How Districts Can Maximize Unfrozen ESSER Funds to Support Vulnerable Student Populations

The U.S. Department of Education has reversed its decision to cancel the extended spending timeline for COVID-era relief funds. School districts across the country now have until March 30, 2026, to spend their remaining ESSER and related pandemic funds—reinstating the original liquidation deadline.

For many school districts, this funding represents a critical second chance.

Programs that were paused or downsized due to funding uncertainty—including student services, transportation contracts, and after-school support—can now resume. But with litigation ongoing and future policy shifts possible, districts should act quickly and strategically to maximize and fully liquidate their remaining funds.

A Crucial Opportunity for Specialized Transportation

The ESSER funding extension provides districts a vital opportunity to reinvest in transportation solutions that serve students with the greatest needs:

McKinney-Vento Students

For students experiencing homelessness, frequent housing changes, living out-of-district, and varying drop off locations can make traditional transportation an unfeasible solution for their everyday needs. This often leads to gaps in their learning, engagement, and can even risk their chances of graduating. Districts can use ESSER funds to provide reliable transportation for these students to ensure they have access to the education they deserve.

Children in Foster Care

Foster care students often undergo mid-year school changes or long commutes. Alternative transportation options can help minimize their educational disruption, helping students to remain in familiar schools and environments where they can thrive academically and socially.

Students with Disabilities

Students with special needs often require specialized transportation—such as adaptive vehicles, trained staff, and consistent routines—to safely arrive at school. ESSER funding gives districts the resources to meet these complex needs through alternative transportation solutions that might otherwise be out of reach. Investing in reliable, individualized transportation not only supports academic progress—it gives students a safe, dependable way to get to school, see their friends, and feel confident and included every day.

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Why Alternative Student Transportation Deserves a Seat at the Funding Table

Reliable transportation plays a significant role in a student's day—especially for vulnerable student populations. For many, it's the difference between starting the school day ready to learn—or missing it entirely. It's how they get to vital services, connect with their peers, and show up each day with confidence and consistency.

ESSER funding gives districts a powerful opportunity to invest in transportation solutions that meet the evolving needs of today's students. By building flexible, dependable systems now, schools can create more inclusive learning environments that support every student—especially those who need it most.

Strategic Use of ESSER Funds for Student Transportation

Student Group	Why Reliable Transportation Matters	Benefits
McKinney-Vento Students	Provides door-to-door rides and consistent drivers with liaison support.	Helps students regularly attend school and stay connected to friends and peers.
Students in Foster Care	Offers flexible routes that adapt to school or placement changes.	Minimizes disruption and keeps students in familiar, trusted schools
Students with Disabilities	Delivers specialized vehicles and trained staff tailored to students' needs.	Provides safe, reliable rides that align with IEPs.

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What Districts Should Do Now—And Why It Matters

With the ESSER liquidation window reopened, districts have a powerful—but limited—chance to act. These next steps don't just check a compliance box. They can directly improve student outcomes and strengthen district systems for the long term.

Revisit Previously Paused or Shelved Projects
If your district paused transportation plans due to the previous ESSER deadline, now is the time to revisit them. These projects can restore critical services for students—and moving quickly ensures there's time to implement before funds expire.

Prioritize High-Impact, Student-Centered Investments
Focus on transportation for students experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or with disabilities. These investments directly support attendance, stability, and access to learning—while aligning with ESSER's core purpose.

Secure Procurement and Contracts Early
Start procurement and contracting processes now to stay ahead of deadlines and service demands. Early action ensures students have uninterrupted access to safe, reliable transportation.

Partner with Experienced Providers
Choose partners experienced in serving specialized populations and navigating ESSER requirements. The right provider ensures compliance—and delivers care, consistency, and peace of mind for students and families.

The Bottom Line: Second Chances Don't Last Forever

The reinstated ESSER deadline is more than a policy change—it's a chance to invest in what matters most. For students facing the greatest barriers, reliable transportation can be the difference between showing up or falling behind, feeling supported or feeling left out. It connects them not just to classrooms, but to friends, trusted adults, meals, and a sense of stability.

This isn't just a funding window. It's a window to act—thoughtfully and urgently—for the students who need it most.

Need help mobilizing ESSER funds for your district's transportation needs?

Reach out to learn how we support specialized transportation for unique student needs.

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