



State of Student Transportation

2026 report

Insights from student transportation professionals

Surveyed February 2026

Executive summary	
Critical insights from the data	3
About the survey	
Methodology and respondent demographics	5
Section 1: Operational challenges	
Workforce crisis, budget constraints and rising costs	6
Section 2: Student safety challenges	
Communication gaps and compliance issues	11
Section 3: Technology landscape	
Current use and 2026 plans	15
Section 4: Data management difficulties	
Staff limitations and integration challenges	19
Section 5: 2026 technology investment priorities	
Key investments this year	22
Section 6: Strategic focus	
Priorities for the coming years	25
Section 7: What gets measured	
Operational KPI priorities	28
Conclusions and implications	
Summary and recommendations	31
Going miles ahead	
Future outlook	33
About Zonar	
Who we are	34

Student transportation leaders across the United States operate under sustained pressure. A February 2026 survey of 118 transportation professionals, conducted by [Zonar](#) and [School Transportation News \(STN\)](#), highlights the challenges facing fleets of all sizes where small teams are expected to manage complex operations that families rely on every day.

Transportation teams face driver shortages and budget constraints, while expectations for safety and communication continue to climb. Many organizations are working to maintain consistency and reliability while operating with limited time and staff.

These pressures push transportation teams to reevaluate how they work. Technology plays a larger role, serving as support for teams that need to operate more efficiently with limited resources.

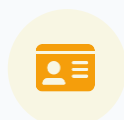
This report explores those challenges and trends. Student tracking shows the largest gap between current use (41%) and future adoption in 2026 consideration (33%), signaling strong near-term growth as organizations look for better visibility and accountability.

The data in this report exposes the reality of teams with a critical mission: keeping students safe while managing increased visibility and constrained resources. Transportation leaders are balancing immediate operational demands with longer-term investments in safety, accountability and efficiency. At the heart of it all are the people doing the work, finding ways to keep students moving safely and reliably every day.



118

Survey respondents
from transportation
professionals



75%

Cite driver shortages
as number one
challenge



48%

Say limited staff is
their primary data
challenge



33%

Are prioritizing
student ridership
verification in 2026

5 key takeaways

1

Continuing driver shortage

The driver shortage crisis dominates the industry agenda with 75% of respondents mentioning hiring and retention as a top issue, with 70% expecting it to be a long-term concern.

2

Rising operational expenses

Safety and cost pressures are deeply connected. Organizations are focused on improving student safety compliance while also managing rising operational expenses and limited budgets.

3

Shifting technology priorities

Technology investments are shifting toward accountability and visibility instead of just focusing on route efficiency. Student ridership verification and driver coaching are leading priorities for 2026.

4

Increasing technology adoption

Larger fleets adopt technology at higher rates. Adoption for routing software jumped from 36% among small fleets to 62% for larger fleets of 100–299 buses.

5

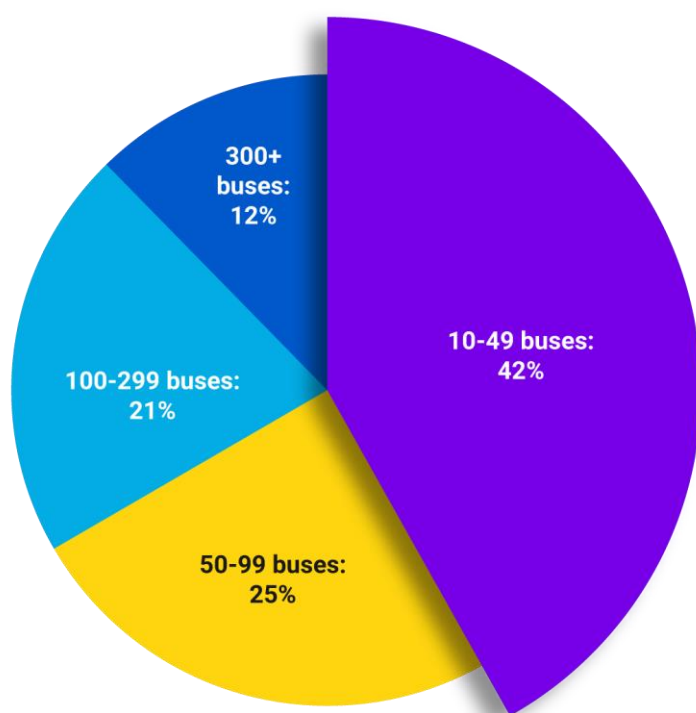
Need for actionable intelligence

Workflow and staffing constraints drive data challenges. Teams report difficulty managing and acting on data, pointing to a need for better integration and automation rather than more standalone tools.

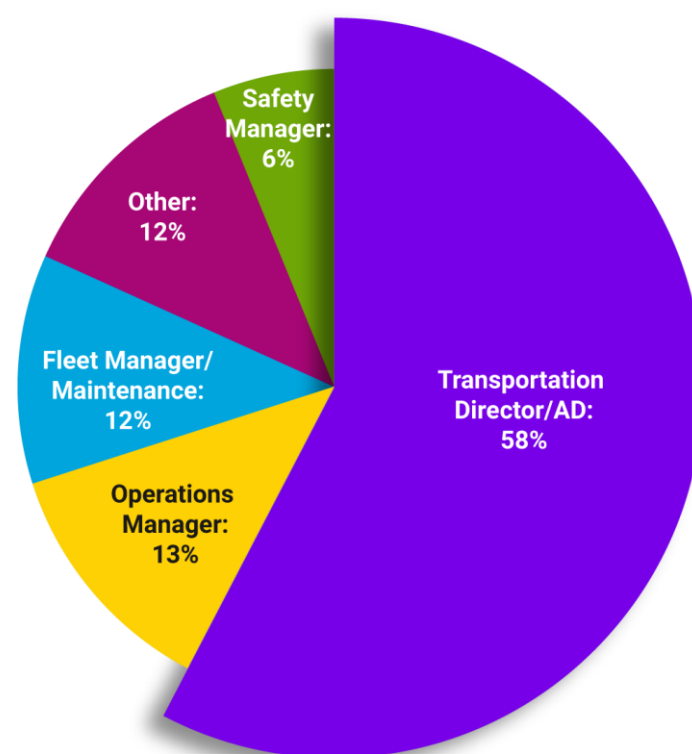
School Transportation News conducted an online survey on Zonar's behalf from February 10–20, 2026 to understand the most pressing challenges and strategic directions for student transportation professionals in the U.S. Respondents represent a variety of fleet sizes and roles within the industry.

Survey respondent profile (n=118 complete responses)

Fleet size distribution:



Job role distribution:



Note: Respondent profile by fleet size and job role (n=118 complete responses)

The survey includes responses from 118 transportation professionals across the U.S., representing a range of fleet sizes and roles. The sample is skewed toward smaller and mid-size fleets (67% operate fewer than 100 buses). Most respondents are transportation directors and operations managers responsible for day-to-day and strategic decisions about fleet technology and operations. It is also worth noting that 13 survey respondents are private contractors, whose operational models and cost structures often differ significantly from school districts, and whose responses may influence segment-level findings.

Note: An additional 105 partial responses were received, primarily from drivers who did not complete the operational questions. All analysis in this report is based on the 118 respondents who completed the core survey questions and operated a fleet size with more than 10 buses.

— Section 01

Operational challenges

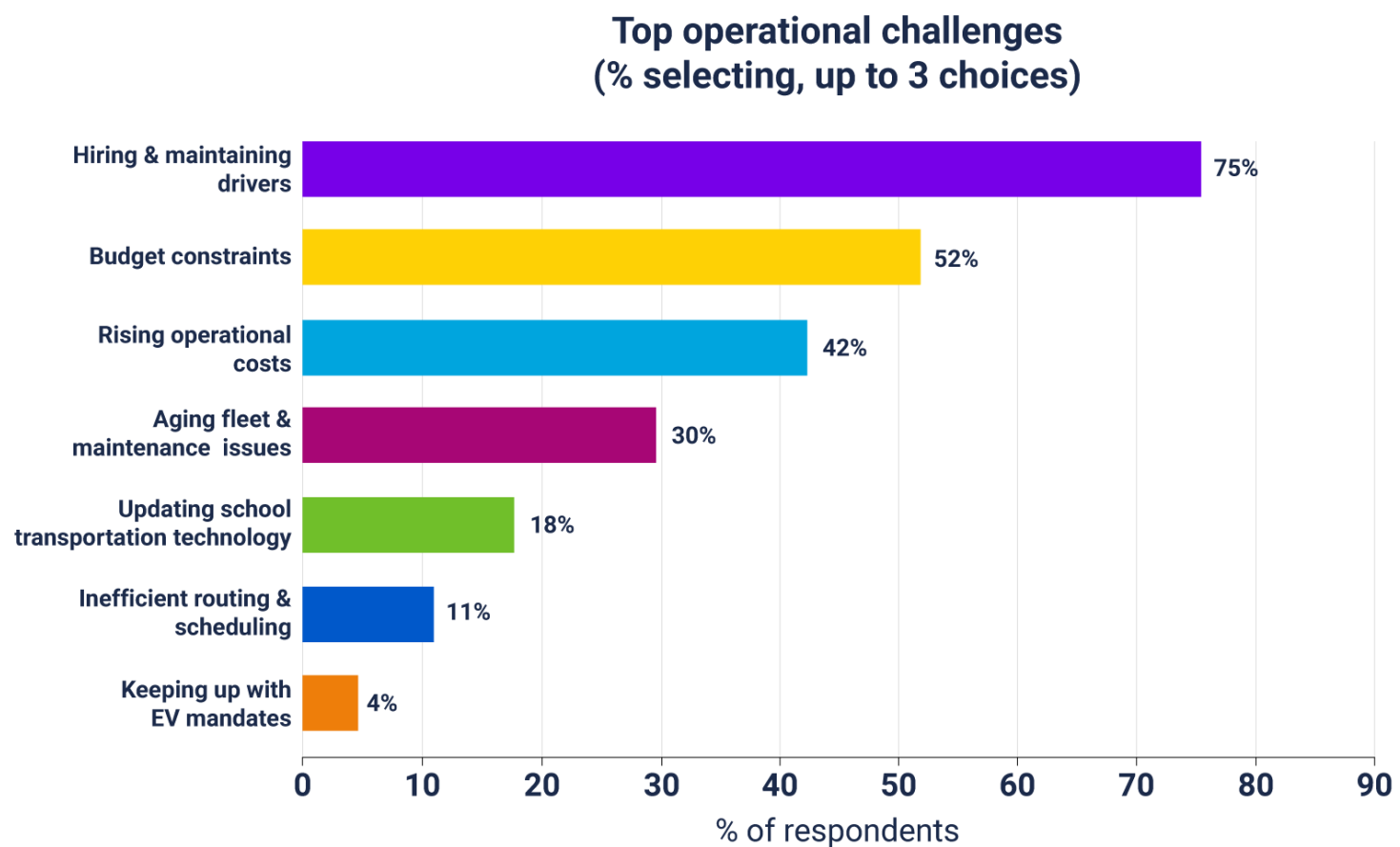
Workforce crisis, budget constraints and rising operational costs define the current landscape.



Respondents were asked to identify up to three of the biggest challenges limiting their transportation department's performance. The results point to a workforce-first crisis, where staffing gaps and financial pressure are critical aspects of every decision.

For many teams, the challenge is not a single issue.

Driver shortages and financial constraints put sustained pressure on transportation departments. The impact is felt throughout the day as teams work to keep service consistent and respond when plans change. Small teams are managing complex systems while working with fewer people and less time.



Note: Biggest operational challenges (% of respondents selecting; up to three choices allowed)

Key insight: The driver shortage is not slowing down

75% of respondents selected hiring and maintaining drivers as a top challenge, far exceeding any other issue. This is not a new problem, and it is not going away. It is consuming management attention and budget across fleets of all sizes.

Challenge breakdown

Hiring & maintaining drivers (75%):

Driver shortages are the most widely reported challenge across fleet sizes. Teams are working to recruit and retain drivers while maintaining service levels.

Budget constraints (52%):

As compensation increases in response to driver shortages, financial strain increases as well. Teams are making tradeoffs between staffing, maintenance and technology investments. They are also looking for creative ways to increase funding or manage on a smaller budget.

Rising operational costs (42%):

Fuel, maintenance, and labor costs continue to climb. Private contractors report higher pressure in this area, with 77% citing rising costs compared with 38% of school districts. Fixed-price contracts can limit flexibility when costs change.

Aging fleet and maintenance issues (30%):

Maintenance challenges are more pronounced among mid-size fleets, particularly those operating 50–99 buses. These organizations often have fewer resources to support preventive maintenance programs or negotiate favorable parts pricing.

Operational challenges by fleet size

Challenge	10–49 buses	50–99 buses	100–299 buses	300+ buses
Hiring/maintaining drivers	49%	35%	51%	40%
Budget constraints	30%	26%	31%	40%
Rising operational costs	25%	26%	28%	16%
Aging fleet / maintenance	12%	25%	15%	20%

Note: Respondents selected up to three challenges. Percentages reflect the share of respondents within each fleet size.

Looking at the data by fleet size shows that budget pressure remains elevated among larger fleets. Forty percent of respondents operating 300 or more buses identified budget constraints as a top challenge, the highest of any fleet size.

Scale brings added complexity, including compliance requirements, reporting needs and coordination across larger teams and service areas. These demands increase the cost of operations and can limit flexibility, even for organizations with more resources. Notably, larger fleets report rising operational costs as a challenge less often than smaller fleets. Only 16% of respondents operating 300 or more buses identified it as a top concern, compared with 25–28% across smaller fleet sizes.

This may reflect advantages that come with scale, such as bulk fuel contracts, dedicated finance staff or greater purchasing power, which can buffer against cost volatility in ways that smaller operators cannot replicate. Budget constraints, however, remain a pressure point for the largest fleets, with 40% citing it as a top challenge, the highest of any fleet size, suggesting that capital and procurement demands, not day-to-day operational costs, are where financial strain concentrates at scale.

What this data shows

Across fleet sizes, the pattern is consistent. Transportation teams are working under tighter constraints while expectations continue to rise. Staffing gaps, financial pressure and operational complexity are shaping day-to-day decisions across the industry.

This is not limited to student transportation. Broader fleet research, including findings from the [American Transportation Research Institute \(ATRI\)](#), identifies the economy as a top concern across trucking and logistics in 2025, driven by rising operational costs and shrinking margins which reinforces how widespread these pressures have become. For many organizations, maintaining reliable service comes down to how well small teams can [manage a system with little margin for disruption](#). This environment is driving a shift in how teams think about support, with greater focus on tools and processes that reduce manual work and help operations run more consistently at scale.

Best practices

When driver shortages and budget constraints compound at the same time, the organizations that manage best tend to focus on reducing manual work rather than absorbing more of it.

- Automating route adjustments and exception handling frees dispatchers to address problems that genuinely require judgment.
- Tracking fuel consumption, idle time and unplanned maintenance in one place gives teams the data they need to make deliberate budget tradeoffs rather than reactive ones.
- Treating driver workload as a retention factor, not just an operational one, pays dividends over time: drivers who feel supported with clear tools and fewer friction points stay longer.



For a broader look at operating efficiently under financial constraints, Zonar's white paper [11 ways to do more without blowing your fleet's budget](#) covers practical approaches relevant to fleets of all sizes.

— Section 02

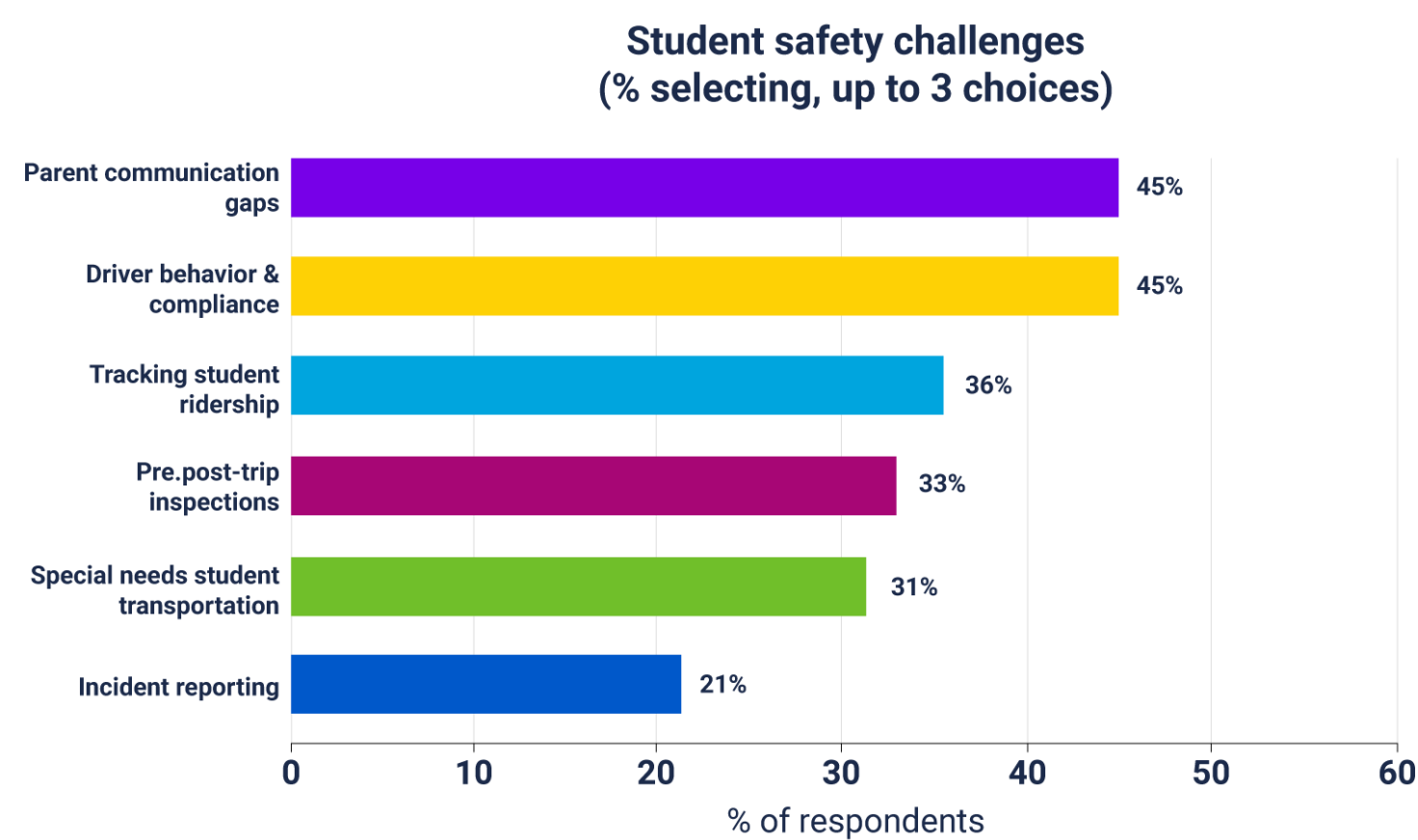
Student safety challenges

Communication gaps, compliance issues and tracking
across daily operations

When asked to identify their most challenging student safety-related issues, respondents revealed that communication and behavioral compliance are as worrying as physical tracking and logistics. Responses show where teams focus their time as they manage daily operations and safety responsibilities.

The results show that safety challenges are distributed across several areas of responsibility. Forty-five percent (45%) of respondents cited parent communication gaps and driver behavior and compliance as the hardest challenge. Student ridership tracking followed at 36%, with pre- and post-trip inspections at 33%.

These findings reflect how safety is managed in practice. Teams manage communication and oversight across daily operations, often with limited staff capacity.



Note: Most challenging student safety issues (% of respondents selecting; up to 3 choices)

 Key insight: Safety is a communication and compliance problem

Parent communication gaps tied at 45% for the top spot with driver behavior and compliance. These results reflect the operational reality teams are managing every day. Knowing where a bus is does not resolve how information is shared with families or how consistently safety expectations are followed.

Parent communication gaps were identified as a top challenge by 45% of respondents, tied with driver behavior and compliance for the highest rate of any safety issue in the survey.

The pressure is practical. Families want to know where their student's bus is and when it will arrive. When updates are delayed or missing, families call dispatch. That call volume adds to the workload of teams that are already managing routes, drivers and daily disruptions.

Communication tools help, but they depend on accurate data to be useful. If routing information is outdated or driver updates are inconsistent, the information reaching families will be too. Teams that manage communication proactively by pushing updates before families have to ask tend to reduce call volume and build the kind of trust that makes disruptions easier to manage when they happen.

Safety challenge	School district	Private contractor
Parent communication gaps	44%	46%
Driver behavior & compliance	43%	54%
Tracking student ridership	37%	31%
Pre/post-trip inspections	32%	38%
Transportation for students with disabilities	33%	15%

Note: Private contractor sample is smaller (n=13); percentages should be interpreted with caution.

For private contractors, the largest concern is around driver behavior and compliance, with 54% saying it was a top issue compared with 43% of school districts. This difference shows how accountability is managed across different operating models.

What this data shows

Safety in student transportation is a multi-faceted problem. It depends on how consistently teams can communicate and maintain oversight across daily operations. This challenge has become more pronounced as expectations from families continue to rise.

Parent communication tools, once a secondary layer, are becoming part of how teams manage day-to-day service. Since the early 2010s, the rise of apps such as Uber and Lyft has normalized real-time tracking and raised expectations for visibility. Real-time updates and direct communication help reduce uncertainty for families while easing the burden on dispatch and administrative staff.

At the same time, these tools require accurate data and ongoing coordination to be effective. As a result, safety is increasingly tied to how well systems support communication and consistency across the operation, not just individual points of visibility.

Best practices

The survey data points to communication and compliance as the core of most safety challenges, which means technology alone is not sufficient if the underlying processes are inconsistent. Teams that perform well here tend to monitor driver behavior proactively using dashcam and telematics data, set family communication expectations before disruptions occur rather than responding to them, and standardize pre- and post-trip inspections through electronic logging rather than paper. For teams managing special needs transportation, building accurate documentation into daily workflows also has a direct financial benefit: that data often supports Medicaid reimbursement eligibility, which can offset some of the costs associated with individualized service requirements.



Zonar's blog post on [school bus safety](#) and post on [additional funding for transporting students with disabilities](#) go deeper on both the operational and funding dimensions of these challenges.

— Section 03

Technology landscape

Current use and 2026 plans — adoption rates, fleet size analysis, and investment trends



As safety expectations increase, transportation teams are relying more on technology to manage daily operations and maintain visibility. Most fleets now operate across multiple systems, from routing to communication and tracking. These tools are essential to keeping service running, but they also shape how information is collected, shared and acted on across the organization.

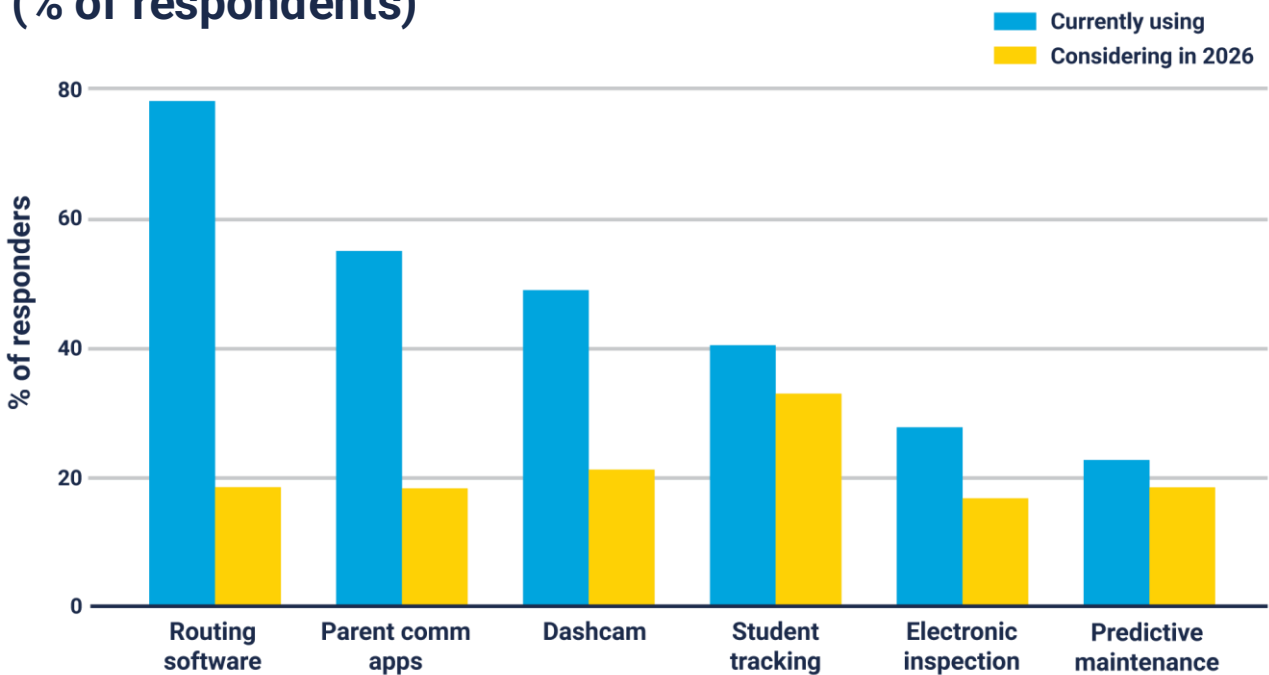
Current technology adoption

This industry, including the families and communities it serves, is familiar with technology. A whopping 78% of respondents reported using routing software. It remains foundational to how routes are planned and adjusted. [Parent communication apps](#) (55%) and [dashcams](#) (49%) are also widely used, reflecting the importance of visibility for both families and administrators.

At the same time, some areas still show room for growth. [Student ridership tracking](#) is currently used by 41% of respondents, while predictive maintenance tools are used by 23%. These systems extend visibility beyond routing and communication, giving teams more insight into ridership and vehicle performance. While student ridership tracking has lower overall adoption (41%) than routing, parent communication apps and dashcams, it shows a much tighter gap between current use and future consideration (33%). This signals significant near-term investment as organizations look for better visibility into who is on which bus and when.

Respondents mentioned evaluating several additional technologies in 2026, including: driver coaching and safety, data analytics and compliance solutions. On average, fleets reported plans to evaluate 2.7 additional systems in the coming year, demonstrating the necessity for technology to automate currently high-volume activities.

Fleet management technology: Current use vs. 2026 plans (% of respondents)



Note: Current technology use vs. 2026 implementation plans (% of respondents)

Technology adoption by fleet size

Not surprisingly, technology adoption tends to increase with fleet size, with higher usage across routing, tracking and communication tools among larger fleets. Routing adoption increases from 36% among smaller fleets to 62% among fleets of 100–299 buses, while student ridership tracking rises from 12% to 40%. Adoption is different for each technology type and demonstrates that as fleets increase in size, they require more technology to manage and scale.

Technology	10–49 buses	50–99 buses	100–299 buses	300+ buses
Routing Software	36%	44%	62%	56%
Parent Comm. Apps	24%	30%	44%	48%
Dashcams	34%	30%	23%	20%
Student Ridership Tracking	12%	23%	38%	40%
Predictive Maintenance	10%	11%	21%	20%

Note: Technology adoption rates by fleet size in grid format (% currently using)

Key insight: Dashcams flip the script

Unlike most categories, dashcam adoption is highest among smaller fleets and decreases as fleet size grows. This counterintuitive finding may reflect that smaller operators use dashcams as an affordable liability and safety tool, while larger districts with established safety programs may have deprioritized dashcam expansion in favor of other investments.

What this data shows

Technology adoption in student transportation is broad but uneven. Routing software has reached near-universal status among larger fleets, but tools that extend visibility beyond the route like student tracking, predictive maintenance remain underpenetrated across the industry, particularly among smaller operators.

The gap between current use and 2026 consideration for student ridership tracking is the largest in the survey, signaling that accountability and ridership visibility are becoming table-stakes expectations rather than optional upgrades. The inverse dashcam pattern reinforces a recurring theme: smaller fleets are making targeted investments to manage risk, while larger fleets are shifting spend toward integrated platforms.

Taken together, the data suggests the industry is moving from a first generation of operational tools into a second generation focused on what happens on the bus, not just how it gets there.

Best practices

With respondents planning to evaluate an average of 2.7 additional systems in 2026, fragmentation is a real risk. Each new tool adds another login, another training requirement and another silo. Before evaluating new capabilities, it is worth asking whether existing tools are fully integrated and whether staff have the time to act on what those systems already produce.

For fleets sequencing their investments, student ridership tracking shows the largest adoption gap in the survey and tends to deliver high operational value relative to cost. For smaller fleets, dashcams remain one of the most cost-effective tools available, particularly for liability management.



Zonar's white paper on simplifying [school bus fleet operations](#) addresses how integrated technology can reduce complexity rather than add to it.

— Section 04

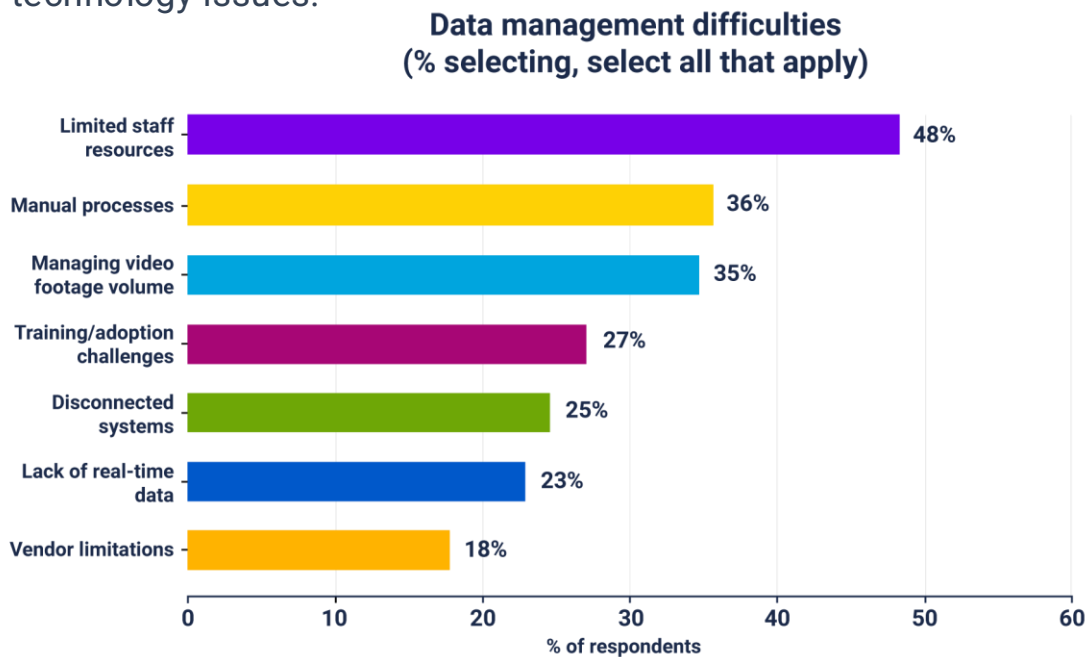
Data management difficulties

Staffing constraints, video management and
disconnected systems



Transportation teams have invested in technology, but the data those systems generate is not always actionable. Routing, communication, tracking and video tools each play a role in daily operations but as the systems expand, so does the volume of data teams are expected to manage.

Survey responders highlight that they have the most day-to-day difficulties in managing fleet technology data with the root cause pointing to operational and human bottlenecks, not technology issues.



Note: Data management difficulties (% of respondents selecting; multiple responses allowed)

Key insight: The data problem is a people and process problem

Forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents cited limited staff resources as a primary challenge. Many teams are responsible for identifying issues highlighted by data and taking remedial action, often alongside their core operational responsibilities. Simply put: they have data, but not enough people or time to act on it. This underscores the growing demand for automated alerts, dashboards and AI-assisted insights that reduce the analytical burden on already-stretched teams.

The growth of video-based safety tools adds another layer. Managing video footage was identified by 35% of respondents as a challenge reflecting the increasing role of cameras.

The volume of footage tied to driver behavior and student incidents has increased due to cameras [protecting both drivers and students](#). But reviewing it requires time many teams don't have. For many administrators, this work competes with other priorities, making addressing issues in a timely way more difficult.

Disconnected systems (25%) and lack of real-time data (23%) suggest that even when technology is in place, integration gaps prevent operators from getting a unified operational picture. Multiple logins, siloed data and delayed reporting undermine the value of individual tools.

What this data shows

Transportation teams are data-rich and resource-poor. The challenge is no longer getting systems in place but building the workflows and staffing capacity to act on what those systems produce. As long as reviewing video, flagging exceptions, and cross-platform reporting depend on manual effort from already-stretched teams, the value of technology investments may remain sub-optimized.

For transportation leaders, this points to a clear near-term priority of consolidation. Platforms that unify GPS, ridership, inspection, alerts and video data into a single view address the root cause rather than adding another tool to the stack.

Best practices

The survey's top data management challenge, cited by 48% of respondents, is limited staff resources, not technology gaps. That distinction matters for how teams approach the problem.

- Automated exception alerts that flag issues without requiring someone to actively look for them reduce the analytical burden considerably.
- Defining a structured review process for video footage, tied to specific triggers rather than open-ended monitoring, helps teams keep up with the volume that camera adoption creates.
- Consolidating GPS, inspection, ridership and communication data into a single view addresses the disconnected-systems problem at its root rather than layering additional tools on top.



Zonar's white paper [controlling costs with custom data visualizations](#) and broader piece on [all-in-one school bus fleet management](#) speak directly to this challenge.

— Section 05

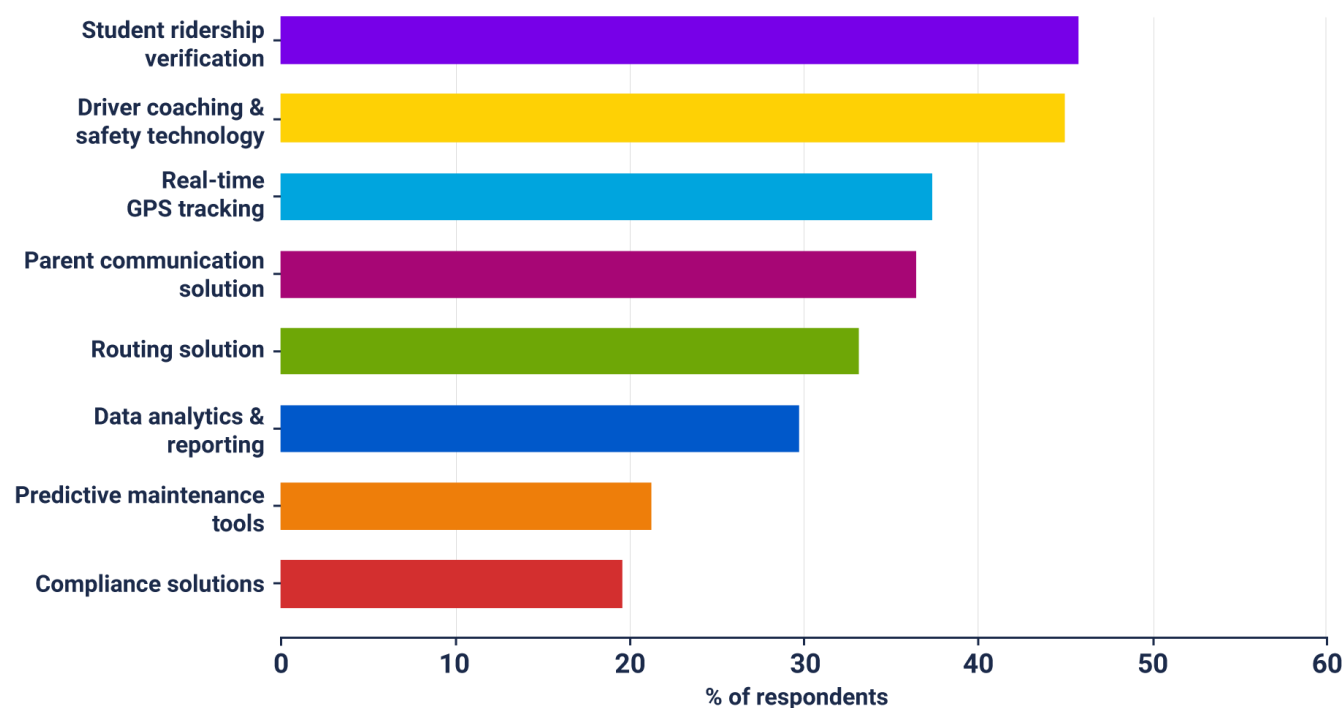
2026 technology investment priorities

Where transportation teams are focusing their
next investments

Transportation teams are making targeted decisions about where to focus next. When asked which transportation technology investments are a priority for their organization in 2026, respondents revealed a clear preference for student accountability and safety technology over infrastructure or analytics tools.

These priorities reflect how transportation teams are responding to ongoing pressure, by keeping student and driver safety as the most important priority.

Transportation technology investment priorities for 2026
(% selecting, select all that apply)



Note: 2026 technology investment priorities (% of respondents; multiple selections allowed)



Key insight: Ridership verification and driver coaching lead 2026 investment intent

Student ridership verification (46%) and driver coaching and safety technology (45%) are the top investment priorities for 2026. Both are tied to improving safety and accountability. Teams are working to understand what is happening in real time and to act on that information without adding additional workload.

Real-time GPS tracking (37%) and parent communication solutions (36%) round out the top four which shows continued investment in visibility and stakeholder communication. This is seen even among districts that have already deployed these tools (possibly upgrading or expanding coverage).

Compliance solutions, examples could include [CARB](#), [biometrics](#) and [EV mandates](#) were selected by only 20% of respondents. These are regulatory requirements for specific geographies, such as California, rather than universal priorities.

2026 investment priorities by role

Technology	Transportation director	Operations manager	Fleet manager/maintenance	Safety manager
Student ridership verification	49%	47%	43%	43%
Driver coaching & safety tech	47%	40%	43%	57%
Real-time GPS tracking	44%	47%	29%	57%
Parent communication	38%	47%	36%	29%



What this data shows

Across roles and fleet sizes, transportation teams are prioritizing tools that help them manage daily operations with greater clarity and control. These investments are closely tied to the pressures outlined earlier in the report, including staffing constraints, safety expectations and the need to respond quickly when conditions change.

For many organizations, the focus is on building systems that support the work already being done, helping small teams operate more efficiently while maintaining reliable service.



Best practices

Student ridership verification and driver coaching lead 2026 investment intentions, and the organizations that see the strongest returns from both tend to plan for implementation as carefully as they plan for procurement.

- Establishing a baseline before deployment, whether that is scan rates, safety event frequency or parent call volume, makes it possible to demonstrate value over time.
- Introducing driver coaching tools with clear communication about purpose and use tends to reduce resistance and accelerate behavior change.
- For districts transporting students with disabilities, ridership data also creates documentation that supports reimbursement claims, turning an operational tool into a funding asset.



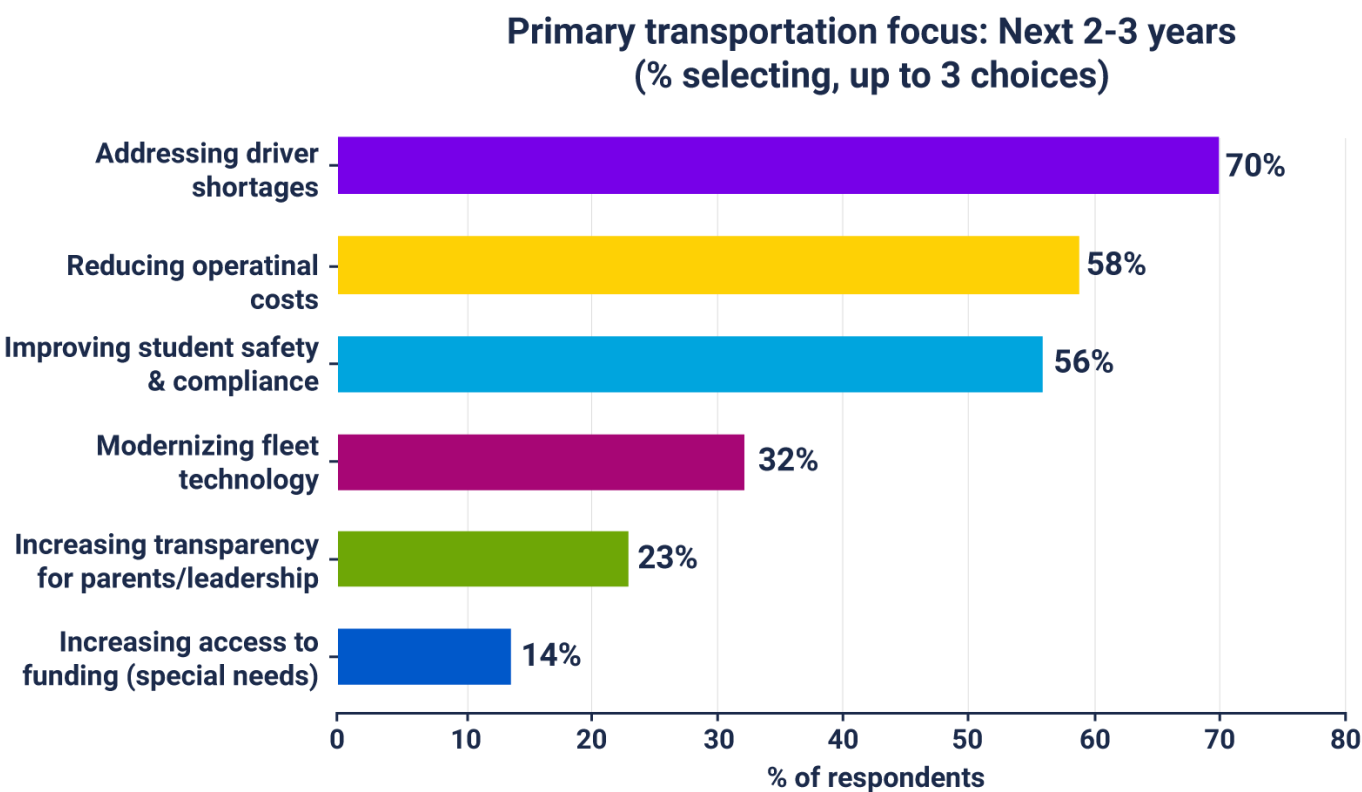
Zonar's white paper on [choosing a school bus fleet technology partner](#) offers useful criteria for evaluating vendors before committing, and their [safe driving ROI calculator](#) can help teams build the internal budget case.

— Section 06

Strategic focus for the coming years

Workforce sustainability, cost reduction and long-term safety improvements

Looking beyond 2026, transportation leaders were asked what are their organization's primary focus areas for the next two to three years. Their answers reveal a strategic agenda aiming for workforce and financial sustainability with student safety right behind.



Note: Primary transportation focus areas over the next two to three years (% selecting; up to 3 choices)

Key insight: Driver shortages will define the decade

Addressing driver shortages remains the top long-term priority, with 70% of respondents identifying it as a focus over the next two to three years. Workforce stability continues to shape how teams plan, staff routes and maintain consistent service. Recruitment, retention and workload management are all central to this effort.

Strategic focus by job role

Focus area	Transportation director	Operations manager	Fleet manager / maintenance
Addressing driver shortages	50%	61%	69%
Reducing operational costs	41%	72%	44%
Improving student safety	43%	28%	56%

What this data shows

The focus on addressing driver shortages over the next two to three years suggests that technology investments in this period will increasingly be justified by their measurable impact.

Questions teams will ask themselves:

-  Does this tool help retain drivers?
-  Does it reduce the cognitive burden on dispatchers?
-  Does it automate tasks that currently require a headcount?

For many organizations, the long-term strategy is to support the people responsible for keeping service running and ensuring they have the tools to manage the demanding environment.

Best practices

The three long-term priorities identified most often, addressing driver shortages, reducing operational costs and improving student safety, are deeply connected. Progress on any one of them tends to support the others.

Framing technology investments in workforce terms, specifically how they reduce dispatcher cognitive load and lower dependence on any single employee, tends to resonate with boards and budget decision-makers more than efficiency arguments alone. Starting preventive maintenance programs before deferred repairs become a service reliability issue is another area where earlier action compounds in value. And for fleets where electric vehicle adoption is still years away, beginning infrastructure and route planning now reduces the pressure when mandates or procurement timelines arrive.

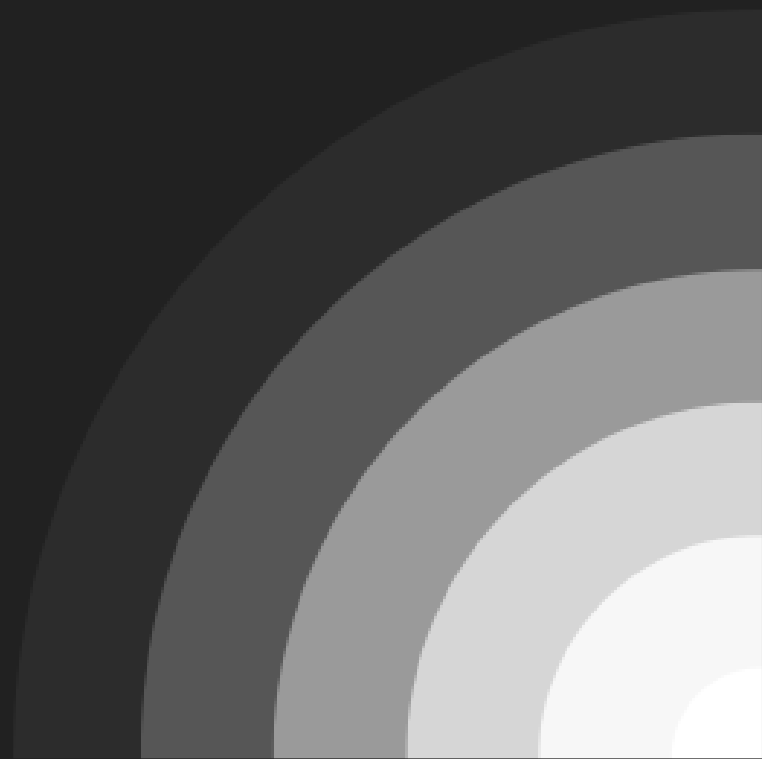


Zonar's [predictive maintenance ROI calculator](#) and their white paper on [EV fleet management considerations](#) are practical starting points for both near- and longer-term planning.

— Section 07

What gets measured

Operational KPI priorities — how teams measure success



Respondents who completed the KPI section ranked ten operational metrics from one (most important) to ten (least important).

On-time performance ranked highest by a significant margin, followed by safety-related metrics, showing respondents consistently prioritized metrics that reflect daily service reliability and visible outcomes.

Operational KPI importance rankings (Average score; lower = higher priority)

KPI	Avg. score	Rank
On-time performance	3.3	#1 — Most important
Safety violations	4.0	#2
Route productivity	4.0	#3
Safety incidents	4.6	#4
Driver turnover	5.4	#5
Student ridership counts	5.5	#6
Unplanned vehicle maintenance	6.0	#7
Maintenance costs	6.8	#8
Idling	7.2	#9
Daily parent call volume	8.3	#10 — Least important

Note: Operational KPI importance rankings (lower average score = higher priority)

Key insight: On-time performance is the north star metric

On-time performance ranked highest, with an average score of 3.3, making it the most important metric by a wide margin. For parents, administrators and school boards, keeping buses on schedule is the most visible measure of success. Service reliability affects student riders, families and school operations, and is often the first signal when something is off.

Safety violations (avg. 4.0) and route productivity (avg. 4.0) were tied for second and third, reflecting a balanced concern for both safety accountability and operational efficiency. Safety incidents (avg. 4.6) came in fourth. These KPIs shape how decisions are made throughout the day, with teams weighing safety and efficiency in every route, response and adjustment.

Daily parent call volume ranked lowest, with an average score of 8.3. While communication remains important, it is less often used as a primary measure of success. Communication issues are often viewed as the result of operational disruptions rather than standalone performance metrics.

What this data shows

Teams are measured by outcomes that reflect safety and reliability. Their performance connects directly to the challenges outlined throughout the report, where small teams are responsible for complex operations that require coordination and leave little room for disruption.

Many organizations measure success by how well teams maintain service under pressure and to keeping students moving safely and on schedule every day.

Best practices

On-time performance as the top-ranked KPI reflects how transportation success is experienced by the people who depend on it most. Families and school administrators experience the operation through its most visible outcome, and that outcome is downstream of driver availability, route efficiency and vehicle reliability. Teams that perform consistently well on this metric tend to track leading indicators alongside it rather than waiting for on-time rates to slip before investigating causes.

Driver turnover, ranked fifth in importance by survey respondents, is one of the most useful forward-looking signals available: rising turnover predicts route instability, which shows up in on-time performance before it shows up anywhere else. Automated reporting that surfaces these metrics without manual effort ensures leaders see the numbers consistently, even during the busiest operational periods.



Zonar's white paper on [optimizing school bus fleets using GPS and vehicle data](#) covers how to connect the data teams are already collecting to the KPIs that matter most.

The 2026 student transportation landscape is defined by a paradox: fleets are more committed to technology investment than ever, yet the biggest barriers to progress remain human.

Technology supports routing, communication and visibility, but also adds to the volume of data teams must manage. With workforce shortages, staff capacity limitations, and the challenge of turning data into action teams need actionable intelligence to function as effectively as possible.

Performance continues to be measured through outcomes that are easy to see and feel. On-time performance, safety and service consistency remain the primary indicators of success for students, families and administrators.

For transportation leaders, the path forward centers on supporting the people doing the work. Workforce stability, operational clarity and the ability to act on information in real time will continue to define how well teams can maintain safe, reliable service.

1

Prioritize driver retention technology

Any technology that reduces driver workload, improves satisfaction, or provides coaches and trainers with better performance data will pay dividends against the number one challenge in the industry.

2

Invest in integrated platforms, not point solutions

With 25% citing disconnected systems and 23% citing lack of real-time data, the demand for unified operational dashboards is clear. Solutions that consolidate GPS, ridership, inspection, and communications data into a single view will reduce staff burden. [Read more about all-in-one solutions.](#)

3

Build the case for student ridership verification

Student ridership verification is the top investment priority for 2026, yet only 41% of respondents currently use student tracking. This gap between current use and planned investment is the largest in the survey, indicating growing recognition of its value. For districts without ridership tools, the return on investment is becoming clearer. [Read more about student ridership verification.](#)

4

Automate what can be automated

With limited staff being the top data management challenge, tools that automate inspection reporting, exception alerts, and parent notifications reduce the manual burden without requiring headcount growth. [Learn more about automation specifically designed for bus routing.](#)

Student transportation is in a period of technology acceleration. The foundations are largely in place, with routing software nearly universal, dashcams widespread and parent communication tools common.

The next frontier is smarter, more integrated, and more actionable. Organizations need systems that do more than collect data and help lean teams make better decisions faster.

For transportation leaders, the path forward centers on supporting the people doing the work. Workforce stability, operational clarity and the ability to act on information will continue to define how teams can maintain safe and reliable service. Organizations that can close the gap between current technology use and their 2026 investment will be better positioned to address the workforce crisis, meet parent and administrative expectations, and deliver safe, on-time transportation for every student.

About Zonar

Zonar combines a unified fleet management platform with reliable telematics hardware and always-on human support, giving mission-critical fleets precise, trustworthy data to improve safety, ensure compliance and reduce operating costs.

Proven every day in student transportation, where it safeguards millions of children, Zonar's technology and partnership deliver the trust, transparency and confidence public-sector, field service and vocational fleets need to perform when it matters most.

www.zonar.com

Get a demo today

