



Stronger Connections Grant Program

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) of 2022 provided \$1 billion in funding to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) to be distributed under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The BSCA specifies that SEAs must make competitive subgrants to high-need Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) or consortia of LEA's, as determined by the SEA, for activities to support safe and healthy students under section 4108 of the ESEA.

The Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program is different from the regular Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program, which funds a broader range of activities, including activities to support well-rounded educational opportunities and the effective use of educational technology.

Stronger Connections Grant funds will be awarded competitively to high-need LEAs to establish and support safer and healthier learning environments in our school communities. LEA plans to create safe, healthy, and supportive schools should reflect a comprehensive set of evidence-based components.

SCG Eligibility

The State of Nebraska has defined “high-need LEA” as a district that has a high rate of poverty (40% or more will be given preference but lower will not be excluded) and one or more of the following challenges:

- A recent disaster
- High mental health issues
- Chronic student absenteeism
- Expulsion issues due to bullying and harassment
- High community violence
- High school violence
- High homeless or foster care student counts

Applicants must be an LEA or a consortia of LEAs. LEAs may only submit one application and/or be included in one proposal. If granted, funds may not be transferred. Applications must be fully submitted in the Grants Management System (GMS) by 11:59 PM on the date of the deadline which is yet to be determined.

Award Amounts

Nebraska was awarded \$4,833,025 and 95% of these funds must be provided to LEAs through a competitive process. All award amounts must be approved by the State Board of Education.

The one-time grant award amounts will be determined using need based on poverty, documented areas of need that will be mitigated through grant funds activities, and quality of application based on required areas.

Timeline (Tentative)

Competition outline for public comment:	April 2023
Grant opportunity and guidance released:	May 2023
Additional guidance after LEA questions:	May 2023
Grant application available in the GMS:	June 2023
Application submission deadline:	August 2023
Award notifications:	September 15, 2023
Final period for liquidation of funds:	September 30, 2026

Planning Process

As LEAs, or consortia of LEAs, begin the planning process, it is important to consider each portion of the application. The application sections are:

- Stakeholder Engagement
- Needs Assessment
- Program Objectives
- Justification
- Nonpublic Consultation
- Evidence-based Programs
- Program Evaluation
- Budget
- Sustainability

Considerations for each portion of the application are included in this document. During the development of the proposal, ensure alignment between all sections of the application and, where appropriate, the connection to the school/district continuous improvement plan.

Requirements for each portion of the application:

1. Stakeholder Engagement – Please also refer to the section on Nonpublic later in this document

LEA's must engage with stakeholders; students, parents, families, community members, and nonpublic school personnel (if applicable) to gauge input from the various groups to make determinations for critical next steps. Communication and collaboration between the LEA, school leadership, educators, and other school staff is crucial to supporting the effective use of funds. LEA and school leaders should provide ongoing and meaningful opportunities for educators and staff to be involved in the selection of evidence-based strategies and activities implemented to increase the safety and well-being of students, educators, and staff.

Proposals that engage community partners to leverage resources beyond the school are encouraged. Community partners should be actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the plan.

Input from a variety of stakeholders is vital for successful programming. Stakeholder input helps the planning team identify the needs of the LEA, schools, students, parents, and community. This input combined with the needs assessment enables the planning team to design programmatic activities that meet the needs of the various stakeholders.

LEAs should include stakeholders from the following groups:

- Parents
- Students
- District and school representatives
 - Administrators, educators, specialized instructional support personnel, related service providers, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, nurses, and other applicable personnel
- Nonpublic school representatives
 - Administrators, educators, and other applicable personnel
- Indian tribes or tribal organizations, when applicable
- Local government representatives
- Community-based organizations
- Others with relevant and demonstrated expertise

Methods of stakeholder engagement may include the following:

- Separate SCG meetings with various stakeholder groups invited
- Surveying stakeholder groups with topics specific to SCG
- Attending existing stakeholder meetings (ex. parent-teacher-student organizations, student government, City Council, Chamber of Commerce) with SCG on the agenda and an opportunity for comments and questions
- A presence at schools, community events, and other areas with stakeholders to request feedback (ex. parent pick up, school activities)
- E-mails to various stakeholder groups with an overview of SCG and a request for thoughts, ideas, and feedback

After the proposal is developed and if the project is selected for funding, stakeholders should be continuously engaged throughout the life of the funded project. This ensures that the LEA continues to meet the needs of the stakeholders as needs arise and evolve. Stakeholders should be partners in the development, implementation, and the provision of feedback regarding the SCG activities and programs.

2. Needs Assessment

LEAs competing for Stronger Connections Grant funds must conduct a needs assessment and provide a summary of the assessment findings. Assessments may include school safety assessments, culture and climate assessments, capacity assessments, and site assessments.

When conducting the needs assessment, planning teams should consider the use of data to identify areas where grant funded activities have a reasonable likelihood to create a positive impact. LEAs may include demographic data that describes the school community as part of the proposal, but the identification of needs that will be addressed through the grant should be focused on gaps in services or disproportionate outcomes. The needs assessment must incorporate the voices of stakeholders. Additionally, LEAs should note if resources and assets already exist and identify them as a part of the needs assessment.

The following are examples of sources of data and potential identified needs and challenges. These are examples only and do not include all possible options.

Sources of Data

- Attendance data
- School discipline data
- Assessment results
- Acceleration data
- Graduation rates and postsecondary data
- School, campus, and family survey results
- Referrals for behavioral health services
- Hate-based and other discriminatory incidents
- Community specific health data
- Calls to community crisis centers
- Restraint and isolation data

Identified Needs and Challenges

- High mental health issues
- Chronic absenteeism
- Bullying and harassment
- Community violence
- School violence
- High homeless or foster student counts
- Disproportionate discipline
- Juvenile justice system involvement
- Substance misuse referrals
- Recent traumatic events
- School climate indicators

Note: Programs outlined in the program implementation section must have a demonstrated connection to the identified needs and challenges outlined in this summary.

3. Program Objectives and Implementation

Planning teams should incorporate the results of the needs assessment, stakeholder feedback, research, best practices and evidence-based strategies in the development of programs. Based on data and current needs, the applicant will describe how SCG funds will be used to implement programs incorporating evidence-based strategies that meet the needs of students. For each program, applicants must provide the following information:

- Action plan of how the funds will support safe and healthy student outcomes;
- The goals, objectives, and anticipated student outcomes;
- A description of the program(s) and how the program(s) will be implemented;
- The rationale behind selecting the program(s) and the match to the needs assessment;
- The group of students most likely impacted by the program(s) and the approximate number of students that will be served;
- The program(s) measures that will be used to monitor for implementation effectiveness
- Implementation timeline
- Sustainability plan

4. Evidence-based Programs

Evidence-based interventions demonstrate a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes. Each program proposed should include an evidence-based intervention in line with the ESEA, as amended, tiers of evidence. LEAs may use programs or strategies that align with multiple tiers of evidence. The tiers of evidence are as follows:

- Tier 1-Stronger Evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study, meets What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Evidence standards without reservations.
- Tier 2-Moderate Evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study on the intervention, meets WWC Evidence Standards with reservations.
- Tier 3-Promising Evidence: At least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study, sampling and/or analytic methods to reduce or account for differences.
- Tier 4-Demonstrates a Rationale: A well specified logic model that is informed by research or an evaluation that suggests the intervention is likely to improve the relevant outcomes and an effort to study the effects of the intervention.

Potential Activities to Address Identified Needs/Challenges

- School-based, community-based, and/or remote (telehealth) behavioral health services.
- Social Emotional Learning
- District/School Comprehensive School Safety
- Positive and fair behavioral interventions and supports
- Inclusive practices
- Implement Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Trauma informed classrooms
- Inclusive and culturally affirming discipline practices

- Anti-harassment, anti-intimidation, and anti-bullying
- School climate initiatives
- Recognition, screening, and response to emotional or behavior stress in students
- Threat assessments
- Equity, cultural responsiveness, and anti-racism
- Safety and violence prevention programs

5. Program Evaluation

Program evaluations provide a systematic method to determine a program’s effectiveness and how well the program achieves its goals. Evaluations can help an LEA determine what works well, and evaluation data can be used to improve a program. The evaluation should clearly identify what data will be collected, the rationale for using the selected data and the frequency of monitoring for implementation effectiveness. The outcome of the evidence-based activities, programs, and practices should have a direct impact on students. When considering program evaluation, planning teams should consider the anticipated outcomes, the timeline for goal completion, and the tools they will use to measure the outcomes.

6. Budget

The budget for the SCG program should reflect expenditures that focus on direct services and resources to provide students with safe and healthy learning conditions. LEAs will include a proposed cost-effective budget with all costs described and justified as reasonable and necessary to accomplish the activities outlined in the application.

As part of the development of the proposal, LEAs should carefully consider the level of funding needed. Planning teams should also consider administrative costs and the federal “supplement, not supplant” provision as **SCG funds are supplemental funds**. LEAs may include reasonable indirect costs and clearly defined direct administrative costs. All proposed costs shall reflect the goals and priorities of the SCG and will be reviewed to ensure costs are allowable and reasonable.

7. Sustainability

SCG funds are designed to provide support to LEAs in establishing and improving safe, healthy, and supportive learning opportunities and environments with a funding period of three years. The grant period will end September 30, 2026, and there is no carryover provision beyond that date. During the three-year cycle, LEAs should be identifying partnerships and other funding sources that can help sustain the programs implemented to provide safe and healthy learning conditions.

8. Nonpublic Consultation

Public Schools that apply for funding must consult with all their resident nonpublic schools to determine if the nonpublic wants to participate in the grant and receive equitable services. A suggested consultation form is being sent to all districts. The district can use another form, if they would like, but all the information provided on the suggested form must be included. *It is the responsibility of the public school to assure that the nonpublic spends any allocations in the appropriate ways.*

Links for Additional Resources:

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education: Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Website:
<https://oese.ed.gov/bipartisan-safer-communities-act/>

Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Grant Program Frequently Asked Questions, Final Document released April 2023: [Final Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Frequently Asked Questions – Nonregulatory Guidance](#)

Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates:
Climates: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>