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ED Announces Stronger Connections Grants

Ken Forsberg • 202-624-7889 • kforsberg@ffis.org

Summary

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) provided \$1 billion for formula grants to states, which will then be provided as competitive grants to high-need local education agencies (LEAs) to support safe and healthy students. The Department of Education (ED) is calling the program the Stronger Connections Grant Program and has released state allocations and requirements for it.

This brief summarizes allowed activities, priorities, and requirements for the program and provides state allocations. The grants are meant to support activities that promote student wellbeing in equitable ways and engage families and communities in that work.

Funding

The BSCA ([P.L. 117-159](https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/1159), summarized in [Issue Brief 22-11](#)) appropriated more than \$4.5 billion in state and local grant funding, including \$1 billion for certain activities under the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) block grant, which is Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), to remain available through fiscal year (FY) 2025.

The BSCA directs that funding be awarded to states by formula, then by states to high-need LEAs on a competitive basis. “High-need” is defined as having high rates of poverty and one or more of the following characteristics:

1. a high student-to-mental-health-professional ratio
2. high rates of chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, referrals to the juvenile justice system, bullying/harassment, community and school violence, or substance abuse
3. recent experience of a natural disaster or traumatic event

On September 15, ED announced state allocations for these grants, which it is calling Stronger Connections grants (CFDA 84.424F). Allocations are presented in [Table 1](#) at the end of this brief. They are calculated according to Title I-A state shares.

States must award at least 95% of their allocations to high-need LEAs and may reserve up to 1% for administration. Remaining funds may be used for state-level programs.

Authorized Activities

Stronger Connections grants are to be used by states and LEAs for activities listed under Section 4108 of the ESEA—added by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015—entitled “Activities to Support Safe and Healthy Students.” It authorizes activities that:

- are coordinated with other schools and community programs
- foster a safe and healthy environment for students
- promote the involvement of parents

It specifies several qualifying activities, including the following:

- (A) drug and violence prevention
- (B) school-based mental health services
- (C) programs or activities that
 - i. integrate health and safety practices into school or athletic programs
 - ii. support a healthy, active lifestyle
 - iii. help prevent bullying and harassment
 - iv. improve instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills
 - v. provide mentoring and school counseling
 - vi. establish or improve school dropout and reentry programs
 - vii. establish learning environments and enhance skills essential for academic success
- (D) training for school personnel in suicide prevention, classroom management, crisis management and conflict resolution, human trafficking, prevention of violence, drug abuse, and bullying
- (E) child sexual abuse awareness and prevention programs
- (F) design and implementation of plans to reduce exclusionary discipline practices
- (G) implementation of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports
- (H) designation of a site resource coordinator to establish community partnerships to support a school
- (I) pay-for-success initiatives, which condition payment for interventions on verified successful outcomes

Priorities

Along with state allocations and other documents, ED released a [letter](#) to state school officers encouraging states to prioritize funding for LEA applicants demonstrating commitment to the following:

1. Use of strategies supported by the strongest tiers of evidence
2. Engagement of students, families, educators, staff, and community organizations, with attention to communities that face systemic

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- barriers and with communication to families and communities on how their feedback was incorporated into final decisions
3. Advancement of equity and protection of student rights, including through:
 - a. professional development
 - b. comprehensive emergency management planning
 - c. behavioral and trauma- or grief-informed mental health supports for students (including addressing hate, bullying, and harassment)
 - d. developmentally and culturally appropriate and trauma-informed emergency training, security measures, and other schoolwide policies
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Requirements/ Restrictions

As part of the release, ED provided a [list of assurances](#) states must provide to draw down funds. A [separate list](#) of assurances was provided for American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. In addition to those already mentioned, state assurances include the following:

- LEAs may not use grant funds for the provision of weapons or weapons training.
- Students and teachers in non-public schools must receive equitable services under the grants, but such services must be secular, neutral, and nonideological. Grants to non-public schools must also follow certain requirements regarding public agency involvement in purchases and service provision.
- LEAs must follow the ESEA’s “supplement not supplant” requirements.
- Grant funds must be tracked separately from regular SSAE funds.
- State Educational Agencies (SEAs) must follow various reporting requirements.
- LEAs must participate in evaluations and audits.

Next Steps

States may now begin to draw down funds consistent with assurances and other requirements in their award notification. ED intends to issue answers to FAQs in the coming months and also [seeks comment](#) on the collection of information from states for the program; comments are due November 15.

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