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## Bus

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to scrutinize bills, the company finds out about it," Gaines said.

An examination of the bus program revealed:

● One former school transportation coordinator admits he accepted hundreds of dollars in loans from officials of two bus companies before being fired in January by supervisors who called the loans kickbacks.

● The former head of the bus program handed out \$100 gift certificates for liquor to other school officials on behalf of a bus firm before leaving to take a job with another bus company.

● School officials have found many buses being driven by unlicensed drivers.

● Even though the Chicago school board spends four times more on transportation than it does for textbooks, some bus companies repeatedly fail to get students to school on time.

"They crucify the learning process," said William Murawski, principal of the Edwards and Pasture Elementary Schools on the Southwest Side. "The kids show up at 11 a.m. They miss reading. They have to run to recess. The instructional program is savaged."

"It's not one day or two days. It's every day."

School administration files are filled with hundreds of complaints by parents and local school officials about late and missing buses, many of them assigned to transport students to the system's elite magnet schools.

School officials made spot-checks of 640 buses in November. They found that 12 buses, carrying about 200 children, were more than 45 minutes late to school. In a second round of spot-checks in April of 435 buses, they found 36 buses, carrying about 600 children, that were more than half an hour late.

"Several times my son missed class because he was not picked up and had to come home," said Elva Acosta, whose son, Jose, is a 7th-grader at the Belding School, 4257 N. Tripp Ave. "My principal told me I had to call the Board of Education because they wouldn't listen to him."

School officials don't know the full extent of the faulty bus service and overcharges for nonexistent trips because they have no system for monitoring the service daily.

But documents examined by The Tribune, as well as interviews with present and former school officials, indicate that the problems are widespread.

By sapping money from cash-starved schools and stealing class time from children, the bus program undercuts a school system that has been called the worst in the nation by U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett.

"The students aren't getting served, and the principals aren't getting served," Gaines said. "It's too much money being wasted."

In addition to frequent late service, internal audits by the school system found a handful of firms regularly bill for bus trips that never took place. The audit reports indicate that school officials have known about the overcharges since at least 1984.

But those firms—identified in school board audits as Rapid Bus Co., Chicago; Art's Transportation, Chicago; Stewart Bus Co., Chicago; and Northtown Bus Service, Lincolnwood—have continued to receive school business. Last year, the school system paid Stewart \$8.9 million, Northtown \$5.4 million, Rapid \$4.2 million and Art's \$3.7 million.

The school system's internal audits of the bus firms provide only a fragmentary picture of the billing and service problems because they are based on spot-checks.

For example, one-day spot-checks in late spring of 1987 at 67 of the more than 400 schools with bus service found that the school system was billed \$6,074.75 for 50 trips that never took place.

Such overcharges, if they took place consistently through the year at those schools, would cost the school system \$1.1 million in wasted spending, the audit pointed out. And that audit covered only one-sixth of the schools with bus service.

On the basis of new spot-check audits last fall and inspections by her own staff, Gaines levied penalties of \$184,037 on 19 bus companies for overcharges and poor service in the first six months of this school year.

A follow-up audit in April found that many of the cited companies still were overcharging the school system.

Robert Goldberg, an attorney for Northtown, one of the companies accused by Gaines of falsifying invoices, said: "When you are running hundreds of buses and hundreds of routes, there is room for error. Last year, there was a different director of transportation. We went through all kinds of situations where we had been instructed by our bosses at the Chicago Board of Education to run buses at one route and bill them to another school. Our bosses told us to do it."

Al Rudd, a former transporta-

tion director for the school system who now works for Robinson Bus Service, said the school board does not fund bus service adequately, and, as a result, many firms claim more service than they provide and cut back on maintenance, safety practices and the salaries offered to drivers.

On April 27, the school board awarded new contracts for regular student transportation for next year, including ones to Stewart, Rapid and Art's, although the number of routes handled by Art's and Rapid was reduced for what school officials said was poor performance.

Northtown was denied any routes for next year because the firm has failed to meet the school board's affirmative-action guidelines. The firm is appealing the decision.

All four firms will continue to provide bus service for handicapped students next year under long-term contracts.

Under the school bus contracts, each of the 26 hired companies is required to give the school board a complete list of drivers and license numbers. Gaines said that only 3 have done so.

Further, the November checks of 640 buses—a quarter of the 2,605 buses in service—found 19 drivers not properly licensed.

Seven had only automobile licenses; 12 had no license at all. Eight of those 12 drove for Rapid, 2 for Art's and 2 for Willett Inc., Chicago.

The school system's transportation bureau has 12 staffers to handle bus contracts and monitor service. The bureau has a history of close relationships to the companies paid to provide bus service.

In January, Gaines fired Leonard Garrett, a \$22,327-a-year transportation coordinator, on grounds that he had demanded money from E.T. Transit, a small Chicago-based bus firm, in return for additional routes.

Ed Fradkin, the company's owner, said his firm paid \$4,000 to \$5,000 to Garrett, whose job was to act as liaison to the bus firms.

"In the beginning, it wasn't a shakedown," Fradkin said. "He was asking us for loans that he would never pay back. He would hit us every couple of months—two, three, four hundred. Toward the end, he started hitting every couple of weeks. He point-blank said, 'We'll sell you a couple of runs.'"

"Being a new contract carrier, we weren't sure what power he had. We were afraid to make a move. We just paid."

Garrett said he received \$671 from Fradkin and \$400 from Clovis Dunn, owner of Rapid Bus Co., but he called the payments loans to help with his daughter's college education and to repair his auto.

Garrett said that initially he had asked Fradkin for a part-time weekend job to supplement his school salary.

He denied any conflict of interest in his request for a job or acceptance of money from the bus firms. "I was going to [Fradkin], not the company," he said. He said there was no connection between the money and his suggestion last fall that E.T. be given two extra routes.

Dunn acknowledged that he gave Garrett money but said it was a loan.

Law-enforcement sources say the public integrity unit of the Cook County state's attorney's office is investigating the case.

Dorothy Greene, a transportation coordinator on Gaines' staff, is a sister-in-law of J.B. Sims, owner of J & B Transportation, Chicago, which was paid \$784,319 last year by the school system. Greene said she does not see the relationship as a conflict of interest.

Donald Sparks offered bureau employees \$100 gift certificates for liquor on behalf of one provider, Robinson Bus Service, of Evanston, when Sparks headed the transportation bureau, according to Robert Radasch, a former school board employee.

Sparks said an investigation of the charges was made without any action being taken, but he couldn't recall details.

Sparks left the school board last year to take a job with Student Bus Co. Chicago, one of the firms serving the school system. Three years earlier, Rudd, his former supervisor, had left to take a job with Robinson Bus Service, Evanston.

Many of the bus companies also have ties to the city's power structure.

Bus firms made more than \$12,000 in political contributions to Mayor Harold Washington in the year before his death. Willett Inc., Chicago, for example, which was paid \$15.1 million last year by the school system, gave Washington \$3,600.

Art Smith, owner of Art's Transportation, contributed \$4,150 to Washington individually and through his firms. In addition, Smith and his firms gave Mayor Eugene Sawyer \$7,000 in contributions over a three-year period when Sawyer was 6th Ward alderman.

Smith is under federal investigation on suspicion of an attempt to

bribe an official at the Chicago Transit Authority, which pays one of his firms \$65,000 a month to provide Dial-A-Ride service to disabled persons. The official, Jon Roth, who was in charge of the Dial-A-Ride service at the time, told his superiors he was offered "a fistful" of money during a 1985 meeting.

Some of the bus firms also hire politicians or lawyers with political connections to do legal work for them.

For example, Rapid has at various times employed Ald. Timothy Evans (4th), chairman of the City Council Finance Committee; John Stroger, a Cook County Board member; State Rep. John Cullerton (D., Chicago); and a law partner of State Sen. Arthur Berman (D., Chicago), chairman of the Illinois Senate Education Committee.

Gaines said that in January Cullerton accompanied Dunn, the owner of Rapid, to her office to complain about a reduction in the number of his buses that the school system used.

Cullerton "wanted to know why Rapid was doing so bad," Gaines said. "He said, 'How can I help him do better?' I said, 'Tell him to do his job.'"

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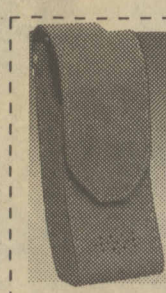


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