought to the attention of OPT regarding unreliable and or unsafe transportation of children are properly identified, determined to be valid, and resolved in a timely and appropriate manner.

OPT indicated that it is in the process of correcting its shortcomings. Nevertheless, we identified several areas of concern, including inadequate procedures for following up, resolving, and closing complaints; and inconsistent handling of complaints by CSU agents that resulted in complaint descriptions not always being complete and clear and assigned complaint numbers not always being provided to callers. We found that resolution descriptions indicated on the print-outs from the Call Recording System were not always detailed and precise and were sometimes blank, and that the resolutions were not actually resolutions as such, but notes documenting the progress in

following up the complaints. In addition: there is no tracking system in place to record written complaints received; informational and transfer calls that do not require follow up are inappropriately assigned complaint numbers; and the same complaint is recorded more than once and assigned different complaint numbers.

Audit Recommendations

Based on our findings, we make 17 recommendations, including that OPT should:

- Develop and implement adequate written procedures that are sufficiently detailed for all of its units when following up, resolving, and closing school-bus-related complaints.
- Ensure that complaints received are recorded fully and clearly, as required by the *Customer Service OPT Overview*, to avoid ambiguity and to ensure timely resolution.
- Ensure that complaints are adequately resolved and require that resolution descriptions in the Call Recording System be detailed and clear. In addition, an authorized individual should be responsible for periodically reviewing the resolutions to ensure that they comply with guidelines established by OPT.
- Develop a tracking system to capture written complaints and ensure that they are recorded promptly, fully, and accurately. Information relating to the resolutions to these complaints should also be recorded.

DOE Response

In their response, DOE officials agreed with 15 of the 17 recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Department of Education (DOE) provides education to children from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. DOE's Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) is responsible for ensuring that clean, safe, and reliable bus service is provided to and from school for students who are New York City (City) residents. In addition, OPT prepares bus routes and notifies all parties involved of the dates of initiation of services; communicates with parents and school-based personnel; conducts vehicle inspections to ensure compliance with safety standards; facilitates all citywide field-trips and transportation for the summer school session; and maintains a Customer Service Unit (CSU) to address transportation concerns raised by callers and to assist in the resolution of complaints.¹ This audit focuses only on OPT's effectiveness in recording, following up, resolving, and closing complaints related to the transportation of children.

CSU consists of approximately 65 agents who are responsible for recording all complaints received by telephone into a Call Recording System, which is to be used to track and manage complaints. The agents are available to speak directly with callers from Monday through Friday generally between the hours of 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. During peak periods, work hours and days are expanded to handle the high demand of calls. Agents are instructed to: (1) identify the issue, (2) decide which of approximately 40 categories the issue falls under and record the category in the Call Recording System, (3) describe the issue fully and clearly in the system, and (4) provide an assigned complaint number to the caller that is automatically generated from the system.

The Call Recording System is set up to permit an agent to first categorize the telephoned complaint. If the agent cannot resolve the issue involved, the complaint is automatically referred to the appropriate unit within OPT for follow up. For example, OPT's Operations Unit, which is responsible for the routing of buses, handles such matters as buses arriving late or not at all to pick up students; and buses that are overloaded. OPT's Field Inspections Unit handles complaints related to the breakdown of buses. The complaint is closed in the system once it is resolved by the unit.

Complaints received by OPT can also include those made against school bus drivers and escorts. Drivers operate school buses contracted by public schools or nonpublic schools—private or parochial. Escorts assist students with disabilities as they get on and off school buses. Drivers and escorts are considered private employees of the bus companies for which they work. It is the duty of bus drivers and escorts to establish discipline and caution students when they misbehave.

The Investigations Unit of OPT is responsible for following up allegations against school bus drivers or escorts such as leaving a child unattended on a parked bus; leaving a child at home without a parent or authorized person present; inflicting corporal punishment; cursing at children; reckless driving; or having weapons discovered on buses. In addition, this unit is responsible for following up allegations of student misconduct related to sexual harassment among students and

¹ Transportation eligibility requirements are based on grade levels and the distance between the residences of students and their schools.

parent misconduct on buses.² Allegations of non-sexual student misconduct are referred by the unit to the school principals of students against whom such allegations are made for follow up and corrective action. As part of the investigative process, OPT investigators may interview bus drivers, escorts, complainants, students, bus company representatives, or other eyewitnesses. They may also follow vehicles and perform bus inspections in front of a student's home, at a school, or at a bus garage.

If the allegations against school bus drivers or escorts are substantiated by the Investigations Unit, then OPT is to contact the bus companies to take appropriate action, such as a warning, transfer, or suspension. During the course of a follow-up, if the alleged conduct threatens the health and safety of students, OPT can immediately suspend bus drivers or escorts. OPT is not allowed to take any disciplinary action against students—only principals can take such action.

DOE has currently taken over the responsibility of transporting pre-kindergarten (pre-k) students and, as a result, handles both school-age and pre-k complaints.³ According to the Call Recording System, a total of 376,257 school-age complaints were recorded during the period July 1, 2006 through January 15, 2008, and a total of 815 pre-k complaints were recorded during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008.

Objective

The objective of the audit was to determine whether OPT is effectively recording, following up, resolving, and closing school-bus-related complaints.

Scope and Methodology

The audit scope period was July 2006 through April 2008.

To obtain an understanding of OPT's responsibilities, goals, and regulations governing the transportation of children and the follow-up and resolution of school-bus-related complaints, we reviewed:

- Chancellor's Regulations C-100, A-801, and A-831;
- Section 156.3 of the New York State Education Department Regulations of the Commissioner;
- DOE, *School Bus Driver's Guide to Clean, Safe, and Reliable Transportation*;
- DOE, *An Escort's Guide to Clean, Safe, and Reliable Transportation*;
- DOE, *Riding the Special Education School Bus*;
- DOE, *School Bus Contractor's Manual of Procedures and Requirements*;
- *OPT Policies Pertaining to Investigations* (Draft); and

² Sexual harassment consists of uninvited sexual advances; requests for sexual favors; and verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is sufficiently severe and pervasive to interfere with a student's ability to participate in or benefit from education.

³ The responsibility was formerly that of the Department of Transportation.

- Manuals issued to new CSU agents such as *Customer Service OPT Overview*, *Call Recording System*, and *Customer Service Training*.

In addition, we interviewed DOE officials, including the Auditor General of the Office of Auditor General; Director and Deputy Director of OPT; Chief Investigator of the OPT Investigations Unit; Chief Executive Officer of the Office of School Support Services (OSSS); Director of Strategic Initiatives of OSSS; Director of the OPT Customer Service Unit; Director of the OPT Training Unit; and the Director of the OPT Operations Unit. We also conducted unannounced observations of nine CSU agents while they handled and recorded complaints received by telephone on four days (January 28 and 30, 2008, and February 6 and 27, 2008).

Reliability of Call Recording System Data

We requested and DOE provided us three Excel spreadsheets extracted from the Call Recording System containing daily complaint data recorded by the CSU agents that included the assigned complaint number, category of complaint, description of complaint, date complaint was made, name and identification number of student and bus company involved in the complaint, and date complaint was resolved. The three spreadsheets included: (1) 90,946 school-age complaints recorded during the period July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007; (2) 285,311 school-age complaints recorded during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008, (while the audit was in process); and (3) 815 pre-k complaints recorded during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008.

To test the reliability of the complaint data in the Call Recording System, we performed the following tests:

- Sorted all three spreadsheets by complaint number in consecutive order and determined whether any numbers were duplicated or missing;
- Sorted the first spreadsheet containing school-age complaints by category of complaint and judgmentally selected 24 of the 40 complaint categories that we determined to be significant as related to child safety and the reliability of transportation. The 24 categories contained a population of 21,946 complaints. We randomly selected three complaints per category for a total of 72 complaints and determined whether the information recorded in the Call Recording System matched information in OPT's hard-copy files;
- Sorted the second spreadsheet containing school-age complaints by category of complaint and judgmentally selected 24 of the 45 complaint categories contained on this spreadsheet. (The 24 complaint categories selected included only 18 of the categories that were selected from the first spreadsheet since the remaining 6 categories had no complaints; and 6 additional categories.) The 24 categories contained a population of 138,222 complaints. We randomly selected three complaints per category for a total of 72 complaints and determined whether the information recorded in the Call Recording System matched information in OPT's hard-copy files; and

- Sorted the third spreadsheet containing pre-k complaints by category of complaint and judgmentally selected 15 of the 35 complaint categories contained on this spreadsheet. (The 15 complaint categories selected included only 11 of the categories selected from the first spreadsheet since the remaining 13 categories had no complaints; and 4 additional categories.) The 15 categories contained a population of 524 complaints. We then randomly selected one complaint per category and determined whether the information recorded in the Call Recording System for the 15 complaints matched information in OPT's hard-copy files.

In total, our test of the reliability of the data included a review of 159 complaints.

Categorization, Referral, and Clarity of Complaints

We obtained a listing from OPT of the complaint categories and the corresponding units to which the complaints in those categories should be referred. Our purpose was to determine whether the 159 complaints in our sample were correctly categorized by the CSU agents and were referred to the correct unit for follow up and resolution. We then printed from the Call Recording System all data pertaining to each of these complaints. We reviewed the descriptions for each of the complaints as indicated on the print-outs and determined the complaint categories the complaints were or should have been classified under and the units within OPT to which the complaints were or should have been referred for follow up and resolution. In addition, we determined whether the CSU agents described the complaints in our sample fully and clearly, as required.

Resolution of Complaints

To determine whether OPT adequately resolved each of the 159 complaints in our sample, we evaluated the resolutions to these complaints that were indicated on the print-outs from the Call Recording System. Next, we requested from OPT and reviewed any additional documentation that they gathered for the complaints in our sample, such as letters or e-mails to parents or principals regarding incidents, Accident Reports, Student Misbehavior Reports, Incident Reports prepared by drivers or escorts, written narratives documenting interviews conducted or of attempted interviews, and written testimonies from drivers, escorts, or eyewitnesses. (Since DOE lacks formal procedures defining what is considered to be an adequate resolution, for purposes of our analysis, we considered an adequate resolution to be: (1) whether DOE determined that the issue was valid, and (2) if so, whether a solution was found to correct the issue.)

For any complaints in our sample that we assessed were not adequately resolved because OPT was not able to get in touch with relevant individuals for follow up, we determined whether the number of attempts made either by letter or phone was adequate. (For our analysis, we judgmentally considered at least three attempts to be adequate.) Our purpose was to assess whether diligent efforts were taken by OPT.

Timeliness of Resolving and Closing Complaints

We calculated the number of days between the dates that the complaints were recorded (dates reported) to the dates that the complaints were resolved (resolution dates) for 151 sampled complaints to determine whether they were resolved by OPT in a timely manner.⁴ Specifically for those complaints pertaining to the investigation of bus drivers or escorts, we determined whether the number of days it took to resolve them fell within 60 school days or 120 calendar days, whichever was shorter, as required by Chancellor's Regulation C-100.

In addition, we calculated the number of days between the resolution dates to the dates that the complaints were closed in the Call Recording System to determine whether complaints were closed soon after they were resolved.

Survey of Parents

We conducted a telephone survey of parents during the months of March and April 2008. We judgmentally selected for interview 55 of the 159 callers in our sample who made complaints.⁵ However, only 20 of the 55 parents participated in the survey. As part of our survey of the parents, we inquired whether: the CSU agents answered their complaint calls promptly; the agents were courteous and well spoken; complaint numbers were provided by the agents; and they were satisfied with the services provided by OPT in handling and resolving complaints. In addition, we asked the parents to confirm the accuracy of the information pertaining to their complaints recorded by OPT in the Call Recording System (i.e., complaint dates, date of incidents, complaint descriptions, and resolutions).

Recording the Same Complaint More than Once

During the course of the audit, we noted that the CSU agents were recording the same complaint more than once and assigning them different complaint numbers. To determine how prevalent this was, we sorted the Excel spreadsheet containing school-age complaints during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008, by students' last names and identification numbers and judgmentally decided to review data in this spreadsheet pertaining to the last names beginning with the letter "A." In total, there were 2,970 complaints.

We considered a complaint for a student whose last name began with the letter "A" to be recorded more than once if it met any of the following criteria: if other complaint descriptions for this student were similar and were recorded within a one-week time period; if other complaint descriptions referred to the same complaint number (regardless of the time period); or if the language of other complaint descriptions was identical to that of the complaint (regardless of the time period).

⁴ Our sample consisted of 159 complaints. However, since our timeliness analysis consisted of only those complaints that were closed, we eliminated from this analysis eight complaints that were pending resolution. As a result, we reduced our sample to 151 complaints.

⁵ We judgmentally selected 25 of the 72 callers during the period July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007; 25 of the 72 callers during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008; and 5 of the 15 callers during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008.

The results of our testing of the above noted samples, while not projected to their respective populations, provided a reasonable basis to satisfy our audit objective.

This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS) and included tests of the records and other auditing procedures considered necessary. This audit was performed in accordance with the audit responsibilities of the City Comptroller as set forth in Chapter 5, §93, of the New York City Charter.

Discussion of Audit Results

The matters covered in this report were discussed with DOE officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft report was sent to DOE officials and was discussed at an exit conference held on May 27, 2008. On June 3, 2008, we submitted a draft report to DOE officials with a request for comments. We received written comments from DOE on June 23, 2008. In their response, DOE officials agreed with 15 of the 17 recommendations. They disagreed with the recommendation to investigate the absence of the cited complaint numbers in the data; and partially agreed with the recommendation to ensure that CSU agents follow the *Customer Service OPT Overview* that requires agents to ask all callers whether the issue being reported has been recorded previously, and if so, not to assign another complaint number. DOE officials stated:

“In Spring 2007, an investigation by the *Daily News* identified serious deficiencies in the DOE’s processes and controls surrounding the intake, tracking, investigation, and resolution of complaints relating to incidents on school buses. In response, Chancellor Joel Klein ordered a complete overhaul of the system and processes for the handling of such complaints and incidents.

“The DOE’s primary issue with the Comptroller on this audit relates not to the findings and recommendations contained in the Report . . . but rather to the timing of the audit The DOE expressed its objection to the timing of this audit immediately upon receiving notice in July 2007 of the Comptroller’s intent to conduct it.

“We indicated that we would welcome an audit in school year 2008-2009 of the new data systems, processes, and controls developed and implemented over the course of school year 2007-2008, at which time the Comptroller could have helped us to assess the effectiveness of our corrective actions. However, the Comptroller insisted on conducting its audit during school year 2007-2008.”

We disagree with DOE’s assertion that the audit was not conducted during an appropriate period and that it should have been conducted during school year 2008-2009. Our intention in performing this audit was to assess the effectiveness of DOE’s operations and to provide helpful recommendations while DOE is in the process of modifying its operations and finalizing procedures. Our sample included complaints recorded during the period July 2006 through January 2008 to reflect prior and current performance by DOE. In addition, during January and February 2008, we conducted observations of CSU agents while they handled and recorded complaints. We believe, and DOE pointed out, “the audit team did offer some helpful

comments and suggestions on our Call Recording System and on a preliminary working draft of the DOE's new policies.”

Moreover, throughout the audit, DOE officials repeatedly stated that they will develop formal procedures for the other units within OPT once the procedures for the Investigations Unit have been finalized. However, as of this writing, neither the Investigations Unit nor the other units within OPT have formal procedures that have been finalized and distributed for the staff to follow. Therefore, it is uncertain that DOE's modification of its operations would have been completed in time for us to perform the audit during school year 2008-2009 as DOE requested.

The full text of the DOE response is included as an addendum to this report.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our observations of CSU agents and our review of complaint data from the Call Recording System, we conclude that, in general, OPT did not effectively record, follow up, resolve, and close school-bus-related complaints. As a result, there is limited assurance that complaints brought to the attention of OPT regarding unreliable and or unsafe transportation of children are properly identified, determined to be valid, and resolved in a timely and appropriate manner.

OPT indicated that it is in the process of correcting its shortcomings. Nevertheless, we identified several areas of concern that remain, including inadequate procedures for following up, resolving, and closing complaints; and inconsistent handling of complaints by CSU agents that resulted in complaint descriptions not always being complete and precise and assigned complaint numbers not always being provided to callers. We found that resolution descriptions indicated on the print-outs from the Call Recording System were not always detailed and clear and were sometimes blank, and that the resolutions were not actually resolutions as such, but notes documenting the progress in following up the complaints. In addition: there is no tracking system in place to record written complaints received; informational and transfer calls that do not require follow up are inappropriately assigned complaint numbers; and the same complaint is recorded more than once and assigned different complaint numbers.

To ensure that safe and reliable bus service is provided to students, OPT must ensure that all complaints received are accurately recorded, adequately identified, followed up, and properly resolved. These areas are discussed in greater detail in the following sections of the report.

Inadequate Formal Procedures for Following Up, Resolving, and Closing Complaints

OPT does not have adequate procedures for following-up and resolving school-bus-related complaints. According to DOE officials, the procedures they follow for complaints related to school buses are contained in Chancellor's Regulation C-100. However, this regulation is not sufficiently detailed and contains merely general guidelines for the Investigations Unit to follow for handling allegations related only to the misconduct of school bus drivers and escorts. There are no regulations governing the Investigations Unit for handling allegations related to misconduct of students of either a sexual or non-sexual nature or misconduct of parents; nor are there regulations governing the other units within OPT for handling complaints for which they are responsible. The lack of comprehensive formal procedures prevents OPT management from ensuring that every person involved in handling complaints understands, consistently follows, and accomplishes all the tasks necessary to successfully achieve the goal of resolving complaints and doing so in a timely manner.

During the entrance conference held on August 8, 2007, DOE officials stated that they are in the process of correcting its shortcomings regarding safety on school buses that were discussed during an April 11, 2007 City Council Committee on Education hearing. The corrections in process include developing procedures for the Investigations Unit to follow when handling allegations regarding misconduct of bus drivers, escorts, students of a sexual nature, and misconduct of parents.

DOE officials subsequently provided us a draft of these procedures, *OPT Policies Pertaining to Investigations*, which they stated they were in the process of developing. However, on March 26, 2008—seven months after the entrance conference—we met with the officials and were told that these procedures had still not been finalized.

During the exit conference, officials stated that the draft of the procedures provided to us, *OPT Policies Pertaining to Investigations*, had been revised and is now more comprehensive; they also stated that this more comprehensive version—although still not finalized—had been on hand since August 2007, the beginning of our audit. They did not provide us an explanation as to why this version was not provided to us at the outset.

As stated in Comptroller’s Directive #1, “Principles of Internal Controls”: “Internal control must be an integral part of agency management in satisfying the agency’s overall responsibility for successfully achieving its assigned mission and assuring full accountability for resources.” It further states that internal control activities help ensure that management’s directives are carried out, such as the timely resolution of complaints against school buses. Controls are the policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms used to enforce management’s directions. The controls must be an integral part of an agency’s planning, implementation, review, and accountability, and are vital to its achieving the desired results.

Throughout the audit, DOE officials repeatedly stated that they will develop formal procedures for the other units within OPT to follow once the procedures for the Investigations Unit have been finalized. However, as of this writing, neither the Investigations Unit nor the other units within OPT have formal procedures.

During the exit conference, officials stated that in addition to the Investigations Unit, one of the other units within OPT in fact has formal procedures. They stated that they consider the manuals issued to new CSU agents, such as *Customer Service OPT Overview*, *Call Recording System*, and *Customer Service Training*, to be procedures for the Customer Service Unit. While these manuals are helpful to the agents, they are not sufficiently detailed and merely contain general guidelines.

Formal procedures are necessary to help ensure that all the units become more effective in handling school-bus-related complaints. The following are some examples that illustrate the need for procedures.

Inadequate Procedures for Timeliness in Resolving Complaints

OPT has not developed formal procedures governing the length of time it should take to resolve complaints. While Regulation C-100 contains a time frame, starting at the point when the allegations are recorded, in which the Investigations Unit is to resolve allegations of misconduct of bus drivers and escorts, there are no regulations or procedures governing the length of time it should take the Investigations Unit to resolve allegations of misconduct of students of a sexual nature or for allegations of misconduct of parents. Regarding allegations of student misconduct of a non-sexual nature, there are no regulations or procedures governing the length of time it should take to refer these allegations to the principals of students against whom

such allegations are made for follow up and corrective action. (For these types of allegations, the principals, not OPT, are responsible for resolving them.) Moreover, there are no regulations or procedures governing the length of time it should take the other units within OPT to resolve complaints for which they are responsible. As a result, for the majority of complaints that it receives, OPT is unable to ensure that complaints are resolved in a timely manner.

Eight of the 159 complaints in our sample did not have resolution dates because they were pending resolution. We calculated the number of days between the dates that the complaints were recorded and the dates on which we printed out the complaint information from the Call Recording System to determine the length of time these complaints had been pending resolution. We found that the number of days ranged from 101 days (more than three months) to 343 days (almost a year).

Of the 151 complaints in our sample that were closed, 22 pertained to the investigation of allegations of misconduct by bus drivers or escorts that were governed by Regulation C-100. We found that 19 (86 percent) of the 22 complaints were resolved within 60 school days or 120 calendar days, whichever was shorter, as required by the regulation. We believe that OPT's general compliance with this established time frame for the 22 complaints may be attributed to the fact that there is a regulation governing the length of time to resolve these types of complaints—increasing the likelihood of timely resolution.

On the other hand, there were no regulations or procedures governing the length of time to resolve the remaining 129 complaints in our sample that were closed. In fact, the number of days between the dates that the complaints were recorded and the dates that they were resolved ranged from the same day to 365 days (an entire year), as shown in Table I, below.

Table I

**Range of Days It Took OPT Units to Resolve the 129 Complaints,
By Unit and Category of Complaint**

OPT Unit	Complaint Category (as on OPT Listing)	Range of Days	# of Complaints
Contract Compliance	Accident	41 days through 139 days	3
Operations	No Pick-Up	Same day through 41 days	7
	Bus Did Not Arrive at School in AM or PM	Same day through 14 days	7
	Special Ed Child Not Receiving Door-to-Door Service	Same day through 25 days	6
	Medical Alert Code Issues	Same day through 25 days	7
	Student Dropped Off at School—Closed for Day *	Same day	1
Customer Service	Parent Not Home	Same day through 129 days	6
	School Released Bus—Child Left at School	1 day through 123 days	7
	Other Issues	Same day through 45 days	4
	Student Placed on Wrong Bus	Same day through 182 days	7
	Student Hurts Oneself on Bus	7 days through 27 days	4
	Informational (General and Special Ed)	Same day	3
	Missing Child/Police	4 days through 37 days	3
	Jumper	6 days through 149 days	3
	Child Left Unattended/Child Left on Bus *	81 days	1
	Student Dropped Off at Home Unattended—Has Permission Slip	1 day through 365 days	2
	Weapon on Bus *	226 days	1
	Accident *	126 days through 133 days	2
	Parent Misconduct/Parent Issues *	1 day through 224 days	4
	Police/EMS/Hospitalization *	127 days	1
Field Inspections	Breakdown/Other Bus Malfunction	Same day through 19 days	7
	Unable to Transport Wheelchair	Same day through 71 days	6
	Dangerous Driving/Reckless Driving	1 day through 120 days	6
Investigations	Parent Misconduct/Parent Issues	Same day through 50 days	6
	Student Misconduct/Unacceptable Behavior	1 day through 152 days	7
	Sexual Misconduct (student)	33 days through 39 days	2
	Weapon on Bus (student)	60 through 90 days	2
	Police/EMS/Hospitalization (student)	1 day through 7 days	2
	Child Left Unattended/Child Left on Bus (parent)	11 days	1
	Missing Child/Police *	1 day	2
	Student Hurst Oneself on Bus *	14 days through 64 days	3
	Accident *	8 days	1
	Student Dropped Off at School—Closed for Day (parent)	Same day	1
	Student Left at School (parent)	Same day through 111 days	3
No Child Left Behind	No Child Left Behind	Same day	1
Total			129

* These complaint categories are normally resolved by other units. However, based on documentation provided, they were handled by the units indicated.

In the absence of established time frames, OPT cannot measure how effective and successful it has been in resolving complaints in a timely manner. For example, one of the complaints (sample #47s), was called in by a bus driver on May 23, 2007, who reported that it was unsafe for a child to ride the bus since the child's electrical wheelchair was constantly moving around. The CSU agent correctly categorized the complaint as "Unable to Transport Wheelchair" and referred it correctly to the Field Inspections Unit. On August 2, 2007—71 days later—the complaint was resolved by the unit.

Further, 8 (40 percent) of the 20 parents who participated in our survey stated that they were not satisfied with the timeliness of the resolution of their complaints. For example, one of the parents (caller sample #25) informed us that it took approximately two to three weeks to resolve her complaint regarding her special education child not being placed on a minibus but instead being placed on a regular bus. To provide better assurance that immediate attention will be given to potentially unsafe conditions, OPT should develop formal time frames for resolving complaints.

Lack of Procedures for Closing Complaints

OPT has not developed formal procedures governing the closing of cases in the Call Recording System once they are resolved. As a result, cases were not always closed promptly when they were resolved. For the 151 complaints reviewed in our sample that were closed, the number of days between the dates cases were resolved and the dates they were closed ranged from the same day to 203 days (almost seven months later). One of the parents we surveyed (caller sample #55) informed us that OPT should close complaints immediately or soon after they are resolved. She stated that after one of her complaints was resolved, six different CSU agents kept calling her because they thought that the complaint was not resolved since it had not been closed in the system.

Lack of Procedures for Clearly Categorizing and Ranking Seriousness of Complaints

DOE officials provide the CSU agents with a listing of approximately 40 complaint categories which are used for tracking complaints. However, they do not provide detailed descriptions for each of the categories. Some of the complaint categories in our sample were vague and required further clarification, such as "Jumper," "Other Issues," and "No Child Left Behind." As a result, complaints can be referred to the incorrect units for follow-up—delaying the resolution process.

In addition, we found that the complaint categories were not prioritized according to the seriousness of the complaints. Some of the complaint categories could be considered more serious than others and should have been flagged as such in the system. Further, we are not certain whether the Customer Service Unit is the most appropriate unit for handling the more serious complaints since these complaints may require specific expertise.

At the exit conference, officials told us that they believe that all the complaints currently handled by the Customer Service Unit should remain under its authority. They further stated that

for more serious complaints within the Customer Service Unit, there is an “escalation process” whereby the agents are required to seek assistance from their supervisors to resolve the complaints. However, we rarely observed agents seeking assistance from their supervisors. Officials agreed that they would provide more training to the agents in this matter.

During our observations of nine CSU agents, we noted that some were unsure about the category under which the complaints that they were recording should fall. For one complaint, a parent had called to notify OPT that she had arrived at home later than the scheduled time of drop-off of her child, and she did not know the whereabouts of her child. The agent gave the parent the bus company’s phone number to call to find out, and ultimately put the complaint under the category “Informational.”⁶ This complaint should have been categorized under “Parent not Home” and followed up by OPT officials to assist the parent in determining the whereabouts of her child. Instead, by categorizing it under “Informational,” no follow-up was required and the complaint was closed.

In addition, another agent we observed entered an informational call under the category “Other Issues.” This category should be used only to record complaints that cannot be classified under any other complaint categories. We reviewed all 4,220 school-age complaints during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008, for the category “Other Issues” and found that 2,516 (60 percent) were for informational and transfer calls. These types of calls should have been categorized under the categories “Informational” and “Transfer Call.”

Of the 140 complaints in our sample in which the complaint descriptions were written in a detailed and clear manner, 32 (23 percent) were incorrectly categorized.⁷ For one of the complaints (sample #22f), the parent stated that her special education child should be picked up by the bus closer to her home. The complaint was categorized as “Breakdown/Other Bus Malfunction” when it should have been categorized under “Special Ed Child Not Receiving Door-to-Door Service.” Misclassifying complaint categories can delay the resolution process.

Recommendations

OPT should:

1. Develop and implement adequate written procedures that are sufficiently detailed for all of its units when following up, resolving, and closing school-bus-related complaints. The procedures should include, among other things: time frames for the resolution and closing of each of the types of complaint categories, detailed descriptions for each of the complaint categories, complaints ranked by their seriousness, and a definition of what is considered to be an adequate resolution for each of the complaint categories.

⁶ Caller is requesting general information that can be provided fairly quickly by agents.

⁷ For 19 of the 159 complaints in our sample, the complaint descriptions were not clear; therefore, we were unable to determine whether the complaints were correctly categorized.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “The DOE started to develop and implement written procedures for the Office of Pupil Transportation . . . Investigations Unit over one year ago. During Spring 2007, OPT engaged in an in depth study of the shortcomings in the processes of its Investigations Unit. After consultation with law enforcement and legal experts, OPT created new processes. . . . These new processes, contained in a working draft manual, have been largely implemented since last spring. Over the course of the past year, however, there have been modifications to draft processes and to the manual to reflect lessons learned. . . . Since the inception of the audit, OPT has developed additional procedures for follow up and resolution of other types of complaints not handled by its Investigations Unit, that now need to be memorialized in manuals or memoranda for OPT’s other operational units. These new processes include escalation through the chain of command and time frames for moving from one stage to another including final resolution.

“The DOE agrees that it should develop and implement adequate written procedures that are sufficiently detailed for all OPT units and it is in different stages of its extensive, ongoing process, depending on the particular OPT operational unit in question.”

2. Provide additional training to the CSU agents to ensure that they seek assistance from their supervisors when they receive serious complaints that they are responsible for handling. In addition, whenever supervisory assistance is rendered, ensure that it is recorded in the Call Recording System.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Approximately one year ago, OPT hired a Manager for Training and developed a comprehensive training program for its CSU agents. OPT provides intensive initial training to new CSU agents along with ongoing professional development. In the past six months, OPT hired an Assistant Manager for Customer Service and two shift supervisors who provide on-the-floor training to CSU agents. OPT agrees to provide additional training to ensure that agents understand when to seek supervisory assistance and to record it properly in the Call Recording System.”

Inconsistent Handling of Complaints

Based on our observations of nine CSU agents and from our review of the print-outs from the Call Recording System for our sampled 159 complaints, we found that there is inconsistency amongst CSU agents in handling complaints received. As a result, there is an increased risk that personnel may not be working together to ensure that all complaints are recorded, adequately identified, followed up, and adequately resolved. The following are examples of the inconsistencies:

Complaint Descriptions Not Always Complete and Clear

The print-outs from the Call Recording System for 19 (12 percent) of the 159 complaints in our sample contained complaint descriptions that were not written in a detailed and clear manner, as required by the *Customer Service OPT Overview*. Without a clear description of the

complaint, it was difficult at times for us to understand the complaint and to determine whether it was resolved satisfactorily.

For example, one of the complaints (sample #28s) was categorized under “Parent Not Home.” However, there was no complaint description—the computer field for the description was blank. In another example (sample #35f), the complaint was categorized under “Reckless Driving.” However, the description was not clear and indicated only “Test 5.” Unclear and difficult-to-read complaint descriptions hinder the ability of OPT to properly identify the issues so that they could be adequately resolved.

It should be noted that some of the agents whom we observed would read to each caller the complaint descriptions that they had recorded as part of verifying the accuracy of the data. We believe that this is good practice and that OPT should ensure that all agents follow this practice when receiving complaints.

CSU Agents Do Not Always Activate the “Busy” Key

During our observations of the CSU agents, we noted that they did not all activate the “busy” key on the telephone when they were not ready to accept another incoming call, as required by the *Customer Service OPT Overview*.⁸ We noted that often agents would not activate the “busy” key while they were recording complaint information in the Call Recording System from callers that they had just finished speaking with. Instead, the agents would accept the next call, minimize (i.e., put aside) their complaint information screen from the previous caller, and then begin recording complaint information for the new call. In such situations, it is possible that complaints will either not be recorded or will be recorded inadequately.

For example, one of the agents we observed had received a very high volume of calls and had not activated the “busy” key. One of the calls she received was from a bus company representative who stated that the nurse, assigned the task of accompanying a child, refused to get off of the bus when the bus reached the child’s destination since the parent was not home. After speaking with her supervisor, the agent informed the caller that the bus driver was to return to the child’s house later, after dropping off the remaining children. If the parent was still not home, the police were to be called. However, rather than activating the “busy” key so that the agent could finish recording the complaint information, the agent answered the next call. Ultimately, the bus company problem was never recorded in the Call Recording System.

We found that agents tend to answer as many calls as possible since they know that their productivity is being monitored by OPT. Nevertheless, CSU agents should ensure that before picking up the phone for the next call, all complaint information from the previous call has been recorded.

Complaint Numbers Not Always Provided to Callers

During our observations of the nine CSU agents, we noted that only two provided the assigned complaint numbers to callers. According to the *Customer Service OPT Overview*, after

⁸ Once the “busy” key is activated, the next incoming call goes to another agent.

a call is received, agents are to (1) identify the issue, (2) decide which category the issue falls under, (3) describe the issue fully and clearly, (4) provide a complaint number to the caller, and (5) ask the caller to use the complaint number for follow-up. Complaint numbers should be provided to callers so that they can be used to identify the complaint when callers follow up. Furthermore, use of the complaint numbers can prevent the same complaint from being recorded more than once.

Recommendations

OPT should:

3. Ensure that complaints received are recorded fully and clearly, as required by the *Customer Service OPT Overview*, to avoid ambiguity and to ensure timely resolution.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Within the past year, OPT created new processes and standards relating to recording complaints as well as hired two new shift supervisors to walk the floor to ensure that CSU agents record complaints fully and clearly. In addition, OPT will continue its ongoing training of CSU agents with an emphasis of clarity of information contained in the complaint.”

4. Modify the *Customer Service OPT Overview* to require CSU agents (or any other individuals) to read back to each caller the complaint descriptions that they record to help ensure the accuracy of the data being entered.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

5. Ensure that CSU agents are working on only one complaint at a time. They should activate the “busy” key on the telephone when they are not ready to accept another incoming call, as required.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

6. Ensure that CSU agents provide complaint numbers to callers and ask the callers to use the complaint numbers for follow-up.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

Inadequate Resolution of Complaints

Based upon our review of the resolution descriptions indicated on the print-outs from the Call Recording System, we found that OPT does not adequately resolve all complaints received. Specifically, 45 (30 percent) of the 151 complaints in our sample that were closed were not adequately resolved. We believe this is a result of not having procedures defining what is

considered to be an adequate resolution. The remaining 106 complaints were either resolved adequately or were not resolved adequately but showed indications that three attempts were made to get in touch with relevant individuals for follow-up. To ensure that children are safe and reliable bus service is provided to students, OPT must be certain that all complaints received are adequately resolved.

The following summarizes the 45 complaints that were not adequately resolved.

- For three of the complaints, there were no resolution descriptions indicated—the relevant computer fields were blank. Nor was there any other documentation provided to us by DOE after our request to prove that these complaints were resolved. Nevertheless, the complaints were closed in the system. For example, one of the complainants (sample #84f) alleged that a bus driver was recklessly driving alongside her car and also was making obscene gestures at her despite children being present on the bus. The complaint was categorized under “Driver/Escort Misconduct.” However, no resolution description was indicated, which leads us to believe that this complaint was never resolved.
- For six of the complaints, the resolution descriptions indicated “Close Case/Out of Date.” According to an OPT official, these complaints were “too far gone” and therefore were closed out in the system. For example, a complaint (sample #25s) was recorded on April 26, 2007, regarding a child who was beaten up. The parent requested the child be put on a different bus. On September 14, 2007—almost five months later—the complaint was closed. The resolution description indicated “Close Case/Out of Date.”
- For 21 of the complaints, the resolution descriptions were notes documenting the progression of following up complaints that should have been recorded either in the “Follow Up” or “Comments” fields. However, they were erroneously recorded in the “Resolution” field. Nevertheless, the complaints were closed in the system as if they had been resolved.

For one of the complaints (sample #4s), a school secretary complained about a bus that did not arrive to pick up several students who were part of a school’s extended day program. The resolution description stated, “Will check to see if extended.” Based on this description, it appears as if no one looked into this matter and that it was not adequately resolved.

- For 12 of the complaints, the resolution descriptions were not recorded in a detailed and clear manner (such as with dates and times of interviews), thus making it difficult at times for us to understand what the resolution was and to determine whether, in fact, the complaints were resolved satisfactorily. For example, the resolution for one of the complaints (sample #38f) merely stated “Resolved” without any other information.

- For three of the complaints, the resolution descriptions referred to additional supporting documentation maintained elsewhere—other than the Call Recording System. We requested this additional documentation, however, OPT was unable to provide it. For example, for one of the complaints (sample #38s), a parent alleged that her child had not yet arrived home and stated that she was in the process of looking for her child at school. The resolution indicated that it was determined that the bus company was not at fault since the parent had a signed permission slip (waiver) allowing the child to be released without a parent or authorized person being available. It also indicated that the waiver was “attached and maintained in the files.” We requested this documentation; however, OPT was unable to provide it.

It should be noted that 10 (50 percent) of the 20 parents who participated in our survey were dissatisfied with OPT’s resolution of their complaints. Without procedures indicating what constitutes a successful resolution, it is often left to each individual’s interpretation to determine resolution. Thus, there is an increased risk that complaints may be inappropriately deemed resolved and closed with no further action taken.

Recommendations

OPT should ensure that:

7. Complaints are adequately resolved and require that resolution descriptions in the Call Recording System be detailed and clear. In addition, an authorized individual should be responsible for periodically reviewing the resolutions to ensure that they comply with guidelines established by OPT.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented. Supervisory review training scheduled for July 2008.”

8. For those complaints that OPT officials are unable to adequately resolve because they cannot get in touch with relevant individuals, notations should indicate that diligent attempts were made, and there should be a secondary process for moving the complaint up the chain of command for resolution.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

9. Notes documenting the progress of following up complaints are not recorded in the “Resolution” field but rather in the “Follow Up” or “Comments” fields.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

10. Ensure that additional documentation referred to in the resolution descriptions be maintained and adequately filed.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated “Recommendation already implemented and part of training. Point of clarification: the ‘additional documentation referred to in the resolution descriptions . . .’ is a one-page form authorizing OPT to drop off a special education student at home if the parent is not present.”

Auditor Comment: We are pleased that DOE officials agree that additional documentation referred to in the resolution descriptions should be maintained and adequately filed. However, we want to clarify that the additional documentation should not be limited to just the “one-page form authorizing OPT to drop off a special education student at home if the parent is not present.” Rather, there is other documentation that should be maintained and filed, such as letters or e-mails to parents or principals regarding incidents, Accident Reports, Student Misbehavior Reports, Incident Reports prepared by drivers or escorts, written narratives documenting interviews conducted or attempted interviews, and written testimonies from drivers, escorts, or eyewitnesses.

11. It periodically selects complaints received and surveys the callers of these complaints to determine caller satisfaction with OPT’s handling of complaints.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation implementation is pending.”

OPT Complaint Data Issues

OPT does not maintain complete and accurate complaint data in its Call Recording System. As a result, management is hindered in its ability to monitor the complaint process and to measure its effectiveness in resolving recorded complaints. Officials informed us that they consider the Call Recording System their tracking system for complaints that the CSU agents (or sometimes their superiors) receive via the telephone. Relevant information for each complaint, such as the date a complaint is reported, the complaint category, and a description of the complaint, is entered into the system. The system automatically generates a complaint number, and once the CSU agent saves the information that has been recorded, the complaint is automatically forwarded to the appropriate unit for follow up. The resolution of the complaint is also entered into the system.

The following are the problems we found with the complaint data:

No Tracking System for Written Complaints

Although OPT has a tracking system in place to record complaints received by telephone, there is no tracking system in place to record written complaints received by mail or e-mail. Thus, it is very possible that some of these complaints may never be addressed. When we brought this matter to the attention of OPT officials, they agreed that written complaints are not recorded or tracked. They further added that they were not even sure whether written complaints were maintained by the OPT officials who received them, and if so, whether these complaints were filed in an organized manner. OPT officials informed us that they are in the process of devising a plan to capture the written complaints.

Without a complaint tracking system that captures both telephone and written complaints, there is no way for management to monitor the total population of complaints that come in each day; ensure that all complaints are being worked on; verify that complaints are resolved in a timely manner; and identify the number of complaints that are pending resolution or closed.

Complaint Numbers Not Included in Data

We did not conduct a technical review of the features of the Call Recording System, but we found indications that the telephone complaint data provided to us by DOE may not be complete. Therefore, we cannot be certain that we have the entire population of telephone complaints received by OPT.

When we sorted each of the three Excel spreadsheets by complaint number in consecutive order, we found that an additional 4,358 complaint numbers should have been but were not listed, as follows:

- 397 additional complaint numbers should have been but were not listed on the spreadsheet containing 90,946 school-age complaints from the period July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007;
- 3,955 additional complaint numbers should have been but were not listed on the spreadsheet containing 285,311 school-age complaints from the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008; and
- 6 additional complaint numbers should have been but were not listed on the spreadsheet containing 6 pre-k complaints from the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008.

We brought this issue to the attention of DOE officials. We were informed that the complaint numbers were not included in the data either because: (1) complaints were voided by agents (or their superiors) when an issue was incorrectly identified or when the same complaint was incorrectly entered twice; or (2) complaints have been archived to free up space in the system. Nevertheless, DOE officials should have provided us the whole population of complaints regardless of whether they were voided or archived; we therefore question validity and accuracy of the data provided.

We judgmentally selected 43 complaints not included in the data that had been voided and printed relevant information from the Call Recording System. We found that while the complaint numbers for all of them were indicated in red—thus indicating voided complaints—only 3 of the 43 voided complaints contained justifications for voiding the complaints. Therefore, we were unable to ascertain whether the remaining 40 had been voided appropriately.

Informational and Transfer Calls Inappropriately Assigned Complaint Numbers

Our review of the data and our observations found that when a person calls OPT requesting information (i.e., a caller requesting a bus company's phone or route number) or when a caller hangs up or asks to be transferred, the call is recorded and automatically receives a complaint number. By assigning complaint numbers to these types of calls that are not indeed complaints, DOE inflates the number of complaints it receives and resolves.

Our review of the complaint data provided to us by DOE officials found the following:

- Only 42,279 (46 percent) of a total of 90,946 school-age complaint numbers assigned during the period July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007, were for actual complaints requiring follow-up. The remaining 48,667 (54 percent) complaint numbers assigned were for informational and transfer calls.
- Only 60,235 (21 percent) of a total of 285,311 school-age complaint numbers assigned during the period July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008, were for actual complaints requiring follow-up. The remaining 225,076 (79 percent) complaint numbers assigned were for informational and transfer calls.⁹

Furthermore, during the four days that we observed nine CSU agents, a total of 67 calls were recorded and assigned complaint numbers. However, only 14 (21 percent) of these calls were for actual complaints requiring follow-up. The remaining 53 (79 percent) complaint numbers assigned were for informational and transfer calls. Our observations further revealed that time is spent unnecessarily recording informational and transfer calls into the Call Recording System, thereby reducing the time that should be spent on recording actual complaints.

According to OPT officials, every call received by a CSU agent is to be recorded and assigned a complaint number—even informational and transfer calls—for purposes such as monitoring each agent's productivity. The number of calls received by telephone has to match the number of calls recorded; discrepancies are scrutinized.

While we agree that the productivity of each agent should be monitored, we do not understand why the large number of informational and transfer calls should be assigned complaint numbers since they do not require follow-up, or why they are included in the data as actual complaints received. These calls should not be included as actual complaints received. Rather, they should be evaluated and reported separately. OPT officials agreed and stated that they are in the process of seeking a new automated system to handle informational and transfer calls, which should alleviate the need for CSU agents to do so.

⁹ Only one pre-k complaint number out of 815 was for an informational call during this period.

Same Complaint Recorded More than Once

During our observation of one of the nine CSU agents, we noted that when she received a call from someone who previously made a complaint that was pending resolution, she again recorded the complaint and assigned a new complaint number instead of being recorded as a follow-up to the original call. By assigning a new complaint number, DOE inflates the number of complaints it receives and resolves. In addition, it also leads to ineffective use of resources since several individuals may be following up the same complaint. In fact, one of the parents in our survey (caller sample #19) stated that OPT assigned different complaint numbers for her recurring problem and that different officials were handling the same complaint. According to the *Customer Service OPT Overview*, agents are required to ask callers if the complaint has been reported previously. If so, the matter is to be recorded as a follow-up to the original call—not assigned another complaint number.

To determine the prevalence of recording the same complaint more than once, we reviewed the complaint data (July 1, 2007, through January 15, 2008) for all school-age students whose last names began with the letter “A.” We found that 733 (25 percent) of the 2,970 complaints recorded for these students were complaints that had already been recorded once.

For example, on eight separate occasions—once each on September 17, 19, 20, and 26, 2007, twice on October 1, 2007, and once each on October 9, and 29, 2007—a parent called and reported that her child was consistently arriving late at school and requested that her child’s transportation be rerouted. Despite the parent’s providing a complaint number for each of the calls, a different complaint number was assigned each time she called; only one complaint number should have been assigned.

Recommendations

OPT should:

12. Develop a tracking system to capture written complaints and ensure that they are recorded promptly, fully, and accurately. Information relating to the resolutions of these complaints should also be recorded.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation implementation is pending.”

13. Investigate the absence of the cited complaint numbers in the data.

DOE Response: DOE disagreed and stated, “OPT already explained the ‘absence of cited complaint numbers in the data’ to the auditors. These complaint numbers are not missing. They represent archived and voided complaints.”

Auditor Comment: Although DOE officials provided us with this general explanation—which we included in the audit—to account for all 4,358 complaint numbers that were not in the data, they did not provide us with specific explanations for each of the complaint numbers. Therefore, we stand by our recommendation that OPT should

investigate the reasons for the absence of the cited complaint numbers in the data. To avoid any future misrepresentation, DOE should ensure that the whole population of data is provided to the auditors at the outset of any future audit.

14. Ensure that reasons for voiding complaints be recorded in a detailed and clear manner in the Call Recording System. An authorized individual should be assigned the responsibility for voiding complaints.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Recommendation already implemented and part of training.”

15. Ensure that informational and transfer calls are not assigned complaint numbers and included as actual complaints received. Rather, they should be evaluated and reported separately.

DOE Response: DOE agreed but stated, “Informational and transfer calls are not assigned complaint numbers, but are assigned Call Recording System tracking numbers. OPT explained this important distinction to the auditors throughout the audit process.”

Auditor Comment: DOE’s response is misleading. It appears that DOE is attempting to draw a distinction between “complaint” numbers and “Call Recording System tracking” numbers; however, no such distinction exists in that they are both one and the same. All calls recorded into the system—whether complaint, informational, or transfer—are assigned a complaint number in the Call Recording System. In fact, in response to our request for all complaints recorded, DOE provided a list of all calls—complaints, informational, and transfer—recorded into the Call Recording system, with each call assigned a complaint number. DOE does not separately report the number of complaints, informational, and transfer calls received. Accordingly, we reaffirm our recommendation.

16. Ensure that the CSU agents follow the *Customer Service OPT Overview* that requires agents to ask all callers whether the issue being reported has been reported previously. If so, the complaint should be recorded as a follow-up to the original call—not assigned another complaint number.

DOE Response: DOE partially agreed and stated, “OPT will implement the recommendation that agents ask callers whether the issue being reported has been reported previously, but the agent will still assign a separate call number in the Call Recording System. OPT plans to upgrade the existing system so that it may not need to assign each complaint a separate number if the complaint relates to the same issue that has not yet been resolved but the existing system does not have the capacity to adequately distinguish between seemingly similar calls. . . . Nonetheless, OPT staff may view the history of complaints relating to a particular student in the current version of the Call Recording System.”

Auditor Comment: We are pleased that OPT will require agents to ask callers whether the issue being reported has been reported previously and plans to upgrade the existing system so that agents may not need to assign each complaint a separate number if the complaint relates to the same issue that has not yet been resolved. However, we believe that until the system is upgraded and agents continue to assign a separate complaint number to an issue already reported, then DOE needs to ensure that the agents record the matter as a follow-up to the original call. In addition, the complaint description for the separate complaint number assigned should reference the original call.

Other Matters

Parent Survey Concerns

Based on our telephone survey, we found that parents had some concerns (in addition to those mentioned in various sections of the report) that OPT should be made aware of. In general, parents felt that OPT should communicate to them the procedures involved for handling complaints, such as the length of time it should take to resolve their complaints, and the process involved for updating them on the status of their complaints. Parents were unsure whether they should be calling OPT on the status of their complaints or whether OPT would notify them of the status of their complaints.

Recommendation

17. OPT should devise a method to communicate to parents at the beginning of each school year the procedures governing the entire complaint process.

DOE Response: DOE agreed and stated, “Updates to the OPT website and new Department of Education Family Guide are pending.”

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June 23, 2008

Honorable John Graham
Deputy Comptroller
The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007-2341

Re: Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Education in Following Up and Resolving School-Bus-Related Complaints (MH08-068A)

Dear Mr. Graham:

This letter submitted on behalf of the New York City Department of Education ("DOE"), along with the attached detailed response to specific findings and recommendations ("Response"), constitute the DOE's formal response to the City of New York Office of the Comptroller's ("Comptroller") draft audit report titled *Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Education in Following Up and Resolving School-Bus-Related Complaints* ("Report").

The DOE's primary issue with the Comptroller on this audit relates not to the findings and recommendations contained in the Report, although we address them in some detail in the attached Response, but rather to the timing of the audit and the Report. The DOE expressed its objection to the timing of this audit immediately upon receiving notice in July 2007 of the Comptroller's intent to conduct it.

In Spring 2007, an investigation by the *Daily News* identified serious deficiencies in the DOE's processes and controls surrounding the intake, tracking, investigation and resolution of complaints relating to incidents on school buses. In response, Chancellor Joel Klein ordered a complete overhaul of the system and processes for the handling of such complaints and incidents. In addition, personnel deemed responsible for the deficiencies were fired and the Chancellor announced that the DOE would hire a new investigations manager and four additional investigators and would upgrade our data systems to allow for more effective and accurate data collection, tracking and categorization of complaints and investigations. The City Council held a hearing on the matters raised by the *Daily News* investigation at which the DOE further clarified and reiterated its extensive corrective action plan.

A corrective action plan of this magnitude and importance takes time and care to execute. The DOE needed to interview and hire a new investigations

manager and new investigators, get them up to speed on the many tasks at hand, completely revamp its data system for intake, triage and tracking of complaints relating to incidents on school buses, and completely redesign its procedure manuals and training materials.

At the entrance conference on August 7, 2007, we noted to the Comptroller's audit team that the deficiencies in our past practices, our acknowledgment of those deficiencies and our responsibility to cure them, and our commitment to overhaul the system and processes for the handling of school-bus-related complaints and incidents, were already matters of extensive public record. We noted that we were still in the early stages of our extensive corrective action plan, that an audit at that time of school-bus-related complaints would obviously reveal deficiencies of which we and the public were already well aware, and that an audit of our processes and controls during school year 2007-2008 would necessarily be an audit of a moving target, as the overhaul of those processes and controls had already been initiated but would take at least several months to complete.

We indicated that we would welcome an audit in school year 2008-2009 of the new data systems, processes and controls developed and implemented over the course of school year 2007-2008, at which time the Comptroller could have helped us to assess the effectiveness of our corrective actions. However, the Comptroller insisted on conducting its audit during school year 2007-2008, before the DOE had an opportunity to complete its new hiring and the design, review, implementation and self-assessment of new procedures, processes and controls. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Report reflects deficiencies in the recording, follow-up and resolution of complaints. We already knew that, as did the public.

However, in the months since the audit was initiated, and since audit team's interviews, document review, data analysis and other field work commenced, the DOE has hired a new Executive Director of its Office of Pupil Transportation ("OPT"), a new Manager of OPT's Investigations Unit, a new Assistant Manager of OPT's Customer Service Unit ("CSU"), and two new CSU Floor Supervisors. Additionally during that time period, OPT has developed new CSU training materials and trained newly hired CSU staff, revised the call tracking categories of the CSU's Call Recording System, used for the tracking and management of school-bus-related calls and complaints, and circulated multiple iterations of a new draft manual for OPT's Investigations Unit. And since the exit conference marking the close of the Comptroller's audit work, OPT has continued to work closely with the DOE's Office of Auditor General to further improve the clarity, consistency and specificity of the processes and standards in the draft policy manual for the Investigations Unit.

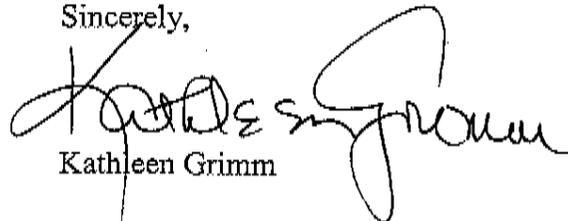
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While our responses to the specific findings and recommendations in the Report are set forth in the attached Response, one global comment on the Report warrants mention in this cover letter. Although we agree with many of the specific recommendations of the Comptroller, the Report generally evaluates OPT's Call Recording System and the data therein as if it were solely intended for the recording and management of "complaints"; and the Report in its presentation of data treats all calls as "complaints". Several of the Comptroller's findings and recommendations appear to be premised on a conflation of "calls" and "complaints". The purpose of the Call Recording System, however, as its name suggests, is to create a record of all calls received and handled by the CSU, including many from constituents seeking information or expressing views on any of a wide variety of issues. Complaints are only a subset of the calls received, and the Call Recording System allows OPT to filter out complaints from other calls as warranted to separately assess the intake and management of complaints. However, OPT believes that a unified data system documenting all calls received yields valuable information to aid OPT in optimizing the configuration of its phone system, tracking the workload and monitoring the efficiency of its customer service agents, and identifying frequently-asked questions to aid in communication and outreach, as well as supporting its monitoring of complaints.

To their credit, the audit team did offer some helpful comments and suggestions on our Call Recording System and on a preliminary working draft of the DOE's new policies for intake, investigation and resolution of complaints relating to incidents on a school bus. But the Report ultimately boils down to just that – comments on a preliminary working draft and on a corrective action plan in progress. It does not even reflect the effectiveness of the new processes and controls that exist today, a few months after the auditors completed their field work, let alone the results the DOE expects and will demand in school year 2008-2009, when the overhaul is finalized and all intake, recording and management of school-bus-related calls and complaints will be processed in accordance with our new policies and under the oversight of the DOE's new Executive Director of OPT and other new managers.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Grimm

cc: Eric Goldstein
Matthew Berlin
Brian Fleischer

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESPONSE TO FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This response to findings and recommendations, with the attached cover letter of New York City Department of Education ("DOE") Deputy Chancellor for Finance and Administration Kathleen Grimm, addresses the City of New York, Office of the Comptroller's ("Comptroller") draft audit report titled *Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Education in Following Up and Resolving School Bus Related Complaints* ("Report").

DOE should:

RECOMMENDATION 1: *Develop and implement adequate written procedures that are sufficiently detailed for all units when following up, resolving, and closing school bus related complaints. The procedures should include, among other things: time frames for the resolution and closing of each of the types of complaint categories, detailed descriptions for each of the complaint categories, complaints ranked by their seriousness, and a definition of what is considered to be an adequate resolution for each of the complaint categories.* (Report, page 14).

RESPONSE: The DOE started to develop and implement written procedures for the Office of Pupil Transportation ("OPT") Investigations Unit over one year ago. During Spring 2007, OPT engaged in an in depth study of the shortcomings in the processes of its Investigations Unit. After consultation with law enforcement and legal experts, OPT created new processes and standards based on the best practices of the New York City Police Department. These new processes, contained in a working draft manual, have been largely implemented since last spring. Over the course of the past year, however, there have been modifications to draft processes and to the manual to reflect lessons learned. Updates to the application that supports the Investigations Unit have also been made so that cases can be more easily categorized and monitored, including time frames from case opening to closing. Since the inception of the audit, OPT has developed additional procedures for follow up and resolution of other types of complaints not handled by its Investigations Unit, that now need to be memorialized in manuals or memoranda for OPT's other operational units. These new processes include escalation through the chain of command and time frames for moving from one stage to another including final resolution. The DOE agrees that it should develop and implement adequate written procedures that are sufficiently detailed for all OPT units and it is in different stages of its extensive, ongoing process, depending on the particular OPT operational unit in question.

RECOMMENDATION 2: *Provide additional training to the CSU agents to ensure that they seek assistance from their supervisors when they receive serious complaints that they are responsible for handling. In addition, whenever supervisory assistance is rendered, ensure that it is recorded in the Call Recording System.* (Report, page 15).

RESPONSE: Approximately one year ago, OPT hired a Manager for Training and developed a comprehensive training program for its CSU agents. OPT provides intensive initial training to new CSU agents along with ongoing professional development. In the past six months, OPT hired an Assistant Manager for Customer Service and two shift supervisors who provide on-the-floor training to CSU agents. OPT agrees to provide additional training to ensure that agents understand when to seek supervisory assistance and to record it properly in the Call Recording System.

RECOMMENDATION 3: *Ensure that complaints received are recorded fully and clearly, as required by the Customer Service OPT Overview, to avoid ambiguity and to ensure timely resolution. (Report, page 16).*

RESPONSE: Within the past year, OPT created new processes and standards relating to recording complaints as well as hired two new shift supervisors to walk the floor to ensure that CSU agents record complaints fully and clearly. In addition, OPT will continue its ongoing training of CSU agents with an emphasis on clarity of information contained in the complaint.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *Modify the Customer Service OPT Overview to require CSU agents (or any other individuals) to read back to each caller the complaint descriptions that they record to help ensure the accuracy of the data being entered. (Report, page 16).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 5: *Ensure that CSU agents are working on only one complaint at a time. They should activate the "busy" key on the telephone when they are not ready to accept another incoming call, as required. (Report, page 18).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 6: *Ensure that CSU agents provide complaint numbers to callers and ask the callers to use the complaint numbers for follow up. (Report, page 17).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 7: *Ensure that complaints are adequately resolved and require that resolution descriptions in the Call Recording System be detailed and clear. In addition, an authorized individual should be responsible for periodically reviewing the resolutions to ensure that they comply with guidelines established by OPT. (Report, page 18).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented. Supervisory review training scheduled for July 2008.

RECOMMENDATION 8: *For those complaints that OPT officials are unable to adequately resolve because they cannot get in touch with relevant individuals, notations*

should indicate that diligent attempts were made, and there should be a secondary process for moving the complaint up the chain of command for resolution. (Report, page 18).

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 9: *Ensure that notes documenting the progress of following up [on] complaints are not recorded in the "Resolution" field but rather in the "Follow Up" or "Comments" fields. (Report, page 18).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 10: *Ensure that additional documentation referred to in the resolution descriptions be maintained and adequately filed. (Report, page 18).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training. Point of clarification: the "additional documentation referred to in the resolution descriptions..." is a one-page form authorizing OPT to drop off a special education student at home if the parent is not present.

RECOMMENDATION 11: *Ensure that OPT periodically selects complaints received and surveys the callers of these complaints to determine caller satisfaction with OPT's handling of complaints. (Report, page 19).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation implementation is pending.

RECOMMENDATION 12: *Develop a tracking system to capture written complaints and ensure that they are recorded promptly, fully, and accurately. Information relating to the resolutions to these complaints should also be recorded. (Report, page 22).*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation implementation is pending.

RECOMMENDATION 13: *Investigate the absence of the cited complaint numbers in the data. (Report, page 22).*

RESPONSE: Disagree. OPT already explained the "absence of cited complaint numbers in the data" to the auditors. These complaint numbers are not missing. They represent archived and voided complaints or calls that are categorized as informational or "transfers" to other offices with a Call Recording System tracking number, which the Report incorrectly characterizes as a "complaint number".

RECOMMENDATION 14: *Ensure that reasons for voiding complaints be recorded in a detailed and clear manner in the Call Recording System. An authorized individual should be assigned the responsibility for voiding complaints. (Report, page 22)*

RESPONSE: Agree. Recommendation already implemented and part of training.

RECOMMENDATION 15: *Ensure that informational and transfer calls are not assigned complaint numbers and included as actual complaints received. Rather, they should be evaluated and reported separately. (Report, page 22)*

RESPONSE: Agree. Informational and transfer calls are not assigned complaint numbers, but are assigned Call Recording System tracking numbers. OPT explained this important distinction to the auditors throughout the audit process.

RECOMMENDATION 16: *Ensure that the CSU agents follow the Customer Service OPT Overview that requires agents to ask all callers whether the issue being reported has been reported previously. If so, the complaint should be recorded as a follow-up to the original call - not assigned another complaint number. (Report, page 22)*

RESPONSE: Agree in part, disagree in part. OPT will implement the recommendation that agents ask callers whether the issue being reported has been reported previously, but the agent will still assign a separate call number in the Call Recording System. OPT plans to upgrade the existing system so that it may not need to assign each complaint a separate number if the complaint relates to the same issue that has not yet been resolved, but the existing system does not have the capacity to adequately distinguish between seemingly similar calls and properly route the complaint to the appropriate unit for resolution. Nonetheless, OPT staff may view the history of complaints relating to a particular student in the current version of the Call Recording System.

RECOMMENDATION 17: *OPT should devise a method to communicate to parents at the beginning of each school year the procedures governing the entire complaint process. (Report, page 22)*

RESPONSE: Agree. Updates to the OPT website and new Department of Education Family Guide are pending.