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



HUMAN RESOURCES  
DIVISION

AUGUST 28, 1979

B-177486

The Honorable Patricia Roberts Harris  
The Secretary of Health, Education,  
and Welfare



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Dear Mrs. Harris:

Subject: [Improvements Needed in the Migrant  
Education Program] (HRD-79-100)

In surveying the migrant education program in California, we have identified several areas needing improvement. Little reliable information exists on the number of eligible migrant children not being served, and there is confusion about conditions for participation of former migrant children. Also, California does not consider its annual evaluation report a useful tool for improving program performance, and California teachers often do not use academic information provided by the Migrant Student Record Transfer System. Accordingly, we are recommending actions you should take to deal with these matters.

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During our survey, we interviewed the officials of the Office of Education's (OE's) Migrant Branch in Washington, D.C., and reviewed migrant education legislation and regulations. We did our fieldwork primarily in California, where the migrant education program is administered by the State department of education. The State contracts with nine local educational agencies to act as regional migrant education offices, which coordinate and manage the program. These regional offices contract with school districts to serve the migrant children in their schools.

We interviewed school district and State and regional migrant education program officials. We also reviewed applicable OE, State, and regional program studies, reports, and documents.

HRD-79-100  
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BACKGROUND

The migrant education program was authorized by the 1966 amendments to title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 241e(c)). The program, which is administered by OE, has grown significantly since it began. In its first full year of operation--fiscal year 1968--\$41.7 million was granted to State educational agencies; in fiscal year 1979, \$174 million was granted. Program funds are to be used for establishing or improving programs which meet the special educational needs of children of migratory farmworkers and fishermen.

House Report 1814, dated August 5, 1966, in recommending adoption of the 1966 amendments, stated that migrant children are seldom in school long enough to participate in school activities and that some spend only 2 to 6 weeks in any one school district during the harvest season. These conditions have severely affected migrant children's educational achievement. For example, in 1977 the National Child Labor Committee 1/ reported that the migrant student has a 40-percent chance of entering the 9th grade and only an 11-percent chance of entering the 12th grade. The migrant education program provides tutorial, health, nutrition, and other services to help migrant children overcome their educational handicaps.

MANY MIGRANT CHILDREN MAY  
NOT BE RECEIVING SERVICES

Many children may not be receiving migrant education services, although the Federal Government will provide funds for every student registered in the program. In California many children who may have been eligible resided in school districts which chose not to participate. Also, former migrant children who resided in participating school districts were not served because State program officials did not believe their participation was allowed under OE policy.

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1/A nonprofit organization formed to oppose the exploitation of children in industry and agriculture.

The 1966 legislation authorizing special assistance for migrant children makes State participation voluntary. States' eligibility for funding is based on estimates of the number of migrant students residing in them. Since fiscal year 1975, OE has used statistics provided by the Migrant Student Record Transfer System to derive such estimates. <sup>1/</sup> State funding levels are calculated by multiplying the average State educational expenditure per pupil times 40 percent times the full-time equivalent number of migrant children, ages 5 to 17, registered in the system. For January 1 to December 31, 1978, there were about 500,000 registered students. Although the number of migrant children is unknown, OE has estimated the total at 1 million.

OE regulations require that States in their grant applications identify (1) locations where eligible children are residing or are expected to reside during the year and (2) the number of such children. Beginning with fiscal year 1980 grant applications, OE regulations require that any State not planning to serve all eligible children must explain why.

Our review of selected State grant applications showed that States generally base their estimates on Migrant Student Record Transfer System data. These data are provided only by participating school districts; they do not include eligible children who are residing or expected to reside in non-participating school districts during the year. For example, California's application for fiscal year 1979 funds provided data on the number of children to be served based on system enrollment summary data for January 1 to December 31, 1977, and listed school districts in which the program would operate in fiscal year 1979. However, California did not identify other locations where eligible children resided or were expected to reside or the estimated number of such children.

According to California State and regional migrant education program officials, some nonparticipating school districts had migrant populations within their jurisdictions. We interviewed officials from five California regions with programs established in 168 school districts.

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<sup>1/</sup>The system, a nationwide migrant student recordkeeping system, is discussed further on pages 11 to 13.

They estimated that an even greater number of eligible school districts within their jurisdictions chose not to participate in the program.

These officials did not have data on the number of migrant children in nonparticipating school districts. California migrant education officials stated that a school district could be eligible for program services with as few as 6 to 10 migrant students. However, the number of migrant students in nonparticipating school districts may be substantial. For example, an official of one nonparticipating school district estimated that 800 (40 percent) of the district's 2,000 students were migrant children.

We discussed the reasons school districts did not participate in the program with officials from three migrant education regions and two nonparticipating school districts. According to them, school districts often do not participate because of prevailing community attitudes regarding migrants. Essentially, they stated that community residents, whose views are represented on school boards, do not believe that migrant children should have special services which are not available to their children. Two of these officials stated that school districts did not want additional Federal control and paperwork associated with the program. In addition, two officials stated that schools were already meeting migrant children's needs.

An indication of community attitudes, according to two regional migrant education officials, was that some school districts were considering eliminating migrant education services because of general budget reductions resulting from recently passed State legislation, Proposition 13. They stated that, even though migrant education funding and services were not affected by the State funding reductions, school officials were under community pressure to eliminate migrant education services because of the increased disparity between assistance offered to migrant children and that offered to other children.

#### Former migrant children not served

The Education Amendments of 1974, enacted on August 21, 1974, expanded migrant education program coverage to include

children of migratory fishermen and formerly migratory children. The latter children are those who have not migrated for at least a year but who remain eligible for title I benefits for up to 5 years after they cease migrating. This expansion was made to stimulate services to these children because the Congress believed their educational needs extended beyond the active migration period.

Allocating funds based on the number of former as well as active migrant children has increased the funds received by States. In fiscal year 1975, the last year that funding was based on a count of active migrant children only, the program was funded at \$92 million. Funding increased by \$82 million to about \$174 million in fiscal year 1979. Eighty percent of the increase was due to the addition of former migrant children to the funding base.

About 23,000 former migrant children were included in the base for determining California's fiscal year 1979 funding. They accounted for about \$10 million of the State's \$37 million program funding. However, California's former migrant children did not receive program services because State officials did not believe they were allowed to under OE policy.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, requires that States give priority to active migrant children. Furthermore, HEW regulations allow program participation by former migrant children only if their participation does not prevent the participation of or dilute the effectiveness of the State's programs for active migrant children. California Department of Education officials said that, based on their discussions with OE officials, they interpreted these requirements to preclude service to former migrant children as long as active migrant children reside in non-participating school districts.

The OE Migrant Branch chief told us that OE policy is that all of a State's identified active migrants in participating school districts must be served before former migrant children receive services. However, he said, that the presence of active migrants in nonparticipating school districts should not preclude serving former migrant children identified in participating school districts. The branch chief

told us, however, that OE does not have a systematic procedure for determining whether participating districts are serving former migrant children and does not know how many former migrant children are registered in the system but not served.

The Migrant Branch chief also told us that, if OE is aware that eligible children are residing in nonparticipating school districts, it encourages the State to persuade the school districts to provide services. OE then monitors the State's efforts, and if convinced they are not adequate, it can establish migrant programs through contracts with other organizations in the area. 1/ He told us that OE had only recently learned that California was not serving eligible migrant children and was monitoring the State's efforts to establish programs in nonparticipating school districts.

California Department of Education officials informed us that program funds generated by former migrant children were used to increase funding for active migrant children and support special projects. They stated, for example, that they were able to allocate about \$650 per active migrant student to their regions in fiscal year 1978 based on a Federal grant of about \$450 per each active and former migrant student. Also, they budgeted about \$3.3 million (10 percent of their fiscal year 1978 grant) for special projects. These funds were primarily for the California Mini-Corps, a program for training young people from a rural migrant background as teacher assistants to provide tutorial and other assistance to migrant children.

During our fieldwork, California migrant education officials were considering extending program services to some former migrant children even though they believed it was contrary to OE policy. Factors cited for this policy reconsideration were (1) a static or declining number of active migrant children combined with an increasing number of former

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1/HEW regulations specify that the Commissioner may make a special arrangement with a public or nonprofit agency to carry out the purposes of section 122 of title I of the act if he determines that the State is unable or unwilling to conduct programs for migratory children.

migrant children in some areas and (2) the belief that serving former migrant children was a higher priority than special projects supported by funds generated by these children. State migrant education officials expected to provide services to a limited number of former migrant children selected on the basis of educational needs.

NEED TO MAKE APPROPRIATE ELIGIBILITY  
AND CLASSIFICATION DETERMINATIONS

The eligibility of some students in California's migrant education program and the classification of others as active migrants were questionable. Information on the students' movements, which is to be used to determine eligibility and classification, either was missing from student enrollment forms or showed the movement was not recent enough to justify the determinations made. A 1978 consultant's study showed that movement of students in California's migrant education program is infrequent. Since student movement is a key eligibility factor, the problem we found in the two schools .. in our survey may exist in other schools.

HEW regulations require grantees to document the basis for each student's eligibility and to determine his/her migrant status--active or former--before providing services. An active migrant child is defined as one:

"Who has moved within the past twelve months from one school district to another--or, in a State that is comprised of a single school district, has moved from one school administrative area to another--to enable the child, the child's guardian, or a member of the child's immediate family to obtain temporary or seasonal employment in an agricultural or fishing activity."

A former migrant child is defined as one who:

"Was eligible to be counted and served as a currently migratory child within the past five years, but is not now a currently migratory child \* \* \*."

To determine eligibility and classification, California's migrant student enrollment form collects data on the student's former residence, date of departure, current residence, and date of arrival.

We reviewed the enrollment forms of all 105 migrant students enrolled at two California schools to determine whether their eligibility and classification status were correct. The eligibility of nine enrollees--six active and three former migrant students--was questionable based on their enrollment form data. The active status of another 44 enrollees (42 percent) was questionable. This is particularly significant because services were being denied to other former migrant children in the two schools.

The primary reason that students' eligibility and classification were questionable was that program staff either did not obtain or did not consider information on residence changes. In all nine cases where eligibility was questionable and in 37 of the 44 cases of questionable classification, enrollment forms had no data on residence changes, and school records showed that the students resided in the school district for a period exceeding the maximum allowed to establish their eligibility or active classification. In the other seven questionable classification cases, the change of residence recorded on the enrollment form occurred before the 12-month period during which the determination of an active classification was appropriate.

California migrant education officials were concerned about the appropriateness of eligibility and classification determinations. They recently established a review team whose tasks included verifying migrant student eligibility and classification determinations. During our fieldwork the team had completed reviewing records for 700 students in 20 schools for one region. The team found that 11.5 percent of the students were misclassified as active migrant children and that a few students were ineligible. Additional reviews were planned in the other eight California regions.

The team gave schools advance notice of their visits to conduct reviews. Such reviews can be an important step in assuring the validity of student enrollment data, but their reliability might be enhanced if visits were unannounced. State migrant education officials told us that schools



might refuse the team access to the data they needed if not given advance notice. We found, however, that the State's contract with local educational agencies assured its entry to all programs and records.

Many migrant students do not move during the year

The migrant education program is designed to cope with the special needs of migratory children caused by interruption of their educational process. OE regulations define an active migratory child as one who has moved within the past 12 months. <sup>1/</sup>A consultant's study, however, indicates that many migrant education program participants in California do not move that often./

A California program consultant used Migrant Student Record Transfer System records to analyze the movement of about 82,000 California intrastate migrant students during 1977. The consultant reported that 57,704 (70 percent) of the intrastate students did not move during the year. Furthermore, the 57,704 students represented 66 percent of the State's total migrant enrollment.

The consultant reported that one explanation for the lack of reported student movement was that students may have moved from a school participating in the program to one that was not. <sup>1/</sup> He stated, however, that field experience showed that there is unlikely to be a high percentage of migrant students moving to nonparticipating schools.

While the results of the consultant's survey showed that 66 percent of California's migrant students did not move during the year, only about 30 percent of the students for which the State receives funding are classified as former migrants. California Department of Education officials believe this does not necessarily mean that participants are misclassified. They cited as an example that students moving during the summer may not enroll in summer schools and consequently their movement would not be reflected in system records.

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<sup>1/</sup>A student's move to a nonparticipating school would not be accounted for in system records.

EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH UNIFORM  
PROGRAM EVALUATION CRITERIA

OE cannot evaluate the migrant education program's effectiveness nationwide because it has not established a uniform program evaluation methodology. States conduct program evaluations, but their methodologies differ. As a result, the data in State program evaluation reports are not comparable. OE hired a consultant to develop an evaluation methodology in February 1976, but the project was not scheduled for completion until November or December 1979. Additionally, California officials told us that its evaluation--prepared primarily for OE's use--may not be useful for improving program performance.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, requires an annual determination of the program's effectiveness in meeting the special educational needs of children, based on appropriate objective measurements of achievement. OE requires States to evaluate participants' educational achievement and improvement. However, due to States' differing evaluation methodologies, comparable data needed to prepare a nationwide report are not available.

In our 1973 report, "Impact of Federal Programs to Improve the Living Conditions of Migrant and Other Seasonal Farmworkers" (B-177486, Feb. 6, 1973), we noted that OE had not developed a systematic approach for evaluating the overall impact of the numerous migrant education programs and recommended that it develop an effective monitoring and evaluation system. In 1974 an HEW consultant who reviewed evaluation reports from 10 States concluded that student progress could not be adequately assessed at the national level because of a lack of guidelines and uniformity in evaluative procedures. He noted that each State report contained a different set of information. Subsequently, a Congressional Research Service study of fiscal year 1974, 1975, and 1976 State evaluation reports found that the range in their content was too broad to determine the program's national achievements or characteristics.

California migrant education officials informed us that they did not consider their annual evaluation report a useful

tool for improving State program performance. The 1977 evaluation cost about \$480,000. According to the State migrant education director, the evaluation was done for Federal rather than State use. For example, the evaluation provided statistical data on student achievement in order to comply with Federal legislative requirements, but was not used to address State program effectiveness.

The OE Migrant Branch chief told us that, like other States, California was required to submit an annual evaluation of program effectiveness, which included objective measurements of student achievement. He stated, however, that California officials have sufficient flexibility to make an evaluation which can be used to determine the program's effectiveness. He said, for example, that California can select the testing device which it believes provides the best objective measurement of migrant student achievement.

OE Migrant Branch officials agree that Federal program evaluation guidelines are needed. According to the officials, OE contracted with a consultant in February 1976 to develop a system for evaluating the migrant education program's effectiveness. The consultant issued a preliminary report in October 1977 that proposed an evaluation system. However, the report also stated that absolute program impact could not be assessed because of design constraints, such as differences in the amount of instructional services migrant students receive and the absence of appropriate comparison or control groups.

An OE Office of Planning, Budgeting, and Evaluation official told us that the consultant plans to issue a report proposing an evaluation methodology to OE in November or December 1979. The official stated that, since the earlier report, the consultant has been gaining valuable field experience while engaged in its own migrant education program study which should aid in developing an evaluation methodology.

NEED FOR MORE TIMELY AND COMPLETE  
STUDENT ACADEMIC INFORMATION

Although the Migrant Student Record Transfer System was developed to provide schools with timely, accurate migrant student academic information, such data were often untimely, incomplete, or missing and often not used by California

teachers. OE and California migrant education officials informed us that the lack of a common language for communicating student academic abilities also impaired the system's usefulness. Recognizing the need to make the system more useful, OE plans to implement a new format for reporting student academic abilities.

The system, which went into full-scale operation in fiscal year 1972, records migrant student health and academic data on an automated telecommunications system in Little Rock, Arkansas. These data are then readily accessible to the student's next school through computer terminals located in migrant education program areas. System educational data include student test scores and enrollment in special programs. For example, a student's record might show his/her most recent score on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in mathematics and that he/she participated in a remedial mathematics program. The system was developed so that teachers could gain an understanding of migrant childrens' educational needs through the rapid transmission of such data.

The system has not been effective in the schools we visited--academic data were often missing and records were not received promptly. For example, 50 of 105 records (47 percent) we reviewed at two California schools had no academic information. Regarding timeliness, it generally took schools from 2 weeks to 1 month to obtain system records because of delays in deliveries between computer terminals and schools. California's goal for forwarding these records to schools is 10 days. A school principal told us that his school does not use system records because it takes 4 weeks to obtain the records and teachers lacked confidence in the validity of the test scores reported. Instead, the school tests migrant students immediately upon arrival.

Migrant education officials informed us that another reason teachers do not use the system records is the nature of the test data. An OE official stated that the system includes scores from about 4,000 different student achievement tests. According to OE, State, and regional migrant education program officials, teachers find it difficult to interpret so many different test results, and therefore the data are not particularly useful for diagnosing student educational needs.

To make the system more useful, OE officials have developed a new system for documenting and communicating student academic information. This new system--the Skills Information System--is a "skills bank" of student abilities. Under this system the record identifies specific student skills, such as the ability to add one-digit numbers whose sum is less than 10. OE officials told us they had started orienting teachers to the information system in April 1979. Implementing the system, however, will not resolve the problem of timely transmission of records to schools.

### CONCLUSIONS

OE and California migrant education program officials face numerous problems that hinder their efforts to establish and improve programs to meet the special educational needs of migratory farmworkers' children. Although our fieldwork was limited to California, the problems we identified may exist in other States.

Little reliable information is available on the number of eligible children not participating in the program. *OE needs to* should determine to what extent school districts with active migrant children are not participating in the program and what impact this has on services being provided or denied to former migrant children. Also, action is needed to eliminate the confusion that exists concerning conditions for former migrant children participating in the program.

The lack of a uniform program evaluation methodology has persisted for many years; however, OE expects a consultant's study proposing a methodology to be completed late in 1979. California spent a substantial amount of money for its 1977 program evaluation, yet it felt that the resulting report was not a useful tool for improving program performance. OE needs to work with California officials to assure that future evaluations address the effectiveness of California's program.

OE has taken steps to improve the Migrant Student Record Transfer System's usefulness; however, the timeliness of transmitting records to schools needs improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that you require that the Commissioner,  
OE:

- Assure that States comply with HEW regulations for identifying the number of eligible children and the areas where they live and disclosing any children not receiving services and an explanation of the reasons why.
- Assess the need to persuade States to encourage eligible nonparticipating school districts to participate in the program and, where appropriate, determine whether it is feasible to contract with other organizations to provide services.
- Clarify HEW regulations concerning conditions for participation of former migrant children in the program.
- Closely monitor California's actions to assure its compliance with HEW regulations for providing services to former migrant children.
- Work with the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Director of Education to develop a methodology that will be useful in evaluating the State's program effectiveness.
- Emphasize to States that data from the Migrant Student Record Transfer System must be transmitted to teachers promptly.

AGENCY COMMENTS

On August 2, 1979, we discussed the report with OE officials, who agreed with our recommendations.

Concerning our first recommendation, OE officials said that they are developing standard procedures for the States to use in identifying eligible children. The officials also said they plan to emphasize the need for improvement in this area at a December 1979 State education directors' meeting.

In commenting on our recommendation concerning the establishment of programs in nonparticipating school districts, OE officials referred to a May 1979 Notice of Proposed Rulemaking which, if adopted, will clarify the conditions under which a State or the Federal Government may make special arrangements to provide services to migrant children. The officials reiterated that OE would seek to provide services only if convinced that a State's efforts were inadequate.

OE officials also agreed with our other recommendations and said they (1) planned to revise existing regulations clarifying conditions for participation of former migrant children, (2) are more closely monitoring program operations in the States, (3) have emphasized to California program officials that the State has sufficient flexibility to develop a methodology that it considers useful in evaluating program effectiveness, and (4) are developing directives to change the procedures for transmitting Migrant Student Record Transfer System data to teachers.

We also discussed the report with California Department of Education officials. The officials expressed concern that, since the report deals solely with the California migrant education program, an unfair emphasis is placed on weaknesses of its program. Initially, we had planned to make a broader review. However, based on discussions with OE officials during the course of our work and their general agreement with our findings, we did not believe it necessary to extend our work to other States. There is no intent to imply that conditions found in California are necessarily unique.

California officials said that they were concerned about identifying and providing services to migrant children residing in nonparticipating school districts. The officials told us that they have attempted to work within the existing local school system to identify and serve migrant children, but were not averse to going outside the local system if necessary.

In regard to providing services to former migrant children, California officials said that, in 1978-79, 5 percent of the funding for each of the State's migrant education regions is being allocated to assess needs of former migrant

children and, where appropriate, to provide services. The officials believe that our recommendation that OE monitor compliance with HEW regulations for providing services to former migrant children has broad application since California's situation is not unique.

Concerning evaluation of the migrant education program's effectiveness, California officials told us they are planning to develop an evaluation methodology with funds authorized by recently passed State legislation. They believe these funds will enable the State to develop and conduct a useful program evaluation.

In commenting on delays in transmitting Migrant Student Record Transfer System records to teachers, California officials said that a contributing factor is downtime on the system's computers in Little Rock, Arkansas. We did not review computer operations.

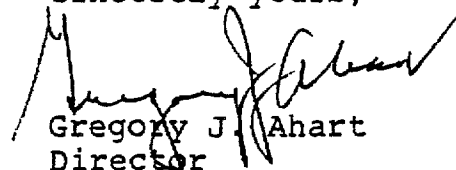
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As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

Copies of this report are being sent today to the Chairmen of the four above-mentioned Committees and of other interested committees; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; and the Commissioner of Education.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation of your staff during this survey.

Sincerely yours,



Gregory J. Ahart  
Director