

# Driver Shortage Playbook:

Strategies, Supports and Use of ARP and ESSER Funds to Address School Bus Driver Shortages



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While Ohio's school districts and educators still are addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, [nearly every district is operating in a five-day, in-person model](#). However, schools have experienced additional challenges as they return to normal operations. School transportation departments across the state are reporting difficulties in securing adequate numbers of licensed school bus drivers to cover routes. This nationwide issue is not exclusive to Ohio, but many Ohio districts are developing creative local solutions. The Ohio Department of Education is working with these districts and partners across the education community to develop and share strategies and supports.

## Federal funding guidance

In some cases, districts may be able to use federal relief funds such as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds to support related strategies. The U.S. Department of Education recently posted [frequently asked questions](#) regarding allowable uses of ESSER and GEER funds by local educational agencies (LEAs) for transportation, including the hiring and retaining of school bus drivers.

## Planning considerations for use of federal funds

The ESSER American Rescue Plan (ARP) federal funds are one-time investments that should be managed carefully. These funds generally should not be used to provide ongoing services, as services may be terminated abruptly when federal funds expire. Rather, funds should be used for one-time or short-duration, intensive supports that address the impacts of education disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic or that build the capacity of the education system to operate effectively. More information on using ARP ESSER funds may be found in the comprehensive [ARP ESSER guidance](#) created by the Ohio Department of Education to assist LEAs and other stakeholders in meeting the requirements of the federal acts authorizing these emergency federal resources and best practices for leveraging the funds.

In general, when determining strategies to spend the ESSER I, ESSER II and ARP ESSER funds, LEAs should consider the following five questions:

1. Will the proposed use of funds prevent, prepare for and respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Is the proposed use of funds allowable under the Coronavirus Aid, Resources and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act and/or ARP? Click here for a broad list of [ARP ESSER allowable uses](#).
3. Is this program reasonable and necessary?
4. Does this program promote equity?
5. Does this program support returning students to the classroom?

*Special Note:* LEAs should expect significant oversight by state and federal auditors on the spending of their ARP ESSER federal funds. The LEA should have a written explanation of how the expenditure using these ARP ESSER funds was made to prevent, prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that LEAs maintain documentation and are able to provide evidence that demonstrates compliance with the allowable uses of these federal resources.

**Department supports:** The Ohio Department of Education is working with partners to expedite processes and exploring additional flexibilities to support potential drivers wishing to obtain certifications, including:

- Working with the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles to expedite school bus driver testing so those who need to obtain their Commercial Driver’s Licenses will be scheduled for tests in a timely manner.
- Reimplementing the online version of [preservice classroom instruction](#).
- Working with the Attorney General’s Office to help applicants obtain FBI/BCII background checks in a timely fashion. This includes receiving information from school districts about applicants who have not received the results of their background checks within 30 days and assisting with the process.
  - To receive assistance, a district must submit to the Ohio Department of Education’s Office of Field Services the following information for applicants who have not obtained the results of their background checks within 30 days:
    - Driver first and last name;
    - Date the fingerprints were requested from the Attorney General’s Office;
    - The applicant’s date of birth;
    - Last four digits of the applicant’s social security number;
    - Transaction number of the requested information;
    - Name of district;
    - Submit to [schoolbus@education.ohio.gov](mailto:schoolbus@education.ohio.gov).

### Considerations for districts

Transportation directors from urban, suburban and rural districts, along with community and nonpublic school representatives across the state have collaborated to share ideas that districts may consider to address school transportation challenges.

#### *Recruitment*

- **Hire a recruitment/marketing firm:** Consider hiring a recruiting firm to assist applicants in the completion of applications for district positions. This typically leads to the recruiting firm using digital marketing to advertise for the positions. In many cases, recruiting firms also can help ensure applicants fully complete the application process, which would allow the district to expedite the hiring process.

Example — A district used a media group that in turn worked with a digital marketing company. This strategy gave prospective bus drivers guidance on how to become a driver for the district. Once the prospective applicant completed a questionnaire, the marketing company reached out and directed the applicant to complete the district’s Driver in Training application.

Example — A school district was able to use ESSER funds to hire a consulting firm. This firm was able to apply an algorithm to the routing parameters, bell times and vehicle capacities. In this way, the firm was able to run many different scenarios that gave the district multiple options to improve efficiency.

- **Partnership training:** Partner with an adult education program to assist applicants with obtaining a Commercial Learning Permit and successfully completing the associated tests. The Adult Diploma Program provides job training and an alternate pathway for adults, ages 20 or older, to earn an industry-recognized credential aligned to one of Ohio’s in-demand jobs (after passing the WorkKeys, course requirements, and assessments) AND awarded a state-issued high school diploma. Partners can be located [here](#).

Example — A district worked closely with an adult education program to teach prospective bus drivers (trainees) the curriculum needed to pass the Commercial Driver’s License permit test. In this instance, the adult education program was able to adapt to the learners’ scheduling needs.

- **Utilize district personnel:** Explore the option of enlisting the help of other district personnel (such as custodians, cooks, classroom aides, teachers, and coaches). In some cases, personnel are only working part time in their current positions, and they may have both time and interest in becoming a bus driver. The school district would need to ensure the individual completes all necessary bus driver training and obtains the proper certification and license. Look at bus drivers as salaried employees in lieu of hourly employees.

Example — An employee would start at 4 a.m. with building duties, then drive a bus for the morning route and finish an eight-hour shift with building and grounds tasks. The next shift would start at 1 or 2 p.m. with a different employee driving an afternoon route and then finishing the shift with building duties.

- **Retire-rehire:** Consider rehiring retired employees at a higher pay scale rate.

Example — A district rehires retired bus drivers and brings them in at the rate of pay they were receiving when they retired. Although they would not keep their seniority, the incentive is that these drivers would be at the top of the pay scale while also collecting retirement benefits. In addition, a district may try using mentors to assist new hires with normal routines. This would provide new hires with someone — beyond the trainer or supervisor — to be available for support. Consider stipends for personnel who bring in applicants.

- **Paid training:** Provide paid training while recruits obtain their school bus driver certifications. Training and support must be in the forefront of all communication to entice applicants to sign on. This can help lower their anxiety to perform the duties. Implement positive changes in duties for the new hires by having them start on well-functioning bus routes and pay stipends to drivers willing and able to handle the most challenging routes or building tasks.

Example — A district reported that once trainees obtained their permits, the district was able to raise their pay from \$11 per hour to \$18.50 per hour. The increase in pay came during the time the drivers were obtaining their certificates.

- **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS):** Provide PBIS training to all school bus drivers. This will equip them with the tools and resources to support student behavior. One factor that may deter people from driving a school bus is the behavior of students. Schools are encouraged to implement a team approach to PBIS and include the bus drivers as part of the team.
- **Other incentives:** Districts may want to explore the opportunity to use federal funds for attendance bonuses, driver referral incentives and salary increases. These funds also could be used to purchase additional buses.
- **Bus driver employment:** Review bus driver employment data to identify current needs compared to the actual number of bus drivers employed. This information will help districts create an aggressive recruitment plan to fill needed bus driver openings. Open bus driver positions can be posted on a school district webpage along with testimonials about current bus drivers. This can help create a sense of value and spotlight current bus drivers for their work and dedication.

### *Route Logistics*

- **Engage a routing consultant:** Engage a routing consultant with expertise in related transportation software to identify options for increasing efficiency. The routing consultant may be able to assist with alternative solutions that another district may have been successful with, such as new route/stop boundaries and more.

- **Monetary incentives:** Districts may consider monetary incentives for staff to supervise students who arrive early to school and are picked up from school later.
- **Determining actual riders instead of eligible riders:** Use routing software to determine the students who will use the transportation services. When determining bus stops and routes, districts need to consider all eligible riders and may consider using a 60% ridership. Anything below 60% ridership should signal that the school should consider consolidation of routes. Review transportation registration and determine the actual number of riders for each route rather than the number of eligible riders for each route. This may reduce the number of routes required each day.

Example — Districts may be able to request transportation registration from parents to determine the number of actual riders who will use a bus every day in comparison to all eligible riders. This information may allow the district to lower the number of routes (and subsequently the number of bus drivers) it needs.

- **Route consolidation:** Consolidate routes throughout the district to increase efficiency. Reduce the number of buses providing services for students. This will create more students per bus, but fewer buses are needed to provide the same level of service.
- **Combine building routes:** Combine multiple buildings on one bus or route to reduce the number of drivers needed. If possible, have more bus stops assigned to a bus that may be able to drop off students at more than one building based on the assigned geographical area.
- **Tiered routing:** Determine if a bus driver has time to run a route, drop off students and then make a second run for the same school building. (A tiered routing system like this may require bell time adjustments). Buildings may need to open earlier to allow for this. This would allow a school bus to run a complete route and drop off the students on the first “run/tier” and then the bus make another trip of the same route or a different route to pick up students for that building.
- **Special education students:** Consider transporting special education students together with other students. Verify that students are being transported in compliance with their individualized education programs and that all requirements are being followed. Students integrated together will help transportation services maintain a level of efficiency.
- **Central hub:** Utilize a hub (such as an elementary building or intermediate school building). In this model, several buses deliver students to this hub and then the students transfer from there to their destinations. All the buses run routes and deliver students to one location. At this one location, the students transfer to the buses that are assigned to drop them off at their respective school buildings.

### *Sharing services*

- **Collaboration with community and nonpublic schools:** Although it is a requirement that the local school district transport community and nonpublic school students to and from school, the district also may explore the opportunity for community and nonpublic schools to provide bus drivers to transport their own students. Community and nonpublic schools could partner with their local school districts for the possible use of a school bus (buses) through a contractual agreement. Contracts should be made in accordance with Ohio Revised Code [3327.018](#). The community or nonpublic school could identify individuals from the community who would be willing to obtain the proper bus driver training, certification and license. These individuals would then drive the community and nonpublic school routes only.



Example – A staff member of the community or nonpublic school may be interested in following the appropriate procedures to be certified to operate a school bus. Additionally, the community or nonpublic school could canvas parents about obtaining school bus driver credentials.

- **Shared services:** Share transportation services between districts and educational service center(s), if the ESCs provide transportation services, to make routing more efficient. At times, districts may be able to work with each other to assist in transporting students in other districts. This may be accomplished by using a neighboring district's buses and drivers after the district completed its route(s). The partner district may be able to assist with transporting students to a hub location or the buildings they are attending.
- **Partnerships:** Seek partnerships with local organizations that have employees with flexibility in their work schedules that would allow their employees to assist with busing (for example, fire departments, emergency medical services, county boards of developmental disabilities, churches, houses of worship, towing companies, veterans' associations and available parents and community members).

#### *Other considerations*

- **Bus purchases:** Purchase buses with more driver amenities such as air conditioning, heated driver seat, power rooftop vent fans, white roofs, tinted windows, driver assist features like auto braking, lane departure warnings and good camera systems, all of which can help retain drivers.
- **Budget considerations:** Determine the costs of a new hire, including compensation and benefits, on-boarding and professional development. Use this data to determine a budget for hiring additional drivers.

In addition to the supports and considerations outlined here, the Ohio Department of Education will continue to offer resources as new information becomes available. Please check back often for updated information. As always, for any questions, please contact the Office of Field Services and Pupil Transportation at (614) 466-4230 or [schoolbus@education.ohio.gov](mailto:schoolbus@education.ohio.gov).