

Using Federal Funds to Address Challenges and Solutions for Transportation Departments



This ebook details the challenges transportation departments face in response to emerging community needs and rapidly shifting environments. It further breaks down how transportation departments can implement changes leveraging software and federal funding support.

In this guide, we cover the following key areas:

- What federal funding avenues are available to pay for new technology to assist with routing and communication
- Where administrators can find efficiencies using automated routing software solutions
- How routing software will ease the stress on department staff and improve their response time when last-minute changes occur
- How software will improve reporting and tracking on route performance
- Bridging the communication gap with drivers and parents about changes to school bus ridership and schedules



TransACT's TravelTracker is a cloud-based routing software that optimizes the routing process and allows administrators to easily coordinate bus routes. Leveraging proprietary mapping technologies and a team consisting of former transportation administrators, TravelTracker provides customers across North America with easy routing, an intuitive and easy-to-use user interface, and live customer support to ensure their customers save money, time, and avoid frustration compared to their previous processes.

190 Billion Dollars to Support Change in Your District



In March of 2021, the government passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, **providing an additional 122 billion dollars in ESSER funding**. This funding, coupled with the CARES Act and CRRSA Act ESSER funds **brings the total ESSER funding to 190 billion dollars to help education agencies at the state and local level, including transportation departments**, address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing solutions to support remote operations in rapidly shifting environments. Grant applications have been submitted and funding is flowing from states to districts or soon will be. Read on to learn how these funds are eligible to be used by transportation departments for purchases such as routing software, tablets for ridership, and communication platforms that support a district in maintaining operations in these extremely trying circumstances.

What is ESSER Funding?

ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding is the portion of funding from the three COVID-19 relief laws designated to help address issues arising from the pandemic. There have been three Coronavirus relief bills passed by the U.S. Congress that provided significant funding for K-12 education. The first funding law is called the CARES Act and it provided \$13.5 billion in ESSER I funding. The second funding law is called the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and it provided \$54 billion in ESSER II funds. The third funding law, the American Rescue Plan Act provided an additional \$122 billion in ESSER III funds.

How much money is it? Is that a lot?

Yes, it is a lot of money! The three COVID-19 relief funding bills were passed over the course of a single year (March 2020 to March 2021), providing \$190 billion of funding to states and districts.

For comparison, Title I, Part A funding is about \$12.5 billion annually (total Title I funding is about \$16.5 billion). The CARES ACT- ESSER I funds provided \$13.5 billion for K-12 education. The CRRSAA- ESSER II funds provided 4x that, in the amount of \$54 billion. And the ARP Act ESSER funds provided \$122 billion in ESSER III funds, nearly 10 times the annual Title I, Part A funding.

What is the catch?

There are restrictions on how districts can spend federal money, called “allowable use of funds”. However, ESSER funding is generally more flexible than other grant packages because the main restriction is that the funds must be used to address issues that are a result of the impact of the pandemic. For example, some federal funding has “required” activities- things you must spend the federal money on.

ESSER Distribution and Uses Summary

- There is 190 billion dollars available to help school districts, including transportation departments, respond to the pandemic.
- Funds are distributed using a Title I formula, but they are not Title I funds and districts do not need to spend them on Title I activities. The state can reserve up to 10% - at least 90% must go to districts.
- You can find the complete list of the allowable uses of these funds in the CARES Act [here](#) (starting on page 285), in the CRRSA Act [here](#) (starting on page 749), and in the ARP Act [here](#) (starting on page 17).
- Routing is supported by at least three activities in these laws – “Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in the LEA”; “Providing principals and other school leaders with the resources necessary to address the needs of their individual schools”; and “Developing and implementing procedures and systems to improve the preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies”.



ESSER I and ESSER II have no required activities but ESSER III requires that 20% of districts' funding be spent on learning loss. All three laws provide a list of 15 or more generally broad categories of allowable activities to support responses to the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

How will districts receive the money?

Money will be distributed to districts using the "Title I Formula" for the 2020-2021 school year. It is not Title I funding and does not need to follow Title I requirements. ESSER funding can be used for any of the activities listed in the allowable use of funds sections linked above. The Title I formula is a complicated, poverty-based formula for determining how to equitably distribute monies to districts and was used because it is the most effective and well-known model for distributing funding to communities in need of support.

When will districts receive the money?

Some ESSER money has already been distributed. The remainder will be distributed when districts' applications for these funds are approved. Dr. David Holbrook, Executive Director of Federal Programs and State Relationships at TransACT Communications estimates that states will work to approve applications on an as-soon-as-possible basis so that as much funding as possible can be distributed to districts during the 2021-2022 school year.

Facilities and transportation is not a Title I activity.

How can ESSER funds help facilities and transportation?

ESSER funds are not Title I funds, therefore ESSER funding can be used for any of the allowable activities as long as they are used to address the impacts of the pandemic, including impacts on facilities and transportation.

Where do I go to learn more about applications?

Your State Department of Education or your district's grant management office.

Title I money has been slow or non-existent for us in the past. How is this money different?

This is not Title I money and this money is substantially larger and more flexible than Title I funding. It includes wording allowing districts to spend ESSER funds on transportation and facilities. ESSER funding can be used for any of the allowable activities listed in these laws, including facilities and transportation. The most important thing to remember is that these funds must be used to address issues arising from or exacerbated by the pandemic.



Make your needs known by identifying who in your district is managing the application for ESSER funding and how they are taking requests for support and budget in their application.

State and District Application Processes

Who manages ESSER grant applications in a school district?

It depends on your district and also sometimes on the size of your district. This is typically your Federal Programs Director, but can also be a superintendent or deputy superintendent, grants manager etc. You should identify your ESSER grant applications manager and submit your requests for support, because the budget for ESSER funds will need to be outlined in detail in your district's applications.

When are applications due?

By now, all states should have provided applications to eligible districts for all three pots of ESSER funds. Information should be available publicly on their websites. In most, if not all cases, ESSER I and ESSER II funding has already been awarded to districts. States may still be in the process of approving district ESSER III funding applications.

Where do you go to find out more about state applications?

Application processes vary state by state. Some have online applications, others have PDFs. In any case, your State Department of Education will have the most up-to-date resources and information.





How Federally-Eligible Software Helps Transportation Departments Respond to Challenges

School districts that use federal funding to implement proper software solutions for routing, driver assignments, and student tracking have seen much greater success in communication than those who are stuck using manual systems. Why? These districts are equipped to respond quickly and efficiently in the new school environment. One App-Garden TravelTracker Routing customer expressed their appreciation of a modern and easy-to-use routing system:

“The App-Garden did not oversell their product. The routing product did exactly what they said it would do. I cannot imagine being without this product amidst COVID-19. Also, the level of support we have received from the App-Garden has been amazing. They have responded every time we have needed them!”

Hal Taylor, Cleveland City School District, TN

The checklist below describes capabilities of transportation departments who leverage software for their department's operations.

- ✓ **Manage fluctuations in staffing** – Across the country, drivers, and transportation staff (office support staff, mechanics, and supervisors) have experienced staff reductions.

A modern software solution like TravelTracker allows districts to consolidate routes daily, combining multiple routes into one, and giving transparency to administrators and parents with an updated, real-time map and directions.

- ✓ **Support communications** – Shifting routes, drivers, and schedules correlate directly with an increase in communications to and from parents. Additionally, new routes and school administration changes create more communication needs between central operations and drivers. In a rapidly changing atmosphere, the burden to communicate exponentially increases.

A modern solution to school district transportation enables simple, automated communication with parents so they understand changes, such as why a new or different driver is picking up their student.

- ✓ **Manage security and risk** – Contact tracing and COVID-19 notifications pose a new challenge for transportation administrators. Tablet-based check-in and check-out features help school administrators know who was riding, at what time, for how long, and with whom, and enables parents to receive a simple automated notification.

- ✓ **Access to information** – As mechanics, bus locations, and operations staff are de-centralized as a result of hybrid work, changes have become difficult to implement if plans were stored in notebooks, whiteboards, or online applications that charge per user. With the right secure, cloud-based solution like TravelTracker, districts can ensure drivers, buses, and mechanics all have the information they need to be in the right place at the right time. This also ensures that any administrators managing operations have remote access to their routing system.

- ✓ **Access customer support** – Using software in new ways can elicit questions you had not thought of when your staff went through training. A friendly K-12 software provider understands the shifting needs of school districts and includes unlimited support and dedicated live team members to help you solve issues, train new staff, and learn new skills in your software – without incurring extra costs.

- ✓ **Respond to bell schedule changes** – Changes in bell schedules can sometimes take months of coordinating changes to associated routes. Customers who use TravelTracker are able to respond to bell schedule changes within days using a simple drag and drop interface to rearrange routes and bus schedules.

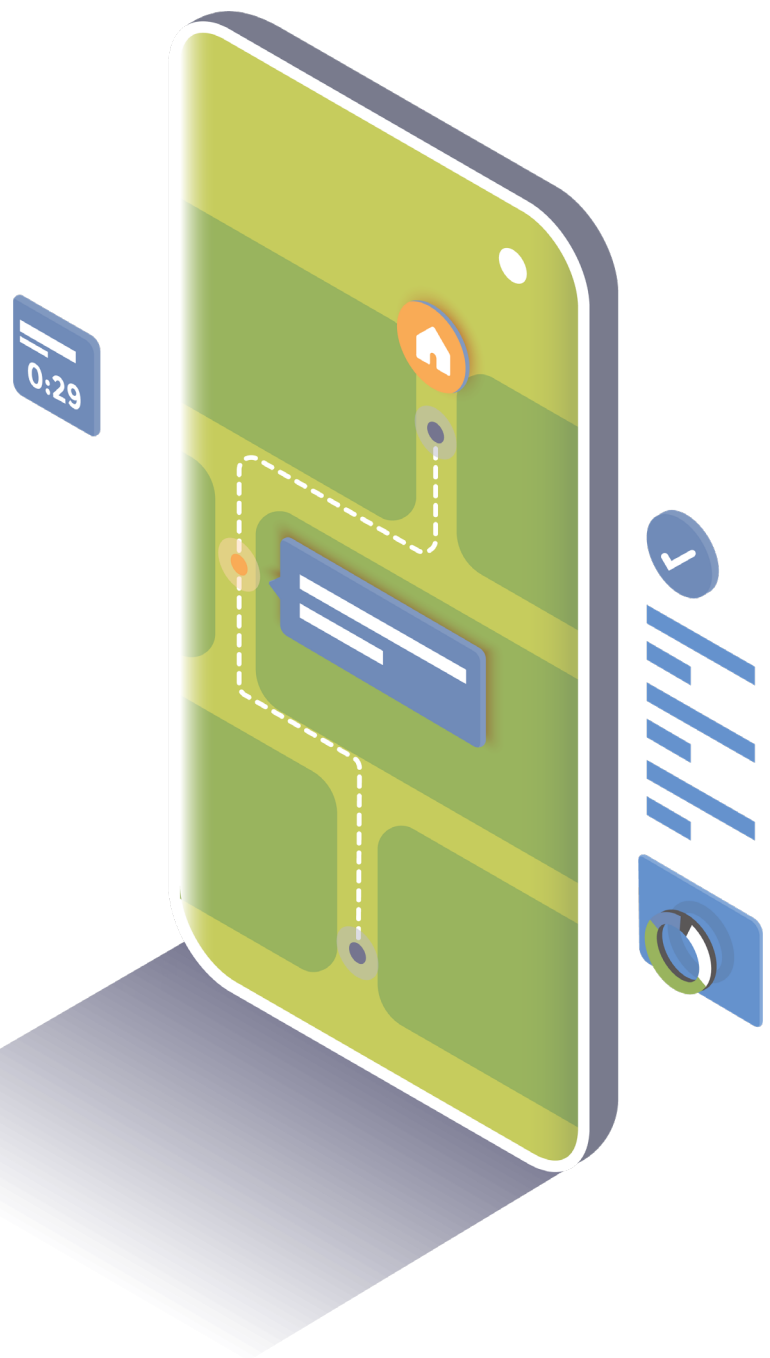
✓ **Recreate routes within 24 hours** – Community outbreaks or inclement weather can force school closures overnight. The ability to auto-generate routes based on changing student ridership and reduced bus capacity requirements allows districts to respond to changes quickly and to evaluate potential scenarios without disrupting current operations.

✓ **Route efficiency** – With increased driver shortages, even minor changes in route efficiency can help fill the gap. The TravelTracker Routing can evaluate existing routes and make suggested efficiency changes or allow you to evaluate various scenarios to determine how to best utilize the staff and buses available.

✓ **Create different routes for different days** – Hybrid learning created an entirely new environment for transportation departments to deal with. Alternating days or locations created a new complexity in routing that older systems or manual processes just did not have the flexibility to deal with quickly. Modern routing software provides flexibility in generating routes depending on the days of the week or student schedules that alternate.

✓ **Easily manage new, complicated routing requests** – Routes for student sub-groups or separate cohorts of learners who needed to be brought in for testing are generated at the click of a button in efficient software.

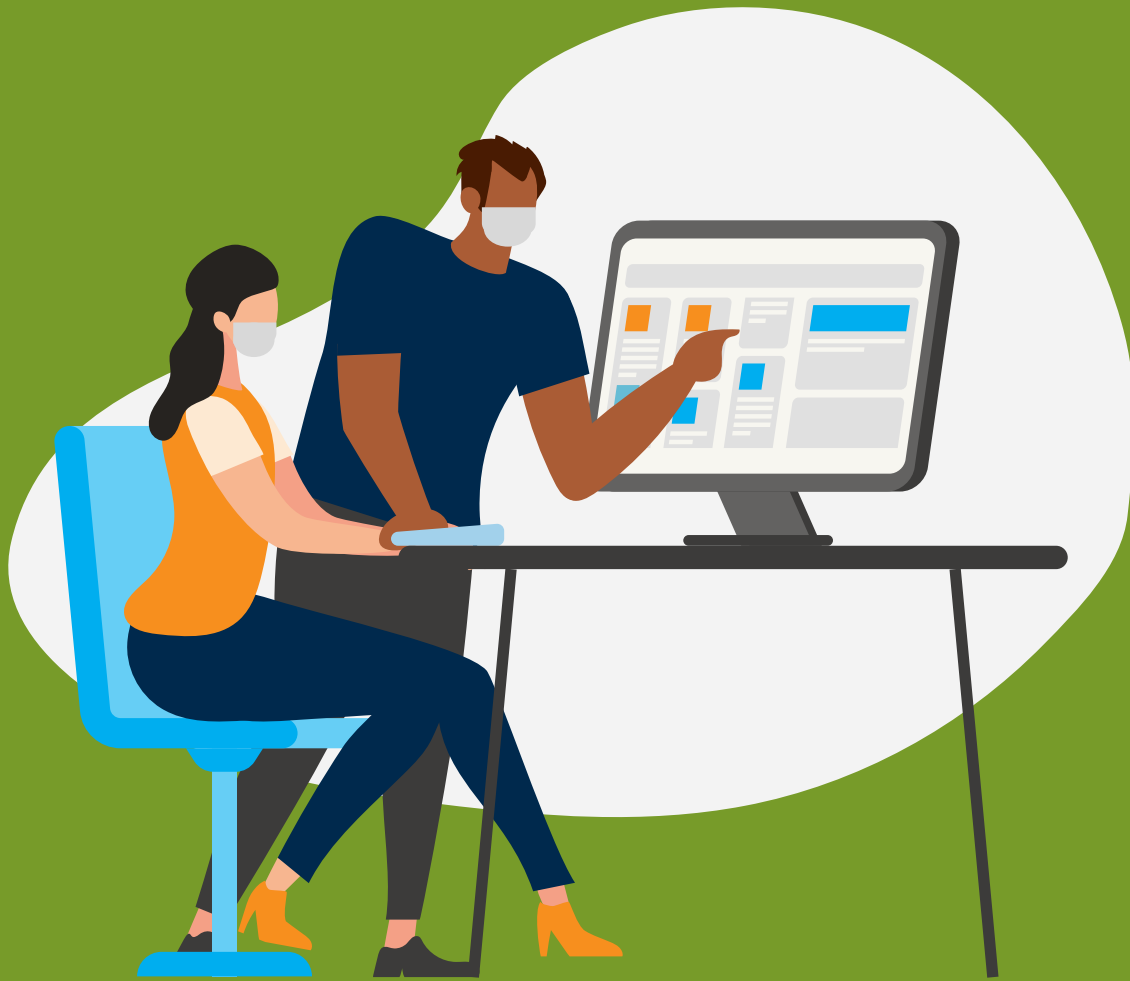
✓ **Access live support** – Software companies with a history in K-12 understand that live support is critically necessary in meeting a district's mission for operational success. TransACT's TravelTracker offers a dedicated support team to their customers that responds quickly to customer requests and consistently achieves a 99%+ rating of customer satisfaction.





Automating Routing Helps Transportation Departments Respond to New Roles and Responsibilities

- ✓ **Generate new routes in a click of a button** – Previously, TravelTracker customers responded to community needs by creating routes for meal delivery, technology drop-off, day care routes for essential workers, distribution of critical supplies like PPE and cleaning supplies. Districts dispatched buses and operations staff to stations in neighborhoods that had limited access to the internet so that students could connect to district-provided hot spots on the buses. Easy routing enabled administrators to quickly respond to emerging needs by simply generating routes, as opposed to manually creating them.
- ✓ **Manage time restrictions** – In emergent situations with reduced staff, time management matters. The right routing software considers time restrictions and ensures deadlines are considered with routing needs, such as when refrigeration on meal delivery will expire or meals are due to a certain student population by a certain time of day.
- ✓ **Respond to natural disasters** – In the future, transportation departments will still be required to respond to community needs and operational challenges for special and unforeseen circumstances such as weather issues or natural disasters. Be prepared to deal with these challenges through a modern, flexible, and easy-to-use routing system.
- ✓ **Optimize ridership** – During the pandemic, social distancing was enforced for riders, which reduced the number of students who could ride on a bus at the same time. TravelTracker customers identified siblings or students from the same household to maximize the number of students who were eligible to ride on the same bus.



Conclusion

As COVID-19 hit, the school transportation industry shifted from their normal operations to ensuring buses could get back on the road and students were safe. Now that everyone has had a chance to assess the challenges experienced with reopening schools safely, new technology can be introduced to augment further improvements.

Changing routes and balancing shortages will not go away. Given the federal funding available, districts are well-positioned to replace manual or out of date technologies that are clunky, cluttered, and simply outdated—not to mention far from mobile-friendly.

Knowing you can continually monitor route data, create unlimited schedules, customize routes and stops, and create efficient bus assignments all while using the integrated communications feature will ease the administrative burden of managing operations and communications around transportation logistics.

How TravelTracker Helps

Communication between transportation officials and their communities is the most important aspect of managing emergent situations. But manual record-keeping or dated software can burden teams with time-consuming route planning, coordinating stops, and communicating with parents. TravelTracker is designed by a team with background in transportation operations, and as such, TravelTracker is the simplest, most comprehensive routing software available on the market today.

- Automate tasks and do away with manual work, such as compiling and collating student data and manually entering it into different internal systems.
- Quickly modify student transportation plans and bus schedules.
- Communicate with parents and families by providing visibility into bus schedules and changes where they are most active: on their mobile devices.

[Request a free demonstration](#) to see first-hand how TravelTracker makes it easy for staff to quickly modify student transportation plans and bus schedules.

App-Garden by TransACT has more than 28 years of history serving K-12 schools, and TravelTracker is trusted by districts across North America. See how we can make routing easier in your district today by scheduling time with our team.

Schedule a Demonstration of TravelTracker

425-977-2100 Extension 1

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