

Stronger Together:

How Partnerships are Making the Industry Better

Zonar and Transfinder Connect for Seamless and Safe Technology Integration

By Richard G. Tackett

The successful integration of Zonar's technology with Transfinder's solutions ensures districts and families nationwide can depend on safe, reliable, and efficient transportation for drivers and students.

Zonar and Transfinder inked a deal in January 2021, pledging to collaborate and equip school district bus fleets with smart fleet management and routing solutions. Additionally, Transfinder became an official reseller of Zonar solutions, to better integrate its routing and management tools with the company's offerings.

"When families and schools have confidence in the safe transportation of students as efficiently as possible, it's a win for everybody involved," said Ryan Sharkey, director of passenger services at Zonar. "And it usually ends up saving districts in the long run."

By combining the routing solutions from Transfinder with GPS and diagnostics solutions from Zonar, buses end up running routes more efficiently with both optimized routes and real-time information on what is happening with any vehicle going directly to dispatch, so that they can take any action needed if a fault code is generated off a bus.

This partnership is part of the evolution to ensure the safety of students and the productivity of Zonar and Transfinder customers through the use of innovative technology.

The latest step of the partnership integrates Transfinder technologies seamlessly with Zonar APIs, leveraging its [high-definition GPS](#) data and patented Electronic Verified Inspection Reporting (EVIR®) and for Transfinder's Routefinder PLUS, Wayfinder and Stopfinder (The Transfinder Trifecta) as well as Servicefinder, [Transfinder's fleet maintenance and inventory management solution](#).

"Zonar's solutions feature many APIs from which we can pull and analyze data," said Antonio Civitella, president and CEO of Transfinder. "As we worked further with Zonar's GPS capabilities, more opportunities opened up for seamless integration."

The compatibility ensures school and district transportation fleets benefit from more accurate and efficient route optimization, increased fleet safety and ridership visibility, and improved maintenance shop productivity.

"Transfinder and Zonar working together really is a win-win for school transportation departments," Sharkey said.

"Speed is a key factor in any data integration between Transfinder and Zonar," said Joe Messia, chief operating officer at Transfinder. "Zonar has real-time data flowing through its systems, so one of our chief priorities is ensuring that the same real-time data moves quickly and seamlessly through our systems, to provide up-to-date route and vehicle analytics to the customer."



Solutions for districts, parents, and students

The integration between Zonar and Transfinder extends to numerous solutions offered by each company, including:

Routefinder PLUS, Wayfinder, and Stopfinder

Zonar's GPS technology also works seamlessly with Routefinder PLUS, Transfinder's award-winning routing software; the [Transfinder driver app](#) Wayfinder; and the parent-facing application, Stopfinder.

Routefinder PLUS is the latest version of [Transfinder's signature, browser-based routing solution](#). Its intuitive design allows for fast, safe, and smart route creation, and allows districts to control routes and maps in order to plot the safest trips with real-time information.

Wayfinder allows drivers to assign trips, select or change vehicles, see the driver schedule, add, or decline trips, skip stops, or make a vehicle substitution and take attendance. Any of these actions will update Routefinder PLUS and all connected solutions with the new information. Wayfinder is also a certified app on Samsung Tab Active3 driver tablets.

Stopfinder also integrates with Routefinder PLUS, allowing parents to have their [children's bus schedule in the palms of their hands](#). The app features push notifications, two-way messaging, and GeoAlert zones to know where a school bus is while it is enroute.

"When we have conversations around the development of our products, including Stopfinder, our parent app, we're talking about getting information down to the second – or even sometimes down to a half second," Messia said. "We're always trying to figure how can we display information one second faster. We spend a significant level of resources with our technology team to shave one or two seconds off the display of that data. It's that important."



Z Pass™

Zonar's Z Pass allows districts to [see where and when riders enter and exit buses](#). This information can help locate a rider, improve routes and utilization, and claim unreported pupil Medicaid reimbursement.

To use Z Pass, students carry a passive RFID identification card that they scan when entering or exiting a school bus. The time, date, and location of each scan is logged and transmitted to a secure database for immediate access through [Zonar's Ground Traffic Control](#).

As a result of the partnership between Zonar and Transfinder, this information is instantly communicated across each of a district's solutions and apps provided by either company.

EVIR®

Zonar's EVIR is the only patented [electronic verified inspection reporting solution](#) available for school buses, complying with FMCSA, DOT, and OSHA requirements.

"Unfortunately, 'pencil whipping' is still common in the industry," Sharkey said. "We had one customer that, before adopting EVIR, used to look for footprints in the snow to check if his drivers were doing their inspections. That's an antiquated way of going about things."

"Pencil whipping" refers to a report signed by a driver without completing an inspection. EVIR essentially removes the ability for drivers to pencil-whip inspection reports. The system, available only from Zonar, works by placing NFC tags in inspection zones throughout the bus. Each tag is digitally linked to the vehicle on which it is placed; so, the vehicle is easily identifiable, and its inspection information is pre-loaded into the system. Drivers use a Zonar handheld device, tablet, or their phone and walk around the vehicle to physically inspect each zone, scanning the tags as they proceed. Scanning a tag initially tells a driver



what to inspect, and the second scan verifies that the zone is inspected. If a previous report noted a defect on the bus, the driver is alerted to verify that it has been corrected. Through the Zonar-Transfinder integration, Servicefinder, Transfinder's fleet management system, pulls in EVIR data to identify major defects, automatically generate work orders, and streamline maintenance workflows.

Deploying to customers

Zonar and Transfinder work together with districts to ensure proper onboarding and implementation of all solutions and hardware.

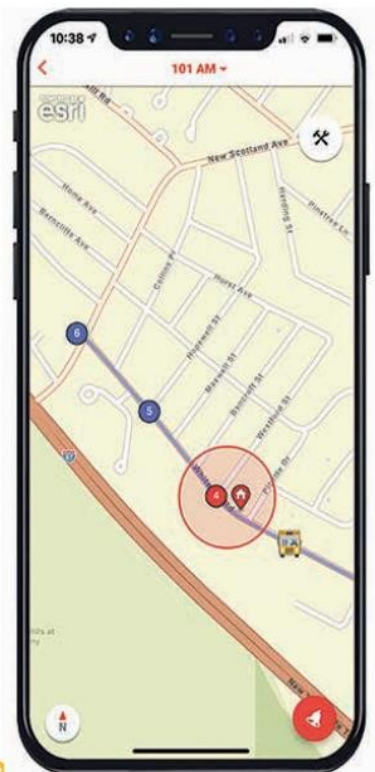
"Each deployment is unique," Civitella said. "Size of staff, time availability, time of year, and the district's end goals each play a factor. We put together a very extensive and customized project plan where we define each organization's responsibilities – the district, Zonar, and Transfinder. If a project plan falls behind schedule due to unforeseen circumstances, we are flexible and adjust our clients' plan accordingly."

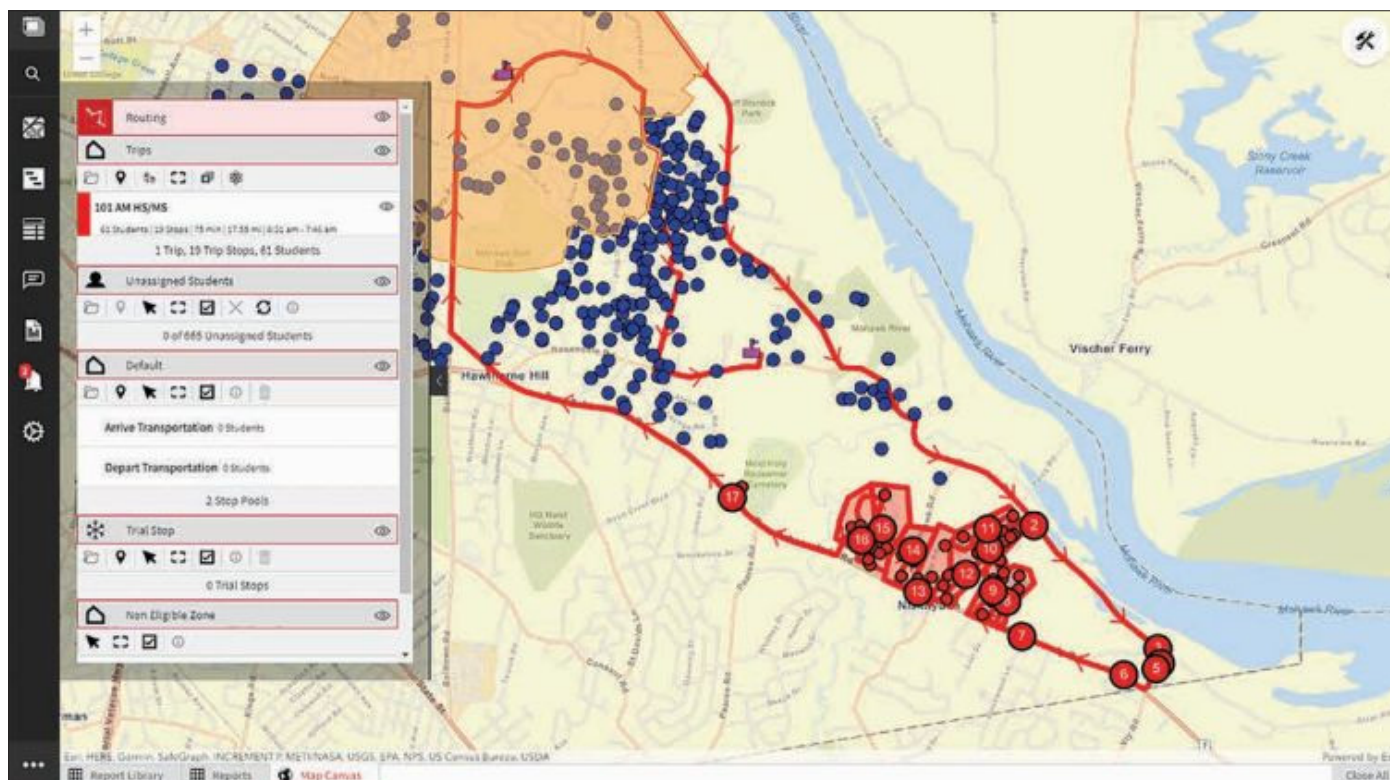
The size of a fleet and the number of solutions chosen will affect the implementation duration.

However, regardless of size or complexity, every successful implementation needs a leader to coordinate the moving parts and ensure everything goes smoothly.

"When a district or contractor chooses Zonar, we provide an assigned implementation manager to be that leader until they sign off that everything's up and running correctly," Sharkey said.

For Zonar's part, an implementation manager will kick off the process and stick with a customer until deployment is complete, providing ETAs based on information customers provide, explaining each step and what to expect along the way, and handling regular check-ins, status updates, issues, and escalations. But if a customer prefers to self-install, Zonar's priority is to set them up for success. If a customer is





confident about performing a full-scale installation – or just needs to outfit a few new vehicles – the company provides tailored, in-depth training to lead the way.

“We’ll install and set up the solution properly, then teach you how to get the most out of it,” Sharkey said. “We start by understanding why you chose the solution and what you need from it. Then, we tailor our training accordingly, including the use of real-world examples from daily operations to make the information relevant and relatable.”

System and solution training

Because Transfinder has such a vast solution set, the company truly customizes each deployment. If a district adds a solution such as the Stopfinder app for parents, Transfinder spends extensive time preparing data and routes beforehand.

“This ensures that our clients can get up and running as soon as the size and complexity of their own operations will allow,” Civitella said.

“When a new project comes in, we evaluate the whole project with our client,” Messia said. “When a client joins us, they’re surrounded by a **service team**. They have a client project manager, and that’s their ‘quarterback’ on the Transfinder side. The project manager ensures that the client has everything required to be successful.”

Transfinder deploys trainers for how-to instruction, and support specialists to aid with technical challenges.

“Data specialists are also becoming more and more important,” Messia said. “The data can’t just be good – it needs to be extremely accurate, because this information is now being shown to parents.” Transfinder also has built a robust Community portal with numerous videos and how-to content, FAQs and other documentation to assist clients 24/7.

On the other end, Zonar offers both premium on-site training customized to a district’s needs and based on what solutions they have implemented. Additionally, Zonar’s support site provides a self-service module that welcomes users and helps them through every step of implementation. The company recently launched Zonar University, a new, scalable online learning management system (LMS), to expand customer training. Zonar University’s online training portal is part of Zonar’s award-winning customer success program. Zonar University is designed to educate Zonar end users on the company’s core product lines, latest product introductions, enhancements, and best practices in using Zonar solutions.

“With Zonar University, customers’ drivers and operators can quickly get up-to-speed on the Zonar solutions that aid them in daily processes, including proper pre- and post- trip inspections and tablet use for student transportation,” Sharkey said. “In addition, by flattening the learning curve on how to use Zonar solutions for drivers and whom they work for, all parties can focus more on their daily tasks and less time figuring out how to use their systems, particularly if they are a new hire. It also includes modules for our partners like Transfinder.

“In the end, we’ve created an end-to-end self-service digital ecosystem intending to make it easier for our customers to optimize their fleet management initiatives and do business with Zonar,” he continued. “Furthermore, Zonar University equips Zonar users with the knowledge and critical information on our latest product innovations and core products to help get the job done right the first time.”

Apple Bus

Pupil transportation contractor **Apple Bus**, established in 2000, operates about 1,700 school buses serving approximately 80 contracted clients – including school districts, charter schools, and municipal paratransit services – across eight states.

Apple Bus has worked with Transfinder and Zonar for over a decade.

“We promote ourselves as best in class,” said Reid Oyster, executive vice president of Apple Bus. “It’s not about picking the cheapest product – the product has to work extremely well. We gravitate toward companies that are also best in class. And in that time period, both Zonar and Transfinder have risen to the top. And my humble perspective is that not only have they risen to the top, but the competitive gap between Zonar, Transfinder, and their competitors is vast.”

Apple Bus utilizes Zonar’s GPS services and the EVIR inspection system. From Transfinder, the contractor takes advantage of routing solutions. Oyster said that Apple Bus has seen huge benefits by combining solutions from each company.

“We take the GPS data provided by Zonar, embed it into Transfinder’s solutions, and receive powerful data related to routes and routing efficiency – an increasingly important concern,” he said.

From the company’s perspective as a contractor, the web-based nature of these products is critical. Some of the districts which Apple Bus services are small enough as to not have extensive IT resources. Apple Bus can use

Zonar and Transfinder to consolidate IT resources across fewer locations.

“Instead of having 80 routers serving 80 customers, we can have 10 routers serve the same customer base. Routing is implemented remotely, and at an extremely high level of satisfaction.”

“The systems are clean – they work efficiently and relatively inexpensively compared to the past,” he continued. “We don’t need to ride a bus for a few days to figure out where it’s going – we can take the breadcrumb trail that Zonar provides, overlay that into Transfinder’s technology, and then build an efficient route out of that. We save so much time and money, it becomes a no-brainer even for smaller districts that would never be able to afford routing software in decades past.”

IDEA Public Schools

IDEA Public Schools is on track to operate over 650+ routes from its locations in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and Ohio the following school year. With 82 schools requiring routing coordination, IDEA has worked with Transfinder for over a decade. Because of the partnership, that relationship also included Zonar starting in early 2021.

IDEA utilizes Routefinder PLUS, as well as Stopfinder and Transfinder’s GPS Connect as associated applications. Once the partnership between Zonar and Transfinder ensured seamless integration and improved customer service, IDEA began using Zonar’s Z Pass to track student IDs as they board and exit buses.

“Zonar also gives us GPS capability that, in tandem with Routefinder PLUS, allows us to track and audit forecasted versus actual routes,” said Carlos Castaneda, vice president of transportation and warehousing for IDEA Public Schools. “For example, if the system suggests a route of A to B to C, but a driver actually drives A to C to B, then that is a matter of wasting resources and could also be a safety issue.”

Using the combined solutions, Castaneda said that IDEA is able to track harsh acceleration, hard braking events, hard turns, and other driver behavioral issues.

“We want to know about all of those events,” he said. “We want to take action and be good partners in coaching and developing our drivers. This gives us more efficient and –more importantly– safer routes every day.”

More than any other factor, Castaneda said, IDEA is enticed by the customer service and support provided by Transfinder and Zonar.

“When we need support from Transfinder, they are always a video conference call away; they always strive to provide great customer service by creating a bridge of support between Transfinder and Zonar,” he said. “We’re never told to just go talk to another vendor about our questions. We engage in three-way communication with Transfinder and Zonar, allowing us to have uninterrupted backend support with our platform service and data collection.”



Moving forward

The partnership’s future growth is predicated on safety and customer service. Clients like Apple Bus and IDEA Public Schools see those factors as key differentiators between the two companies and the rest of the industry. And Transfinder and Zonar remain focused on those core competencies, along with a breadth of product and data knowledge.

“First and foremost, we are a customer service company,” Civitella said of Transfinder. “We know what works and what doesn’t work with our clients. We want to share our best practices with our own clients because *their* clients are parents. We realize we must be a software solution that not only solves problems with district operations, but remains cutting-edge in communications and collaboration. That goes beyond even routing and technology integration.”

“Safety is at Zonar’s core,” Sharkey said. “Many of our solutions are **parent-facing** and keep them informed about where the bus is and when and where students are getting on in off the bus. But these solutions extend to areas like contact tracing too. When you do that efficiently, you are saving people time, and time is always money and, in many cases, increased safety.” **SBR**

