



United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

July 27, 2006

Congressional Requesters

Subject: *Head Start: Progress and Challenges in Implementing Transportation Regulations*

The leading cause of death for children ages 3 to 7 is motor vehicle traffic crashes. Head Start, a federal early care and education program run by local grantees and targeted at low-income children, currently serves approximately 900,000 children, and transports many of them to and from Head Start centers across the country. While not required to do so, many Head Start grantees offer transportation as a way to make Head Start more widely available to the eligible population, especially very poor children. To address concerns about transporting children safely, the 1992 Head Start Improvement Act directed the Office of Head Start,<sup>1</sup> housed within the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), to develop transportation regulations to ensure the safety and effectiveness of transportation services made available to children by Head Start grantees. Head Start issued these regulations in 2001.

Grantees were required to meet most provisions of the transportation regulations shortly after their issuance in January 2001; however, the compliance date for the provisions regarding passenger restraints and bus monitors was 3 years later, and the provision regarding vehicles was 5 years later. In addition, grantees had two opportunities—in 2004 and in 2005—to delay or seek a waiver from implementing the restraint and monitor provisions by requesting extensions through the Office of Head Start.<sup>2</sup> Further, when grantees annually renew their funding, the transportation regulations also permit them to request a waiver<sup>3</sup> for good cause from any

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<sup>1</sup>At the time of our briefing in May 2006, the Office of Head Start was called the Head Start Bureau. Hence, the briefing slides enclosed with this report refer to the office by its former name.

<sup>2</sup>The effective compliance dates for the restraint and monitor provisions were first extended via an interim final rule published in 2004. Then, Public Law 109-149, passed in 2005, extended the compliance date for the vehicle provision to June 30, 2006, and also allowed the Secretary of HHS to waive the restraint and monitor requirements through September 30, 2006. The vehicle, restraint, and monitor provisions are effective until these respective dates or the date of enactment of a statute that authorizes appropriations for fiscal year 2006 to carry out the Head Start Act, whichever date is earlier. Head Start has issued guidance stating that waivers granted for restraints and monitors would cover the remainder of a grantee's program year, thus making that date the effective compliance date for a grantee. In June 2006, Pub.L. No.109-234 changed the compliance date for vehicles to December 30, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>The general waiver authority is outlined under 45 C.F.R. § 1310.2(c).

provision of the regulations—which the Office of Head Start may approve or deny.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this report, we refer to extensions as implementation delays resulting from the 2004 and 2005 provisions and waivers as those submitted under the general waiver authority provided for in the regulations.

In commenting on the regulations, grantees expressed concern about the cost of complying with the regulations and cautioned that, since transportation was an optional service, these costs might lead some grantees to discontinue offering it at some sites. They also noted that the regulations might jeopardize long-standing partnerships with groups, such as schools and transit agencies, which some grantees use or contract with to provide transportation to their Head Start children. Controversy has also surrounded the requirement for child safety restraints, which typically are not standard on school buses.<sup>5</sup> Restraints reduce seating capacity, which could result in fewer school age children being transported on school buses in favor of other modes of transportation—such as cars—that are less safe. Additionally, given the safety record of school buses, some school systems have questioned whether the costs of installing restraints outweigh their benefits.<sup>6</sup> Currently, most states do not require child safety restraints on school buses.

To provide you with information that you requested on the regulations and their implementation, we determined:

1. The research and cost information Head Start considered in establishing the transportation regulations.
2. The actions Head Start grantees have taken to implement the vehicle, restraint, and bus monitor requirements of the regulations and the number of grantees that have sought waivers and extensions.
3. The associated expenses and effects of implementing the regulations on grantees and their transportation partners.

To determine the research and cost information Head Start considered, we reviewed relevant research and regulations and interviewed officials from the Office of Head Start and the

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<sup>4</sup>On May 30, 2006, Head Start issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) that, if finalized, would expand the definition of “good cause” under the regulations to allow for a waiver of the restraint and monitor requirements if the grantee demonstrates that compliance with these requirements would result in a significant disruption to the grantee’s program and that waiving these requirements would be in the best interest of the children involved. This provision differs from the earlier waiver process in that the cost of complying could be considered when determining whether good cause exists for a waiver.

<sup>5</sup>Traditionally, large school buses have relied on compartmentalization—a system of closely spaced and padded seats that absorb and cushion riders from impact—as opposed to belts or restraints to protect school age children during a crash. However, NHTSA is considering requirements for lap/shoulder belts in small school buses and standards for voluntarily installing lap/shoulder belts in large school buses. See glossary in encl. II for additional information on child safety restraints.

<sup>6</sup>Some grantee, school district, and transit officials have raised concerns about using restraints in the event of a fire or a bus being submerged in water. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) officials indicated that only two fatal accidents have occurred that involved fire or water and that current school bus safety standards for fuel tanks and emergency exits are more stringent. NHTSA officials also explained that having preschool children in restraints would keep them in their seats in the event of an accident, resulting in fewer injuries and facilitating the evacuation of the bus as the children would be able to walk out unassisted.

Department of Transportation's (DOT) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA). To describe the actions grantees have taken, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of Head Start grantees and their delegates, obtaining a response rate of 77 percent. We also analyzed requests for extended time to implement the child restraint and monitor provisions and interviewed officials from the Office of Head Start and HHS Regional Offices about the process for receiving an extension or waiver and other aspects of implementing the regulations. Information to describe the regulations' effects on grantees was gathered through our survey and visits we made to seven grantees and their transportation partners, as appropriate. The states and HHS Regions in which the selected grantees operated were Indiana (Region 5), Iowa (Region 7), Kentucky (Region 4), Massachusetts (Region 1), and Washington (Region 10). Overall, the grantees were selected based on geographical diversity; size (e.g., funded enrollment); organization type; and to achieve a mix of grantees that filed requests in 2004 for more time to implement the restraint and monitor requirements and those that did not. We analyzed this information in combination with information collected from transportation providers to describe the expenses grantees incurred and the operational changes they made to implement the regulations. Enclosure I contains more details on our scope and methodology. We conducted our review between July 2005 and May 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

On May 16, 2006, we briefed your staff on the results of our review. This report formally conveys the information provided during that briefing. (See encl. II for the briefing slides.)

## **BACKGROUND**

Head Start issued transportation regulations in 2001 that included requirements covering equipment, personnel, and training (e.g., for bus drivers) for transporting Head Start children; in particular, the regulations mandated that grantees use some type of school bus—or an alternative vehicle that is similar to a school bus—and required that children be placed in child restraints and accompanied by bus monitors. Head Start worked with two agencies within the U.S. DOT—NHTSA and FTA—to develop the regulations. NHTSA is responsible for developing transportation safety standards that protect children in an accident, including those for school buses. These standards include, for example, roll over protection and joint strengthening, and require crash testing to ensure school buses meet them. FTA provides financial assistance to states to develop new transportation services and improve, maintain, and operate existing systems that serve multiple populations, including older adults and people with disabilities. Transit agencies receiving FTA funding must use buses that meet NHTSA standards for buses, pass FTA's performance testing, and comply with ADA requirements, among other requirements. However, these buses do not meet NHTSA's school bus safety standards and most cannot accommodate child safety restraints;<sup>7</sup> as such, the Head Start transportation regulations do not include public transit buses among the vehicles allowed to transport children.

To ensure that transportation is as widely available as possible, other provisions of the Head Start regulations require that grantees coordinate transportation with other human services

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<sup>7</sup>For additional information on transit buses, see the glossary in encl. II.

programs, many of which also provide transportation services.<sup>8</sup> Head Start grantees—particularly those in rural areas—have relied on school systems and, to a lesser extent, public transit agencies to transport children. Coordinating transportation services has also been a priority of Congress and the White House in recent years. For example, in 2005, Congress passed the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which requires that human services organizations receiving FTA funding targeted to older adults, persons with disabilities, and persons with lower incomes provide transportation services derived from a locally-developed coordinated public transit human services transportation plan.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Concerning the research and cost information that Head Start considered, we found that:

**The Office of Head Start considered safety research and data in developing the regulations.** Research and safety data from NHTSA, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)—an independent federal agency charged with investigating transportation accidents and identifying safety improvements—and the National Academy of Science’s Transportation Research Board shows that buses—both school buses and other types, such as transit buses—have lower fatality rates than other modes of transportation. For example, NHTSA data indicates school buses have 0.2 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled as compared to cars carrying children, which have 1.5 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. NTSB also recommended to Head Start that children be transported in vehicles meeting NHTSA’s school bus standards. NHTSA data also shows that children of all ages are safer when wearing height- and age-appropriate restraints when traveling on school buses. NHTSA’s crash testing of small school buses in 1997 and 1999 demonstrated that the severity of head injuries exceeded acceptable levels when preschool age children were not restrained compared with when they were restrained; this led NHTSA to conclude that compartmentalization did not sufficiently protect preschool-age children and that they were safer using restraints. The NTSB concurred with NHTSA’s recommendation. NHTSA’s 2002 report to Congress on school bus safety<sup>9</sup>—which addresses large school buses—indicates that lap/shoulder belts offer some benefit in reducing the risk of serious injury to older children.<sup>10</sup> NHTSA’s research, however, has been limited to school buses as NHTSA has not conducted crash testing to assess the risk for preschool age children using restraints on transit buses.

**The requirement for a bus monitor was based on Head Start’s conclusion that young children on a bus should be supervised.** Although the Office of Head Start did not research the need for monitors, it based this requirement on the belief that preschool-

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<sup>8</sup>For example, in 2003, GAO reported that 62 federal programs funded transportation services and that many of them did not coordinate with each other. See GAO, *Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Some Coordination Efforts among Programs Providing Transportation Services, but Obstacles Persist*, GAO-03-697 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Report to Congress: School Bus Safety: Crashworthiness Research*, (Washington, D.C.: April 2002).

<sup>10</sup>NHTSA has found, however, that lap/shoulder belts are not appropriate for preschool-age children. Consequently, these younger children would require child safety restraints on large buses to achieve the same benefits in reducing serious injuries as older children using lap/shoulder belts.

age children and younger who ride a bus should be supervised by an adult monitor in case the driver becomes disabled.

**The Office of Head Start no longer has supporting documentation for its cost estimate of \$18.9 million for implementing the regulations.** Without this documentation, we cannot determine the reliability of the data Head Start used to develop its estimates. However, Head Start has lacked the basic information about transportation services offered by its grantees necessary to have calculated a reliable estimate when developing the regulations or to answer future questions about the regulations' costs or effects. This is because the Office of Head Start has not systematically gathered information on the transportation services that grantees provide. ACF regional offices were able to provide us with some information about the transportation services of their grantees, but the information was neither standardized nor in any type of database that could be aggregated for purposes of analysis.

Regarding grantees' actions to implement the regulations and the extent to which they sought extensions and waivers, we found that:

**Grantees have made progress in implementing the regulations.** Approximately 64 percent report that they have finished implementing the regulations while 18 percent reported being almost finished. The remaining 18 percent reported being either half-way or less than half-way finished, or not sure.

**Almost all grantees reported primarily using a vehicle type that complies with the regulations.** Ninety-seven percent of grantees reported primarily using either a school bus (93 percent) or the alternative vehicle allowed by the regulations (4 percent) to transport Head Start children on a daily basis. Bureau officials stated that they purposefully provided a long period of time—approximately 5 years—to implement the vehicle provisions in order to help ensure that grantees had adequate time to replace their old vehicles with ones that would be in compliance with the regulations.

**Grantees reported taking a variety of actions to meet the restraint and monitor requirements.** Most grantees reported (1) either buying restraints and retrofitting their buses with them, or having had vehicles with restraints already in them; and (2) adding the bus monitor responsibilities to duties of existing staff or having had monitors already in place.

**Some transit agencies and other transportation providers who work with Head Start are facing difficulties in using the alternative vehicle.** This is due to a lack of guidance for adapting it to transport other populations in addition to Head Start children. While it was developed so that grantees' transportation partners could meet the requirements of both Head Start and other groups, such as older adults or people with disabilities, NHTSA did not define how the vehicle could differ with respect to school bus features such as narrow aisle width, high-back seats, narrow, high steps, and compartmentalized seating. These features make using the vehicle difficult for older adults and people with disabilities.

**Fewer grantees requested more time to implement the restraint and monitor provisions in 2006 compared to 2004, but the number of waiver requests is unknown.** In 2006, 19 percent of grantees submitted extension requests, dropping from 30 percent in 2004.<sup>11</sup> As for waivers requested under the general waiver authority provided for in the regulations, the Office of Head Start officials stated that they were unaware that any were submitted. However, we obtained copies of some waiver requests or the Office of Head Start's denials of them from a few regional offices and grantees. Additionally, bureau officials confirmed that they have not specifically defined criteria for submitting a waiver to guide grantees in applying for a waiver or the bureau in approving or denying waiver requests.

With respect to the costs and effects on grantees associated with implementing the regulations, we found that:

**Many grantees reported some cost effects from implementing the regulations, but noted that they were facing other budgetary pressures.** Fifty-six percent of grantees reported no more than moderate cost effects on their transportation budgets from implementing the vehicle, restraint, or monitor requirements while 44 percent reported experiencing large or very large increases associated with one or more of these requirements. However, grantees that we visited stated that other costs, such as health insurance, affected their budgets as much as or more than the regulations.

Historically, Head Start helped grantees with the cost of purchasing vehicles and restraints through supplemental money called Program Improvement (PI) funds, providing grantees a total of approximately \$76 million in fiscal years 2001 through 2005.<sup>12</sup> However, grantees are now expected to pay for replacing vehicles and restraints out of annual operating monies or nonfederal sources.

**Grantees are experiencing effects to transportation services or program operations as a result of implementing the regulations.** Fifty-eight percent of grantees reported at least one effect on transportation services as a result of the regulations, most often noting that they changed transportation routes (83 percent) or reduced transportation services (50 percent). Sixty-seven percent of grantees also reported that implementing the regulations had at least one effect on their program operations, most often reporting that they increased the number of staff (58 percent); increased staff hours (54 percent); changed, reduced, or eliminated other program services (49 percent); or reduced staff hours in the classroom (49 percent).

**Some grantees are facing difficulties sustaining transportation partnerships.** Thirty-six percent of grantees contracted with or used another organization—mostly school systems—for transportation services to at least some or all of their program sites.

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<sup>11</sup>We do not have data to determine the reasons for the decline in extension requests between 2004 and 2006. However, our survey data shows that grantees have taken actions to comply with the regulations either by making the required changes or, in some cases, reducing or eliminating transportation services.

<sup>12</sup>This figure only represents the amount of PI funding that was provided to help grantees in implementing some provisions of the transportation regulations; it does not represent the total amount of PI funding awarded by Head Start for these years.

About a quarter of them reported that their transportation partners discontinued service for this program year while approximately 39 percent of these grantees reported that the contractor would discontinue services for the 2006/2007 program year. For example, 14 of Iowa's 15 DOT regions provided transportation via transit buses to Head Start grantees prior to the regulations; since the regulations' issuance, 9 have discontinued or plan to discontinue some or all services to Head Start grantees, primarily because transit buses do not meet the definition of an allowable vehicle under the regulations. Although Iowa's transit buses were built to meet several of NHTSA's school bus crashworthiness standards and can accommodate child restraints, they do not meet all of them, such as compartmentalization. According to Iowa DOT officials, the loss of Head Start funding has resulted in some Iowa transit agencies reducing services, raising costs, or both for others they serve, such as older adults or people with disabilities. FTA and transit officials indicated that other transit agencies that have had a history of coordinating human services transportation have encountered similar difficulties.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Many grantees have implemented the transportation regulations, with some experiencing adverse program and budgetary effects to do so, including reducing transportation services. But the Office of Head Start does not track transportation services that grantees provide and thus will not know if grantees will be able to continue to comply, or, if over time, other budget pressures will lead more grantees to cut transportation. These cuts could ultimately affect grantees' ability to meet enrollment and other program goals, or reduce transportation safety by children using less safe forms of transportation.

The waiver process will be the key mechanism for grantees to bring compliance issues to the Office of Head Start's attention. However, the Office of Head Start lacks a management process for tracking and considering waivers. Developing such a process would also allow the bureau to define the circumstances or issues on which it needs NHTSA's and FTA's expertise. Further, the bureau has not specifically defined its criteria for "good cause" so that grantees would know the conditions under which adhering to the regulations would create a safety hazard appropriate for requesting a waiver. The absence of a clear process and criteria may pose a barrier for grantees in using this mechanism and reduce grantees' assurance that their issues will be weighed appropriately.

Transit agencies are facing difficulties addressing dual goals: meeting the mobility needs of multiple populations including Head Start children, people with disabilities, and older adults while addressing federal safety requirements. While the federal government has encouraged human service and transit agencies to use one type of vehicle to more efficiently transport multiple populations, there has been limited federal guidance on simultaneously achieving both efficient mobility and safety goals. Specifically, few transit agencies use the alternative vehicle because, while it meets Head Start safety requirements, it does not comply with ADA requirements and consequently is not practical for transporting older adults and people with disabilities. Information on how the alternative vehicle can be adapted for transit would be useful to both transit agencies and Head Start grantees given the program's mandate to provide services to children with disabilities.

Furthermore, some transit agencies—in an effort to maintain long-standing coordination efforts—have adapted transit buses to incorporate standards that they believe sufficiently

protect preschool age children. However, NHTSA, FTA, and Head Start have not determined the safety features needed for transit buses to sufficiently protect these children. Thus, transit agencies are faced with reducing or eliminating service to Head Start, resulting in some children being transported in vehicles that are less safe or not being able to attend Head Start at all.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE ACTION**

In order to determine the ability of grantees to provide transportation services and to define the waiver process, we make the following three recommendations to the Office of Head Start:

- Systematically track transportation services provided by grantees so that the Bureau can determine changes in the availability of these services, especially any reduction in them.
- Establish a waiver process that specifies criteria for submitting waivers, including more specific guidance on what constitutes “good cause,” lists the responsible entities for review and approval, and documents the receipt, review, and final disposition of each waiver. Should any waiver requests submitted require Head Start to address issues concerning vehicles, the waiver process should include consultation with NHTSA and FTA as appropriate.
- Once a process has been established, take steps to ensure that grantees and regional staff know about it and understand how it works.

In order to enable grantees and transit agencies to better coordinate transportation services, we make the following two recommendations to DOT, in consultation with Head Start:

- Develop guidance on adapting the alternative vehicle to incorporate ADA requirements and communicate this guidance to Head Start grantees and transit agencies.
- Determine if certain safety features could be incorporated into transit buses used by Head Start grantees to provide a level of safety comparable to school buses or alternative vehicles in transporting preschoolers.
  - If this determination cannot be made before the remaining deadlines expire, we recommend that Head Start, in consultation with DOT, should determine on a case-by-case basis whether grantees using transit vehicles with child safety restraints can continue to do so until such a determination can be made.
  - If DOT determines that transit vehicles with appropriate safety features would afford suitable protections, we recommend that Head Start adopt these features into the final Head Start transportation regulations.

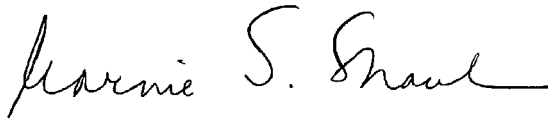
## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

We provided a draft of our report for comment to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF); and the Department of Transportation (DOT), specifically NHTSA and FTA. DOT provided technical comments which we incorporated where appropriate. Regarding the lack of guidance on achieving mobility and safety goals, FTA noted that it has a research project under way aimed at developing a new small bus that would meet both of these goals. We encourage FTA to continue these efforts.

ACF agreed with the two recommendations regarding the waiver process and indicated that it would consider our recommendation that it track the availability of transportation services. ACF also provided technical comments that we included in the report where appropriate. (See encl. III for a copy of ACF's comments.)



As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies of the report to relevant congressional committees and other interested parties and will make copies available to others upon request. The report will also be available on GAO's Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact either one of us at (202) 512-7215 (Marnie Shaul) or (202) 512-6570 (Katherine Siggerud). Betty Ward-Zukerman and Cathy Colwell, Glen Trochelman—Assistant Directors—Lynn Filla-Clark and Janet Mascia—Analysts-in-Charge—and Sandra Tasic, Jeffrey Weinstein, Stuart Kaufman, and Nancy Hess also made key contributions to this report.



Marnie Shaul  
Director, Education, Workforce, and  
Income Security Issues



Katherine Siggerud  
Director, Physical Infrastructure  
Issues

Enclosures

*List of Congressional Requesters*

The Honorable Howard P. “Buck” McKeon  
Chairman  
The Honorable George Miller  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Don Young  
Chairman  
The Honorable James L. Oberstar  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael N. Castle  
Chairman  
The Honorable Lynn C. Woolsey  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Education Reform  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
House of Representatives

The Honorable John A. Boehner  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Betty McCollum  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Anne Meagher Northup  
House of Representatives

## OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

We designed our study to determine the following: (1) the research and cost information Head Start considered in establishing the transportation regulations; (2) the actions Head Start grantees have taken to implement the vehicle, restraint, and bus monitor requirements of the regulations and the number of grantees that have sought waivers and extensions; and (3) the associated expenses and effects of implementing the regulations on grantees and their transportation partners.

We obtained information to determine these objectives by interviewing cognizant federal and state officials as well as representatives from associations, advocacy groups, bus manufacturers and dealers, and independent transportation contractors; collecting and analyzing extension requests from Head Start grantees submitted to the Office of Head Start for 2004 and 2006; conducting site visits with Head Start program officials and their transportation partners; and surveying a nationally representative sample of Head Start grantees and delegates.

### Interviews

Office of Head Start and HHS Regional Offices: We interviewed officials from the Office of Head Start to discuss, among other things, the background and development of the Head Start transportation regulations, information on grantees' transportation services, and the extension and waiver process. We also interviewed Head Start program staff in the 10 HHS Regional offices as well as officials from the American Indian-Alaska Native and Migrant and Seasonal Program Branches responsible for Head Start grantees and delegates serving migrant, American Indian, and Native Alaskan families and children. From the regional offices, we collected data on the amount of Program Improvement funds awarded to grantees for purchasing buses and child restraints, and discussed their perspective on the impact of the regulations on Head Start grantees and delegates in their regions.

Transportation Agencies: We interviewed officials from the U.S. Department of Transportation, including the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). We also interviewed officials from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), an independent federal agency charged by Congress to investigate transportation accidents. Our interviews inquired about the current safety research regarding transporting preschool children on school buses or alternate vehicles, the agencies' involvement in helping Head Start to develop the transportation regulations, issues related to the development of the alternative vehicle, and the impact of the regulations on transit agencies working with Head Start grantees and other human service organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Associations and Advocacy and Trade Organizations: In addition to federal officials, we also met with representatives of transportation associations including the American Public Transportation Association, Community Transportation Association of America, National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, the National School Transportation Association, and

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<sup>13</sup>The regulations describe this vehicle as an Allowable Alternate Vehicle; NHTSA defines it as a Multi Function School Activity Bus. For purposes of this report, we will refer to it as the alternative vehicle.

the National Association for Pupil Transportation to discuss the impact of the regulations on their members. We also met with representatives of the American Academy of Pediatrics to discuss safety issues concerning the transportation of preschool age children. We spoke with representatives from the National Head Start Association as well as several of their members at their annual state directors’ meeting to learn more about the perspective of Head Start grantees on implementing the regulations. Finally, we interviewed representatives from bus manufacturers and dealers, as well as independent transportation contractors primarily to gather cost information about school buses, alternative vehicles, and contracting for transportation services.

**Site Visits**

We visited seven Head Start grantees located in five different states and ACF regions in order to learn more about the effects on grantees’ budgets and program services from implementing the regulations, and to meet with their transportation partners, where appropriate, to discuss the impact of the regulations on providing transportation to Head Start. The states and HHS Regions in which the selected grantees operated were Indiana (Region 5), Iowa (Region 7), Kentucky (Region 4), Massachusetts (Region 1), and Washington (Region 10). Overall, the grantees were selected based on geographical diversity; size (e.g., funded enrollment); organization type; and to achieve a mix of grantees that filed requests in 2004 for more time to implement the restraint and monitor requirements and those that did not. (See table 1.) In addition to these criteria, we specifically selected Iowa and Washington because of unique partnerships between some Head Start grantees in those states and organizations that helped them transport Head Start children to and from their centers.

**Table 1: Site Selection Characteristics**

Grantee location	ACF region	Organization type	Funded enrollment (children)	Filed extension request in 2004
Greencastle, Ind.	5	Non-profit	415	No
Louisville, Ky.	4	School system	1,850	Yes
Fort Dodge, Iowa	7	Non-profit	194	Yes
Renton, Wash.	10	Government agency	1,703	Yes
Pullman, Wash.	10	Non-profit	72	No
Boston, Mass.	1	Community action agency	2,000	Yes
Westfield, Mass.	1	School system	205	No

**Documentation**

In conducting our work, we reviewed relevant background information on the programs, regulations, legislation, and transportation research studies and viewed videotapes of NHTSA’s crash testing of small school buses with preschool-age dummies. We also collected and analyzed all extension requests for more time to implement the restraint and monitor provisions from Head Start grantees to the Office of Head Start, as well as some waiver request letters that either regional offices or grantees provided us. Finally, we collected data on the amount of Program Improvement funds awarded to Head Start grantees used to purchase buses or child restraints

from all HHS regional offices. While we asked for this data for fiscal years 2001 through 2005, some Regional offices were not able to provide this information for all years. Specifically, we did not receive data from four regions for fiscal years 2001 and 2002, and from two regions for fiscal year 2003. Also some regions could not report the number of buses that had been financed, in whole or in part, with Head Start funding, or the number sold or taken out of service because such requests were not retained.

### **Survey Development and Sample Selection**

We developed the survey questionnaire and conducted five pretests of its content and format with Head Start grantee directors and others knowledgeable about the transportation of children to and from Head Start centers. The pretests were conducted either in-person or by telephone. During these pretests, we asked Head Start grantees whether the questions were clear and unbiased, whether the terms contained in the questionnaire were accurate and precise, and whether they would be able to provide us with accurate data on various attributes of the vehicles used to transport children. We made changes to the questionnaire based on the pretest results.

The surveys were conducted using self-administered electronic questionnaires posted on the World Wide Web. We sent e-mail notifications to all sampled Head Start grantees on January 5, 2006, to inform them that our Web-based survey would soon be activated. On January 10, 2006, we sent each potential respondent another e-mail containing a unique username and password to ensure that only Head Start grantees included in our sample could participate in the survey. To encourage respondents to complete the questionnaire, we sent follow-up e-mails to those who had not yet responded on January 19, 2006; January 27, 2006; and on February 6, 2006. During the week of February 13, 2006, GAO support staff made telephone calls to grantees that still had not responded in order to encourage them to respond. We closed the survey on February 28, 2006.

We were interested in obtaining information on transportation services provided by Head Start grantees and their progress and challenges in implementing the Head Start transportation regulations. To do this, we drew a stratified random probability sample of 449 Head Start grantees or delegates from a population of 1,928 agencies that operate local Head Start programs. Grantees and delegates that operated only Early Head Start programs were excluded from the population from which we selected our sample. We selected our sample to represent eight strata defined by the organization type (community action agencies, government or tribal entities, private, non-profit, or school systems) and whether the program had filed an extension request in 2004. Ultimately, we received 339 responses for an adjusted response rate of 77 percent. The division of the population, the sample, and the respondents across the eight strata can be found in table 2. Each sampled grantee or delegate was subsequently weighted in the analysis to represent all the members of the population.

**Table 2: Sample Disposition**

Stratum number	Stratum description	Total population size	Total sample size	Number of respondents
1	CAA that filed an extension request	233	44	33
2	CAA that did not file an extension request	405	76	64
3	School system that filed an extension request	132	40	36
4	School system that did not file an extension request	235	70	53
5	Private organization that filed an extension request	122	21	18
6	Private organization that did not file an extension request	560	99	72
7	Government entity that filed an extension request	57	24	13
8	Government entity that did not file an extension request	184	75	50
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,928</b>	<b>449</b>	<b>339</b>

All percentage estimates from our sample have margins of error (that is, confidence interval widths) of plus or minus 10 percentage points or less, at the 95-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.

In addition to sampling errors, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey may introduce errors, commonly referred to as non-sampling errors. For example, difficulties in how a particular question is interpreted, in the sources of information that are available to respondents, or in how the data are entered into a database or were analyzed, can introduce unwanted variability into the survey results. We took steps in the development of the questionnaire, the data collection, and the data analysis to minimize these non-sampling errors. For example, a survey specialist designed the questionnaire in collaboration with GAO staff with subject matter expertise. Then, the draft questionnaire was pretested with a number of Head Start officials to ensure that the questions were relevant, clearly stated, and easy to comprehend. In addition, the questionnaire was reviewed by a second survey specialist. When the data were analyzed, a second, independent analyst checked all computer programs. Since this was a Web-based survey, respondents entered their answers directly into the electronic questionnaire. This eliminated the need to have the data keyed into a database thus removing an additional source of potential error.

### **Sample Selection for Analyzing Extension Requests**

To characterize reasons for Head Start agencies filing an extension request, we drew a stratified random probability sample from the population of 581 agencies that filed an extension request in 2004. We selected our sample for two strata defined by the Head Start region (Region 3, all other regions). Ultimately, we examined 188 extension requests. The division of the population and the division of the sample across the two strata can be found in table 3. Each sampled agency that filed an extension request was subsequently weighted in the analysis so that final results represent all the members of the population of agencies that filed extension requests.

**Table 3: Sample Disposition**

<b>Stratum number</b>	<b>Stratum description</b>	<b>Total agencies that filed an extension request</b>	<b>Total sample size</b>
1	Region 3 agency requests	68	68
2	All other regions' agency requests	513	117
<b>Total</b>		<b>581</b>	<b>185</b>

All percentage estimates from our sample of the extension requests have margins of error (that is, confidence interval widths) of plus or minus 7 percentage points or less, at the 95-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.



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# **Head Start: Progress and Challenges in Implementing Transportation Regulations**

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**Briefing to Staff of the House  
Committees on Education and the Workforce,  
Transportation and Infrastructure,  
Subcommittee on Education Reform and  
Representatives McCollum and Northup  
May 16, 2006**

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## Introduction

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- Young children are some of our most vulnerable citizens, especially when being transported in vehicles. The Head Start program serves over 900,000 children, ages birth to 5, and provides most of them with transportation services, sometimes in partnership with other agencies, to and from Head Start programs each day.
  
  - As required by provisions in the 1992 Head Start Improvement Act, the Head Start Bureau developed transportation regulations to assure that safe and effective transportation services were available.
    - Issued regulations in January 2001
    - Pursuant to statutory changes, the compliance date for meeting the vehicle type requirement is June 30, 2006, by which time programs are to use school buses or specific alternate vehicles that incorporate school bus safety features
    - Compliance dates for equipping vehicles with restraints and assuring the presence of bus monitor was June 2004 for those who did not request more time, or the end of grantees' 2006 program year for those who received time extensions
-



## Introduction

- To increase transportation safety in Head Start, the regulations required grantees to meet vehicle, equipment, training, and personnel provisions.
- Additionally, Head Start regulations required that grantees coordinate transportation services with other human services programs to ensure that transportation is as widely available as possible. Many of these programs provide transportation services—a 2003 GAO report found that 62 federal programs funded transportation services and that many of them did not coordinate with each other.<sup>1</sup>
- The regulations were developed in consultation with two Department of Transportation (DOT) agencies—the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).
- In commenting on the proposed regulations, some Head Start programs expressed concern about implementing the regulations without adversely affecting their budget, transportation services, and other program services provided.
- In response, Head Start allowed grantees to request extensions for more time to implement the child restraint and bus monitor provisions.

<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Some Coordination Efforts Among Programs Providing Transportation Services, but Obstacles Persist*, GAO-03-697 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2003).



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## Objectives

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To provide information on the regulations and their implementation, GAO determined:

1. The research and cost information Head Start considered in establishing the transportation regulations
2. The actions Head Start grantees have taken to implement the vehicle, restraint, and bus monitor requirements of the regulations, and the number of grantees that have sought waivers and extensions
3. The associated expenses and effects of implementing the regulations on grantees and their transportation partners

See glossary on slides 50-55 for definitions of terms used throughout these slides and pictures of vehicles used by Head Start grantees and child safety restraints

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## Scope and Methodology

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- Surveyed a nationally representative sample of 449 Head Start grantees out of a total of 1,928 that deliver Head Start services<sup>1</sup>
  - Overall response rate was 77 percent
  - Responses from this survey were used to project to approximately 1,370 grantees and delegates that provide transportation services,<sup>2</sup> with a 95-percent confidence interval of +/- 10 percent
- Interviewed federal and state officials; representatives from transportation association and advocacy groups; Head Start program providers; bus manufacturers; and transportation providers

(continued)

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of these slides, we refer to all Head Start grantees and their delegate agencies—entities that help grantees deliver services—as grantees. Our survey excluded grantees that provided only Early Head Start services.

<sup>2</sup>This number is an estimate with a range from 1,290 to 1,460.



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## Scope and Methodology

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- Conducted site visits with 7 grantees in 5 states, selected for geographic diversity, size, and organization sponsorship to learn about the steps and choices grantees made to meet the regulations
  - Reviewed transportation research, agency regulations and guidance and other documentation
  - Analyzed the Head Start Bureau's extension and waiver request documentation
  - This work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.
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## Results in Brief – Objective 1

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- Head Start used NHTSA and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) research in formulating its vehicle and restraint requirements.
    - NHTSA and NTSB research shows that preschoolers are safer on school buses than passenger vehicles.
    - NHTSA research shows preschoolers on small school buses are even safer when in child safety restraints. Similarly, data from a 2002 NHTSA report indicates that lap/shoulder belts offer some benefit to older children riding school buses. Because lap/shoulder belts are not appropriate for preschool age children, they would need child safety restraints when riding on large school buses to achieve the same benefit.
  - The requirement for a bus monitor was based on the Head Start Bureau's conclusion that young children should be supervised by an adult while riding on the bus, in the event that the driver became disabled.
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## Results in Brief – Objective 1

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- The Head Start Bureau no longer has the documentation supporting its \$18.9 million estimate for the cost of implementing the regulations nor does it systematically track grantees' transportation services. Thus, it lacks basic information to develop a reliable estimate.



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## Results in Brief—Objective 2

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- Based on our survey, about two-thirds of the approximately 1,370 Head Start grantees that offer transportation reported having completely finished implementing the regulations as of February 28, 2006. An additional 18 percent reported having almost finished.
  - Others are still having problems in meeting the requirements. GAO's analysis of Head Start's 2006 extension request documentation shows that 19 percent of grantees asked for more time to implement the restraint and monitor requirements. The number of waivers—requests for exemptions from the regulations submitted by grantees with their annual refunding application—is unknown.
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## Results in Brief—Objective 2

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- Of the approximately 1,370 grantees providing transportation, 97 percent report using vehicles that meet the Head Start requirements for vehicle type, mostly school buses.
  - The small percentage of grantees that work with transit and other transportation partners using an alternative vehicle allowed by the regulations are challenged by the lack of guidance on how to adapt these vehicles to meet the transportation and safety needs of Head Start as well as other populations that they serve.
  - The waiver process exists as a mechanism for grantees to raise issues with the Bureau regarding compliance, but the Bureau does not have a clearly defined process for tracking and considering waiver requests. This may pose a barrier for grantee use.
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## Results in Brief—Objective 3

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- Approximately 56 percent of grantees who provided transportation reported having, at most, moderate cost effects associated with implementing the vehicle, restraint, and/or the monitor requirements while 44 percent reported large to very large cost effects for at least one or more of these provisions.
  
  - Grantees reported effects on their transportation services and operations as a result of implementing the regulations:
    - An estimated 58 percent of the 1,370 grantees providing transportation reported at least one effect on their transportation services such as changing routes or reducing transportation services.
    - An estimated 67 percent of grantees reported at least one effect on program operations, including increasing the number of staff needed or increasing staff hours.
    - A third of grantees reported increased parental satisfaction with transportation services.
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## Background: Head Start

- Head Start was created in 1965 to provide comprehensive child development services primarily to poor children.
- In FY 2005, Congress appropriated \$6.84 billion to almost 2,000 Head Start grantees that provide services to over 900,000 children nationwide.
- Grantees are not required to provide transportation services, but many do so to assist children's access to the program, especially those from very poor families.

<b>Fiscal year</b>	<b>Appropriated budget (billions)</b>	<b>Percentage change in budget from previous year</b>
2001	\$6.20	+17.7%
2002	\$6.54	+5.5%
2003	\$6.67	+2.0%
2004	\$6.77	+1.6%
2005	\$6.84	+1.0%

Source: Head Start Bureau.



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## Background: Head Start Transportation Regulations Modified after Issuance

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- In January 2001, Head Start issued transportation regulations requiring, among other things, that
  - *By January 20, 2004*, vehicles transporting Head Start children have a bus monitor on board and all children be transported in age-height appropriate child safety restraints.
  - *By January 18, 2006*, vehicles transporting Head Start children be school buses or allowable alternate vehicles<sup>1</sup> that meet safety standards required of school buses.
- Section 1310.2(c) of the regulations also allowed grantees to apply for waivers to any transportation requirement for “good cause” (i.e., where implementation may cause a safety hazard to children); cost cannot be cited as a reason for a waiver.

<sup>1</sup>NHTSA has also defined this vehicle as a Multi Function School Activity Bus. However, for purposes of these slides, we will refer to it as the alternative vehicle.



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## Background: Head Start Transportation Regulations Modified After Issuance

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- In January 2004, the Head Start Bureau issued interim final regulations allowing grantees to apply for a time extension to meet the monitor or restraint requirements.
  - For grantees with approved extension requests, time to comply was extended to January 2006
- In December 2005, the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations act extended the time allowed to meet
  - the vehicle requirement to June 30, 2006<sup>1</sup>
  - the monitor and restraint requirements until September 30, 2006, (by authorizing HHS to grant a waiver of these requirements) or the date of the enactment of a statute that authorizes appropriations for FY 2006 to carry out the Head Start Act, whichever date is earlier<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In June 2006, P.L.109-234 extended the compliance date for the vehicle provisions to December 2006.

<sup>2</sup>The Head Start Bureau's guidance to grantees in 2006 states that the agency will consider waiver requests that would cover the remainder of a grantee's program year, thus making that date the effective compliance date for the grantee.

<sup>3</sup>On May 30, 2006, Head Start issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) that, if finalized, would expand the definition of "good cause" under the regulations to allow for a waiver of the restraints and monitors requirements if the grantee demonstrates that compliance with these requirements would result in a significant disruption to the grantee's program and that waiving these requirements would be in the best interest of the children involved. This provision differs from the earlier waiver process in that the cost of complying could be considered when determining whether good cause exists for a waiver.



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## Background: U.S. DOT and NTSB

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- Two DOT agencies whose missions are to ensure safe transportation services and provide human service transportation have worked with Head Start to help develop the Head Start transportation regulations.
    - NHTSA helps ensure highway and motor vehicle safety and establishes standards intended to protect occupants during accidents, as well as to prevent accidents
    - FTA provides financial assistance to develop new transportation services and improve, maintain, and operate existing systems that serve the general population as well as older adults and people with disabilities
      - Transit agencies receiving FTA funding must have vehicles that comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, including being wheel chair accessible
      - FTA participates in the United We Ride program established pursuant to an executive order in 2004 that required coordinating transportation for human services programs, including Head Start
  - NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress to investigate a variety of transportation accidents and make recommendations about preventing future ones, and provided input to HHS regarding the safety of vehicles used for Head Start
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## Background: Vehicles Used to Transport Children to Head Start

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- Head Start grantees or their transportation partners use a variety of vehicles to transport children, including:
  - Large and small school buses, which are built to safety standards issued by NHTSA, and include various safety features to protect children in the event of an accident, such as compartmentalization, a system of closely spaced and padded seats
  - An alternate vehicle that is similar to a school bus, with the exception that it does not have stop arms or flashing lights
  - Public transit buses, which are used by public transit agencies that also transport members of the general population as well as older adults and people with disabilities

Definitions and more detailed explanations of these vehicles, as well as pictures, are included in the glossary on slides 51-53

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## Background: Child Safety Restraints

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- Child safety restraints include:
  - Restraints that are added to the vehicle after it is purchased
  - Restraints that are built into the seat, also known as integrated child safety restraints.

Additional information describing the various types of child safety restraints, as well as pictures, can be found in the glossary on slides 54 and 55





## Objective 1: Head Start Considered Safety Of School Buses and NTSB Recommendations

- The Head Start Bureau considered school bus safety data in deciding to require their use or the use of alternative vehicles.
  - In the 1990's, some Head Start grantees used 15-passenger vans (see picture at right) that do not meet NHTSA school bus standards such as joint strength and rollover protection, high backed padded seats, and minimum seat spacing
  - In 1998 and 1999, 4 accidents occurred involving children in vehicles not meeting these standards, including 15-passenger vans, resulting in fatalities and serious injuries, including a fatally injured Head Start child
- As a result, in 1999 NTSB recommended to Head Start that children should be transported in vehicles meeting NHTSA school bus standards.



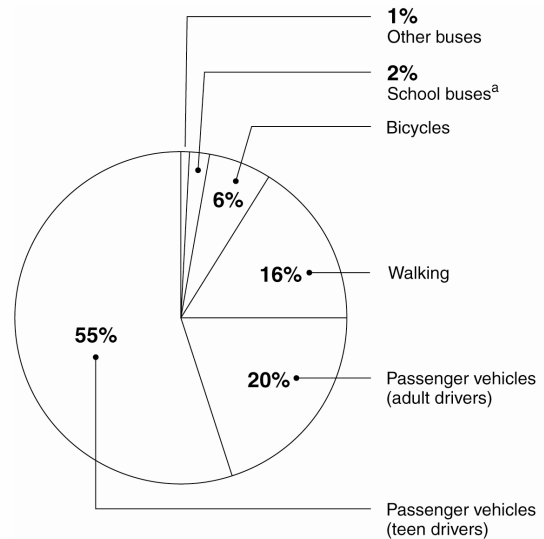
Source: GAO.

15-passenger van.



## Objective 1: School Buses Have Lower Fatality Rates Than Other Modes of Transportation

- NHTSA data indicates school buses have much lower student fatality rates than passenger vehicles.
  - School buses: 0.2 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled
  - Cars: 1.5 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled
- 2002 Transportation Research Board report, *The Relative Risks of School Travel*, indicates school buses and other buses account for far fewer fatalities among school age children during normal school hours than other modes of school transportation. (See figure to the right.)



Source: Transportation Research Board.

<sup>a</sup>On average this represents about 20 fatalities per year; of these, 5 are passengers and 15 are pedestrians.



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## **Objective 1: NHTSA Testing Shows Need for Restraints on School Buses, but Gaps in Testing Exist for Transit Buses**

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- Head Start relied on NHTSA research and recommendations to require child safety restraints:
    - NHTSA crash testing in 1997 and 1999 demonstrated that compartmentalization did not provide preschool age children on small school buses sufficient protection and that they are safer using child safety restraints
    - In 1999, NHTSA recommended that preschool age children transported in school buses use child safety restraints
  - Although NHTSA's research did not address preschool age children on large school buses, data in NHTSA's 2002 report to Congress on school bus safety indicates that lap/shoulder belts offer some benefits to older children riding large school buses. However, NHTSA also found that lap/shoulder belts are not appropriate for preschool age children. Consequently, these younger children require child safety restraints on large buses to achieve the same level of protection
  - NHTSA has not conducted crash testing to assess the risk for preschool age children using child safety restraints on transit buses
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## **Objective 1: Head Start Based Monitor Requirement on Safety Considerations**

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- The Head Start Bureau based the decision to require monitors on the belief that preschool children riding a bus, and infants and toddlers also transported by some grantees, should be supervised by an adult monitor in case the driver became disabled.
- More recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics standards for child care also identifies bus monitors as necessary for child care facilities, which also transport preschool age children.



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## **Objective 1: Head Start Lacks Cost Documentation and Data on Transportation Services to Develop Cost Estimates**

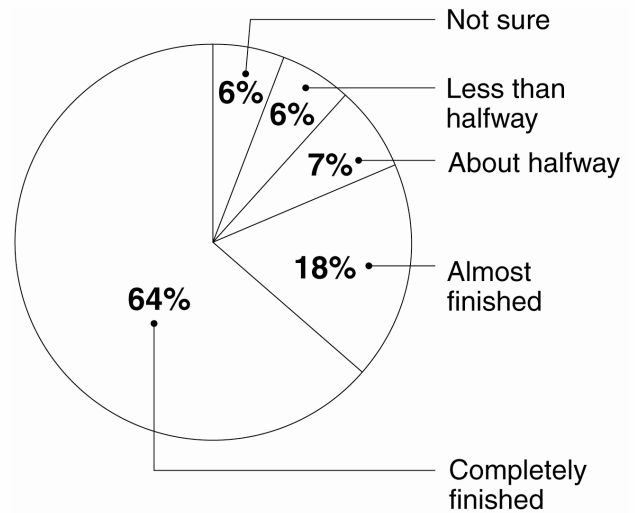
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- In the final regulations issued in 2001, Head Start estimated the cost of implementing the regulations to be \$18.9 million, most of which reflects the cost of restraints, but the Bureau no longer has the supporting documentation for its estimate.
- Without documentation, we cannot determine the reliability of the data Head Start used to develop its estimates. However, Head Start does not systematically track transportation services and thus lacks basic information on which to develop a reliable estimate.



## Objective 2: Most Grantees Report Having Completed Implementation

- An estimated 1,370 grantees--approximately 70 percent of Head Start grantees--provide transportation services
- Of these, 64 percent of grantees reported having completely finished implementing the regulations
- Of the 36 percent reporting that they were not finished, about half were almost done while the remaining were either half-way done, less than half-way done, or not sure.



Source: GAO survey.  
Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.



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## **Objective 2: Reasons Why Some Grantees Are Not Finished With Implementation Are Unknown**

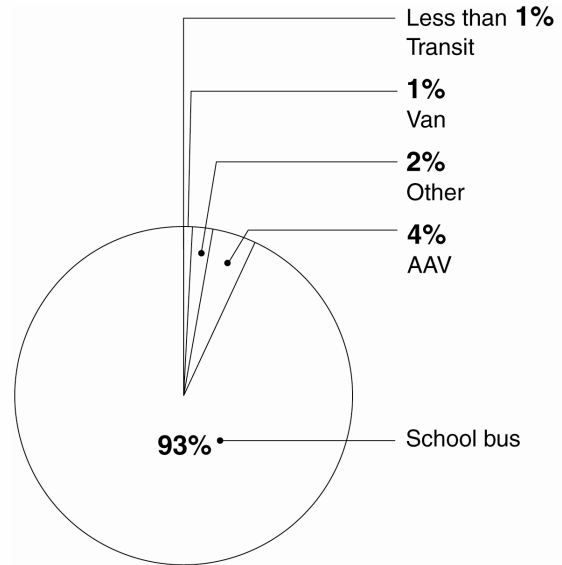
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- Of the 36 percent that reported they were not finished with implementing the regulations, approximately 30 percent reported operating under a waiver or extension for the restraint or monitor requirement, or both.
- We cannot fully determine from our survey data the circumstances under which the remaining grantees—those reporting that they were not finished implementing the regulations but did not report obtaining an extension or waiver-- are operating.



## Objective 2: Most Grantees Primarily Use Vehicles That Meet Head Start Regulations

- About 97 percent of grantees reported primarily using vehicles that meet the Head Start regulations—93 percent reported using school buses and 4 percent reported using the alternative vehicles
- Others primarily used transit buses (less than 1 percent), vans (1 percent), or other (2 percent)



Source: GAO survey.  
Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.





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## Objective 2: Challenges in Using Alternative Vehicles

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- While only 4 percent of grantees reported using an alternative vehicle, this option was offered so that grantees and their transportation partners—especially transit agencies—could meet both the Head Start requirements and other requirements governing the transport of other populations such as older adults or people with disabilities.
  - The alternative vehicle presents challenges for transit agencies and other providers because the focus of NHTSA’s standards is safety in general and they do not specifically address other features, such as ADA requirements, that would facilitate transporting other populations
    - Transit industry officials indicated that the alternative vehicle would be difficult for other populations, such as older adults or people with disabilities, to use because they were very similar to a school bus in terms of aisle width, high-back seats, and high steps
    - DOT officials in a state that has made extensive efforts in the past to coordinate human services transportation indicated that the requirement that the alternative vehicle have compartmentalized seating made it difficult for older adults and people with disabilities to comfortably use the seats
    - Transit officials have also indicated that other features of the bus, such as the narrow, high steps in the alternative vehicle made it difficult for older adults and people with disabilities to use
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## Objective 2: Challenges in Using Alternative Vehicles

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- No guidance exists to identify allowable changes to the alternative vehicle to accommodate populations such as older adults and people with disabilities
    - Officials at one school bus manufacturer that makes the alternative vehicle saw the Head Start population and the transit population as two very distinct populations and did not see how the alternative vehicle could be used for transit
    - A transit provider and school bus manufacturer indicated that manufacturers are reluctant to modify the alternative vehicle for transit use without guidelines from DOT because of concerns about liability if they alter a bus considered to be a category of school bus
  - FTA identified one transit provider that was using the alternative vehicle for transit
    - This provider independently researched how to incorporate ADA requirements such as overhead handrails and supports
    - Although the manufacturer was initially reluctant to modify the vehicle to incorporate these features, the transit provider's research ultimately convinced the manufacturer that they were acceptable
-



## Objective 2: Steps Reported by Grantees to Implement the Restraint Requirement

- Grantees took a variety of actions to implement the restraint requirements, most often through buying restraints and retrofitting vehicles with them.

<b>Actions taken</b>	<b>Percent of grantees</b>
Bought and retrofitted restraints	52
Already had vehicles with restraints	31
Other	12
Bought, leased, or contracted for vehicles with restraints	7
Operating under an extension or waiver	9

Source: GAO survey.

Note: Grantees could report more than one action; thus numbers do not add to 100 percent.



## Objective 2: Steps Reported by Grantees to Implement the Monitor Requirement

- While grantees reported taking various steps to implement the monitor requirement, over half reported already having monitors in place.

<b>Actions taken</b>	<b>Percent of grantees</b>
Already had monitors in place	58
Changed or added monitor responsibilities to existing staff	22
Hired additional staff	21
Recruited volunteers	9
Other	4
Operating under a waiver or extension	8

Source: GAO survey.

Note: Grantees could report more than one action; thus, numbers do not add to 100 percent.



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## Objective 2: Fewer Grantees in 2006 Than 2004 Are Requesting Extensions

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- Based on GAO's analysis of extension request documentation submitted to the Head Start Bureau (shown on slide 31),
  - the percent of grantees requesting more time to implement the restraint and monitor requirements dropped from 30 percent in 2004 to 19 percent in 2006.
  - Numbers may be understated because extension requests had to be calculated against the total number of Head Start grantees, not just those offering transportation.
  - In 2004 and 2006, requests for time extensions to implement the restraint requirement have outnumbered the monitor requirement; however, about one-third of those seeking extensions sought more time to implement both in 2004, while around half did so in 2006.
- The 2004 interim final rule and 2005 appropriations act provision authorized Head Start to waive the requirements for restraints and monitors for those grantees who requested more time to implement these provisions, but did not specifically authorize similar actions for the vehicle requirement.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See page 29 for information on recently enacted changes to compliance dates for vehicles, restraints, and monitors.



## Objective 2: Fewer Grantees Are Requesting Extensions

Year <sup>a</sup>	Total number of Head Start programs <sup>b</sup>	Percentage of Head Start programs that applied for an extension	Of all Head Start programs					Percentage total <sup>c</sup>
			Percentage that filed only for child restraint requirement	Percentage that filed only for bus monitor requirement	Percentage that filed for both requirements	Percentage other		
2004	1,969	30	13	4	10	3	30	
2006	1,954	19	9	3	8	0	19	

Source: GAO analysis of the Head Start Bureau's extension request documentation from grantees and delegates.

Note: Percentages in this table will differ from information on waivers or extensions in other slides that are from GAO's survey of grantees and delegates. This is because GAO's survey results are reported based on the population of grantees and delegates providing transportation. The analysis of Head Start's data is based on the entire population of Head Start grantees and delegates, including those that don't provide transportation, because Head Start does not track transportation services provided by grantees.

<sup>a</sup>Analysis of the fiscal year 2004 extension requests was done for a representative sample of 185 requests out of a total of 581, with a margin of error of +/- 2 percent. Analysis of the fiscal year 2006 extension requests was done for all requests received by the Bureau as of March 10, 2006, which totaled 378.

<sup>b</sup>Programs include both grantees and delegates providing transportation and those that don't.

<sup>c</sup>Percentages may not add to the total because of rounding.



## Objective 2: Cost of Implementing the Requirements Was Major Reason for Extension Requests

In both 2004 and 2006, the cost of implementing the restraint or monitor requirements was the reason most often given by grantees for requesting extensions, but non-cost reasons have become almost as common in requests for extensions to implement the restraint requirement.

Year <sup>a</sup>	Factors cited by programs requesting extensions						
	Child restraints			Bus monitors			
	Cost	Non-cost	Did not specify	Cost	Non-cost	Did not specify	Other
2004	51%	37%	4%	41%	17%	2%	9%
2006	62%	60%	5%	45%	24%	4%	1%

Source: GAO analysis of the Head Start Bureau's extension request documentation from grantees and delegates.

<sup>a</sup>Analysis of the 2004 extension request documentation has a margin of error of +/- 7 percent.

Notes: (1) Categories are not mutually exclusive; reasons under each can add up to over 100%. (2) Some grantees requested an extension for the child restraint or bus monitor provisions, but did not specify cost or non-cost factors. These were counted as relating to the specific provision(s), but cited as "Did not specify." (3) "Other" includes extensions that either did not specify which provision their request pertained to, cited a factor that did not relate to the regulations, or gave no reason for the request.



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## Objective 2: Head Start Approved Extension Requests with Few Exceptions

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- In 2004, the Bureau approved all extension requests, including those that were submitted up to a month or two after the March 2004 deadline; denied only those requests that came in a few months or a year after the deadline, and could no longer be processed
  - In 2006, the Bureau approved all extension requests made by school systems and all others *except* extension requests in meeting the
    - child safety restraint requirement for children who were not being transported on school buses
    - child safety restraint requirement for Early Head Start children
    - bus monitor requirement for children being transported on public vehicles where they are sharing rides with non-Head Start populations
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## Objective 2: Head Start Lacks System for Considering Waiver Requests

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- The waiver process provided in 45 C.F.R. § 1310.2(c) is intended to be available for grantees to present special circumstances for the Bureau’s consideration, but the Bureau does not have a clearly defined process for tracking or reviewing them. Specifically,
  - Bureau officials stated that they have not outlined a process or specific criteria defining “good cause” for when adherence to a requirement would create a safety hazard and thus demonstrate cause to grant a waiver
  - We found 12 waivers submitted to the Bureau for review—some of which were denied—but Bureau officials stated that they were unaware of any waivers that were submitted; one grantee reported submitting a waiver but never receiving a response
- Three grantees and staff in 4 regional offices whom we interviewed were not sure about what the waiver process was, how it differed from the extension process, and when and by whom requests were approved or denied



## Objective 3: Grantees Must Plan for Vehicle and Restraint Costs in the Future

- Bureau and Regional officials stated that grantees are now expected to pay for replacing vehicles out of annual operating monies or nonfederal sources.
- Head Start historically funded such costs, in addition to other priorities, with supplemental money called Program Improvement (PI) funds<sup>1</sup>
  - Grantees received approximately \$76 million in PI funding for vehicles and restraints between FY01-05,<sup>2</sup> with about 85 percent awarded for vehicles<sup>3</sup>
  - Staff from some Regional offices stated that they only partially funded the cost of buses prior to 2005 and required grantees to finance the remainder
- Grantees are allowed to receive PI funding for restraints, but Head Start guidance states that fiscal year 2006 will be the last year this funding will be awarded in the foreseeable future

<sup>1</sup>PI funds are monies reallocated from grantees who have not used all of their funding to other grantees who are requesting additional funds that meet the Bureau's priorities established for these monies.

<sup>2</sup>The Head Start Bureau did not award fiscal year 2005 PI funds.

<sup>3</sup>This figure only represents the amount of PI funding that was provided to help grantees to implement some provisions of the transportation regulations; it does not represent the total amount of PI funding awarded by Head Start for these years.



## Objective 3: Vehicle Costs Driven by Size, Options, and Purchase Method

- Costs of vehicles vary depending on factors such as passenger capacity, weight, types of seats, wheel chair lifts, air-conditioning and other items specified by the buyer, as well as how they are purchased
  - Price discounts--which could amount to \$3,000-\$6,000 per vehicle-- are offered by some manufacturers when a certain number of buses is purchased
  - Some grantees were able to purchase vehicles at reduced cost through collaboration with school systems or other transportation partners

**Manufacturers' cost ranges for different size vehicles**

Vehicle type	Capacity	Cost range	Percentage of vehicles bought
Small (<10,000 lbs.)	24-passenger	\$36,000–\$45,000	37%
Large (>10,000 lbs.)	Greater than 24-passenger	\$35,000–\$100,000	63%

Source: GAO analysis of vendor and GAO survey data.

Note: Child restraints typically reduce passenger capacity by one-third. Price ranges for buses include one with different types of restraints and buses with no restraints.



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## Objective 3: Types and Costs of Restraints Vary

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- Grantees have a variety of restraints from which to choose
- Cost of restraints vary by type<sup>1</sup>
- Integrated restraints (e.g., those built into the seat) tend to be more expensive than those added to the bus later
- Information gathered by GAO shows price ranges for
  - Integrated restraints cost approximately \$350-\$773 (per seat)
  - Add-ons cost approximately \$55-\$200 (per restraint)

<sup>1</sup>Our data only reflects the costs of the restraints and not the additional costs of retrofitting the bus in cases where that would be necessary.



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## Objective 3: Some Grantees Found Ways to Pay Less for Vehicles

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- **Pullman, WA:** Head Start grantee paid less for a bus by partnering with local Area Office on Aging (AoA)
    - AOA secured 80 percent of the cost through FTA funding
    - Grantee's share was only \$11,000
    - Vehicle was built to meet Head Start requirements and ADA requirements for other populations, such as older adults and people with disabilities
  
  - **Westfield, MA:** Head Start grantee used nonfederal funds to buy buses
    - Received funding from the Community Partnership for Children grants awarded by the Massachusetts Department of Education
    - Community Partnership grants can be used for a variety of purposes including transportation
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## Objective 3: Some Grantees Found Ways to Pay Less for Vehicles

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- **Renton, WA:** The Head Start grantee partners with school systems that own and operate school buses to transport 1,200 Head Start children
  - Grantee “piggy-backs” on the school systems’ specifications for school bus orders, modifying them to reflect the grantee’s needs
  - School systems receive state funding to buy school buses
  - Cost to grantee for buses is any amount that exceeds basic state funding for a school bus



### **Objective 3: Regulations Have Some Cost Effects on Grantees, But They Also Report Other Budgetary Pressures**

- A majority of grantees who provided transportation reported having, at most, moderate cost effects associated with implementing the vehicle, restraint, and/or monitor requirements.<sup>1</sup>
- However, a significant portion of grantees—approximately 44 percent—reported large to very large cost effects for at least one or more of these provisions
- Grantees we visited and some regional officials stated that other costs, such as health insurance, are affecting their budgets as much or more than costs incurred from the transportation regulations

<sup>1</sup>We note that it is difficult to separate the effect of the transportation regulations on grantees' overall costs from changes in other factors that affect grantee costs, such as changes in capital funds provided, labor or health costs.

<b>Cost effects of vehicle, restraints, or monitor requirement</b>	<b>Grantees reporting</b>
Moderate or less	56%
Large or very large	44%

Source: GAO survey.



## Objective 3: Regulations Have Some Cost Effects on Grantees

- In looking at the cost effects reported by grantees on their transportation budgets for the vehicle, restraint, and monitor provisions separately, we found that
  - Monitors were cited more often as having the smallest or no cost effect
  - Restraints and vehicles were cited more often as having a large or very large cost effect

	Vehicles	Restraints	Monitors
None or small cost effect	42%	26%	52%
Moderate cost effect	23%	33%	22%
Large or very large cost effect	28%	31%	16%
No basis to judge	5%	2%	3%
Operating under a waiver/extension	NA	8%	7%

Source: GAO survey.

Note: Survey respondents could check only one answer to this question. Thus, those marking "waiver/extensions" would not have provided cost information.





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## Objective 3: Examples of Effects on Grantee Costs

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**Jefferson County, Kentucky:** The grantee stated that the public school system transports around 5,000 preschool children a day—approximately 1,900 are Head Start children—on large buses. They estimated that retrofitting integrated restraints into 402 buses that transport the preschoolers will cost the school system approximately \$6 million (parts and labor), and indicated that this cost would force them to stop providing transportation services to Head Start.

**Renton, Washington:** The grantee noted that adding bus monitors to transport approximately 1,800 Head Start children cost the grantee around \$420,000 in program year 2005. The grantee absorbed these costs by closing classrooms and cutting staff classroom hours, among other things, but also noted benefits in having monitors on buses in the event of problems

**Greencastle, Indiana:** The grantee reported using volunteers to meet the bus monitor requirement and “paid” them with \$10 gift cards from Wal-Mart. According to the grantee, the cards cost approximately \$34,000 in program year 2003; these costs were absorbed by cutting an administrative staff position from the budget. The gift cards helped maintain an adequate number of volunteers.

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## Objective 3: Regulations Led Many Grantees To Change Transportation Services

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- Overall, 58 percent of the estimated 1,370 grantees providing transportation reported *at least one* of the following effects on their transportation services as a result of implementing the regulations:
  - changing routes
  - reducing transportation previously provided
  - changing how transportation is provided, such as using a new contractor
  - discontinuing services altogether



## Objective 3: Regulations Led Many Grantees to Change Transportation Services

- The top two effects on transportation services that grantees reported as a result of implementing the regulations were changes to transportation routes and reduction in transportation services.

**Percent of grantees with transportation services effects**

	Yes	No	Not sure
Changed routes	83	16	1
Reduced transportation services previously provided	50	50	0
Changed how transportation was provided	27	73	0
Discontinued transportation services	13	85	2

Source: GAO survey.

Note: Responses for grantees operating under a waiver or extension were excluded from the analysis for this question.



## Objective 3: Regulations Led Many Grantees to Change Program Operations

- An estimated 67 percent of the 1,370 Head Start grantees who provide transportation noted *at least one* effect on program operations as a result of implementing the regulations
- Looking at each specific effect, over one-half of grantees cited having to increase the number of staff and staff hours while approximately half also reported changing or eliminating other services and reducing staff hours in the classroom
- About one-third also reported that the regulations increased parents' satisfaction with transportation

	Percent of grantees with program operations effects		
	Yes	No	Not sure
Increased number of staff	58	42	0
Increased staff hours	54	44	1
Changed, reduced, or eliminated services	49	47	4
Reduced staff hours in classroom	49	49	3
Increased parents' satisfaction with transportation services	34	50	16
Reduced staff hours	26	72	3
Merged or consolidated sites	14	85	1
Offered another option of care	10	89	2
Reduced enrollment	5	91	4
Closed centers	4	95	1

Source: GAO survey.



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### **Objective 3: Some Grantees Contracting for Transportation Services Reported Problems with Continuing Transportation**

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- 36 percent of the grantees providing transportation reported that at least some of their program sites contract or use another organization to transport their children.
  
- For the 36 percent who contract
  - About a quarter reported the contractor could not currently continue the partnership (8 percent of all grantees providing transportation);
  - 39 percent reported the contractor will not continue providing transportation in program year 2006/2007 (14 percent of all grantees providing transportation)



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## Objective 3: Some Transit Agencies Report Difficulties Sustaining Head Start Partnerships

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- **Iowa:** State law requires coordination among human services programs
  - Iowa requires that transit buses used to transport children must meet some but not all of NHTSA crashworthiness standards that apply to school buses; thus these buses don't comply with the Head Start transportation regulations
  - Before the regulations, 14 of 15 state DOT regions provided transportation to grantees; 9 of these have since discontinued or plan to discontinue some or all services to grantees
  - The regulations led Head Start grantees in Iowa to either
    - Purchase school buses or alternative vehicles; some transit agencies operate these buses for grantees
    - Reduce or eliminate transportation services, or
    - Rely on school districts
  - Iowa DOT officials stated that the loss of funding from Head Start grantees had resulted in some regional transit agencies reducing services, raising costs, or both for other groups they serve, such as older adults or people with disabilities
  - FTA officials confirmed that this loss of funding has similarly affected the cost and level of services other transit agencies provide
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## **Objective 3: Some Transit Agencies Report Difficulties Sustaining Partnerships**

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### **Michigan and Pennsylvania:**

- Transit agencies were using transit buses that met FTA's standards and had restraints. However, officials were not certain whether the buses met NHTSA's school bus standards
  - The restraint requirement has affected the number of children transit agencies can transport
  - Transit officials also said that seats with restraints are uncomfortable and impractical for the adults and people with disabilities that they serve, requiring different buses to transport them
    - Officials in charge of these agencies told us that older adults have difficulty exiting seats because of additional padding
    - One of these officials also told us that the buses used for Head Start have impacted the cost and quality of service provided to other customers, and that the seats have been difficult to maintain and keep clean
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### **Objective 3: Examples of Grantees Having Difficulties Sustaining or Developing Transportation Partnerships**

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**Michigan:** One grantee that serves 21 counties (13,000 sq. miles) and transports about 700 children had partnered with the public schools to transport around a quarter of the children. The grantee stated that the schools can no longer do it because of the restraint requirement. As a result, the grantee plans to discontinue some transportation services if it cannot find another partner.

**Independent Transportation Contractors:** For some Head Start grantees, contracting with an independent transportation provider may not be an option. Contractors reported that they need a critical mass of children to make a contract economically feasible for both parties. Typically contractors work best with very large grantees or those connected with school systems.

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## Glossary

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- Head Start requirements: requirements outlined in the Head Start transportation regulations
  - NHTSA school bus standards – safety standards NHTSA issues to protect children on and around a school bus.
    - “Crash-worthiness” standards offer protection in the event of an accident and include rollover and fuel tank protection, joint strengthening, and a system of closely spaced and padded seats, commonly referred to as compartmentalization.
    - Traffic control standards are intended to help prevent accidents, and include requirements that the bus have stop arms and flashing lights.
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## Glossary

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- Large School Buses: exceed 10,000 pounds, seat between 24 – 84 children
    - Often used for school age children, but also transport preschool children.
    - Bus size and design absorbs the force of a crash, thus NHTSA does not require restraints in these buses for older children
    - Compartmentalized design is intended to offer protection in the event of a crash.
  
  - Small School Buses: less than 10,000 pounds; seat no more than 24 children
    - Often used for preschool children.
    - NHTSA requires lap belts because the smaller size does not absorb the force of a crash as well as a large bus and lap belts reduce the chance of a child being ejected.
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## Glossary

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- **Allowable Alternate Vehicle:** sub-category of school bus that meets all crash worthiness standards but not traffic control standards.
    - Created for use by public transit agencies that transport children to Head Start so they could still serve the needs of others who use public transit.
    - Sizes vary, but similar to school buses.
    - Lap belts required on small vehicles but not on large vehicles.
  
  - **Public Transit Buses:** used by public transit agencies in cities, small communities, and rural areas. Size and design varies, depending on needs of the population served, which can include the general public, older adults, and people with disabilities.
    - Buses must meet NHTSA standards for buses, pass FTA's performance testing at Altoona, PA testing facility, and comply with Americans with Disabilities Act.
    - Buses are not required to meet NHTSA school bus standards or undergo crash testing and most cannot accommodate child safety restraints.
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## Glossary: Pictures of Buses

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Small school bus.



Allowable alternate vehicle.



Large school bus.



Public transit bus.

Source: Thomas Built Buses, GAO.

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## Glossary

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- Child safety restraints – Designed to keep children in their seats and protect from injury in the event of a crash. They can take various forms and offer a range of protection:
    - Harnesses and vests – Worn over child’s shoulder and torso. Restraint is attached to bus seat and seat back to keep child in place in the event of a crash
    - Convertible seat – Placed on bus seat and attached using seat belt. Child is restrained in seat
    - Booster seat – Placed on bus seat and secured with a lap/shoulder belt. Built-in harnesses are used to secure child
    - Integrated child safety seat – Restraint is built into bus seat and folds out for use. It is folded back up when older child or adult uses the seat.
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# Glossary: Pictures of Restraints

Add-on restraints



Integrated restraints



Source: GAO, Q'Straint.



## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH &amp; HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600  
370 L'Enfant Promenade, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20447

JUL 25 2006

Ms. Marnie S. Shaul  
Director, Education, Workforce, and  
Income Security Issues  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Ms. Shaul:

Attached are comments of the Administration for Children and Families on the Government Accountability Office draft report entitled, "Head Start: Progress and Challenges in Implementing Transportation Regulations" (GAO-06-767R).

Should you have questions or need additional information, please contact Channell Wilkins, Director, Office of Head Start, at 202-205-8573.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wade F. Horn".

Wade F. Horn, Ph.D.  
Assistant Secretary  
for Children and Families

Enclosure

**COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
ON THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE DRAFT REPORT  
ENTITLED, "HEAD START: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN  
IMPLEMENTING TRANSPORTATION REGULATIONS (GAO-06-767R)**

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) appreciates the opportunity to comment on this Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report.

**GAO Recommendations:**

In order to determine the ability of grantees to provide transportation services and to define the waiver process, we make the following three recommendations to the Head Start Bureau:

- Systematically track transportation services provided by grantees so that the Bureau can determine changes in the availability of these services, especially any reduction in them.
- Establish a waiver process that specifies criteria for submitting waivers, including more specific guidance on what constitutes "good cause," and lists the responsible entities for review and approval. Should any waiver requests submitted require Head Start to address issues concerning vehicles, the waiver process should include consultation with NHTSA and FTA as appropriate.
- Once a process has been established, take steps to ensure that grantees and regional staff know about it and understand how it works.

**ACF Comment**

The Office of Head Start supports the second and third recommendations made by GAO. We will consider the first recommendation, but there are information collection implications in this recommendation that need to be fully considered before any final decision can be made.