



February 3, 2023

Stronger Connections Grant Guidelines

The Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program under Title IV, Part A of the ESEA, will be used to provide competitive grants to high-need PreK-12 public school districts as determined by the State. The overall goal of the Stronger Connections grant is to help schools provide all students with safe and supportive learning opportunities and environments that are critical for their success by establishing emergency operation plans, a positive school culture and climate and prioritizing student wellness. These funds can be used to support school and community partnerships that pursue multifaceted solutions to more effectively prevent and respond to acts of bullying and violence that impact members of our school communities at both individual and systemic levels. Subgrants can support conducting school safety assessments and creating safety plans, increasing access to integrated student supports, implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioral Interventions (PBIS), or improving meaningful family engagement opportunities, or other allowable activities.

Criteria must address the following:

- Implementing comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that meet each student's social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being needs; create positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; and increase access to place-based interventions and services.
- Engaging students, families, educators, staff, and community organizations in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions to create safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments.
- Designing and implementing policies and practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

The funding period for this grant expires September 30, 2026.

Program Funding

Program	Amount
Stronger Connections Grant Total	\$5,988,079
Allocated to Districts (95%)	\$5,688,676
State Activities (4%)	\$239,523
Administration (1%)	\$59,880

Non-Public Equitable Share

Each eligible LEA receiving a Stronger Connections subgrant must, after timely and meaningful consultation with appropriate private school officials, provide eligible private school students and educators services and other benefits that are equitable in comparison to services and other benefits provided with Stronger Connections funds to public school students and educators. (ESEA section 8501(a)(1), (3)(A)). After timely and meaningful consultation, the LEA makes the final decisions with respect to the services it will provide to eligible private school students and educators (34 C.F.R. § 299.7(b)(3)).



Activities to Establish Safer and Healthier Learning Environments

Grant funds will support grantees in using funds to build relationships between students and educators, and other adults who serve students, in ways that help students feel less isolated and more connected to their school, improving their overall health and well-being. Funds can be used to provide all students with safe and supportive learning opportunities and environments that are critical for their success. For example, funds could be used to support the mental health and wellness of students and staff by hiring additional counselors, social workers, and psychologists; partnering with community organizations to offer mental health support for students; training staff on how to handle trauma; and creating calming spaces for staff and students.

Examples of Allowable Uses of Funds	Prohibited Uses of Funds
Emergency operating plan and emergency drills (comprehensive, high-quality) https://rems.ed.gov/districtguide.aspx	An LEA cannot use funds for school construction, renovation, or repair of any school facility, except as authorized under this chapter; ESEA 8526.
Safety and violence prevention https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/events/webinar/positive-behavioral-strategies-restorative-practices	Funds cannot be used for the provision to any person of a dangerous weapon, as defined in section 930(g)(2) of title 18, or training in the use of a dangerous weapon. (Funds may not be used to purchase a firearm or to train teachers to use a firearm) ESEA section 8526
Evidence-based interventions that have been shown to significantly improve student safety and health as well as academic outcomes https://www.samhsa.gov/resource-search/ebp	An LEA that receives a Stronger Connections award may not transfer funds out of that award to another authorized program.
Anti-bullying and harassment plans (PBIS, mental health supports, instructional practices for developing relationships building skills, high-quality training for school personnel) https://www.stopbullying.gov/	SEC. 4110. [20 U.S.C. 7120] SUPPLEMENT, NOT SUPPLANT. Funds made available under this subpart shall be used to supplement, and not supplant, non-Federal funds that would otherwise be used for activities authorized under this subpart.
Develop and implement positive and fair discipline policies and practices	
Implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to support and respond to student needs https://www.pbis.org/	
School-wide implementation of strategies to meet social, emotional and academic needs (fostering student voice, promote student connectedness to school, teach emotional self-regulation, restorative circles, routines meetings, wellness teams, student engagement surveys and result responses)	
Increase access to mental health services (implementing a comprehensive mental health system)	
Activities and strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities and support their safety, health, learning and success (MTSS, provide students with opportunities to develop and practice social, emotional and cognitive skills that are designed to be accessible, family and community engagement, prevent bullying, promote inclusion)	
Activities to support preschool aged students that encourage healthy growth and development	



Examples of Allowable Uses of Funds	Prohibited Uses of Funds
Increase students' connections and a sense of belonging at school https://www.pbis.org/resource/improving-attendance-and-reducing-chronic-absenteeism	
Promote student physical fitness (programs to build classroom physical activity, before and after school)	
Implement plans to prevent and respond to bullying and harassment (cultivate positive student-teacher relationships, MTSS, PBIS)	
Professional development for educators in support of providing safe, welcoming and inclusive learning environments (provide educators job-embedded and ongoing professional development)	
Professional development to support trauma-informed practices https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4884.pdf https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/	
Professional development for principals and school leaders to implement and sustain evidence-based strategies school-wide (job-embedded professional development such as: simulation-based training, cohort-based learning, network opportunities, coaching, mentoring, and using problems of practice as a process of inquiry)	
Professional development for educators on how to use a variety of data sources to identify areas of need (chronic absenteeism, bullying, calls to community crisis centers, grade retention, community health care and substance abuse factors and early indicators) https://www.partnershipstudentsuccess.org/	
Develop early detection, screening or warning systems to identify students who may be at risk or those in need of additional supports (implementing or enhancing MTSS)	
Hire mental health professionals and other critical student support staff (school-based mental health providers such as school psychologists, school counselors, social workers, behavior specialists, mentors or site resource coordinators)	
Contract with external service providers, train current staff and support recruitment efforts to place trained adults as mentors, integrated student support coordinators, post-secondary education transition coaches and student success coaches	
School-based police officers, law enforcement or school resource officers (SROs) (schools should: conduct a comprehensive vetting process, provide training and ongoing professional development on MTSS, establish clear roles, conduct community and family engagement, implement accountability measures and data-driven evaluations)	



Examples of Allowable Uses of Funds	Prohibited Uses of Funds
Infrastructure-related security equipment (surveillance cameras, metal detectors, minor remodeling for installation of security equipment)	
Implement comprehensive approach to school safety	
Title IV, Part A, Sec. 4108 Activities to Support Safe and Healthy Students	

Allocations by District Size

The \$5,688,676 in awards will be proportionally distributed across small to large competitive applicant districts. The proportion of the award distributed to district size categories based on district certified Iowa public school K-12 enrollment for 2021-2022 reported, 481,248 students. The following table provides the proportion of the awards slotted to be distributed to competitive district applicants of each size.

District Size	Size 1	Size 2	Size 3
Certified Enrollment 2021-2022	100-1,000	1,000-3,500	3,501+
Proportion of Iowa Students Served (# of districts that fall in size category/total Iowa student enrollment)	22.73%	31.59%	45.68%
Approximate Proportion of Award* (Proportion of Iowa students served x total dollars available for the award)	\$1,293,037	\$1,797,052	\$2,598,587
Approximate Number of Awards Available	35	17	8

*If there is an insufficient number of district applicants within the district size category to completely distribute the awards, remaining awards will be allocated across remaining district size categories.

Budget Recommendations

The below table is intended to assist district applicants in developing a reasonable budget. The table provides estimates of reasonable allowances. The below are recommendations. Districts should work to stay within the budget allowances based on their district size and scope of their proposal, but may submit a proposal that goes over the allowance if they include an explanation of need.

District Size	Size 1	Size 2	Size 3
Suggested Budget	\$35,000	\$105,000	\$325,000



Selection

Competitive Criteria

The Department will evaluate and score each application against the competitive criteria listed in the tables below. To be considered, all district applicants must meet the definition of a high need LEA, which is listed in each Gate below. The data submitted in the application must be from the 2021-2022 school year. Data from the 2022-2023 school year may be submitted in the application, but would only be considered supplementary.

Gate 1: Mandatory Competitive Criteria

Area	Description	Points
Poverty Rate Requirement	The LEA has a poverty rate of 40% or higher	10

Gate 2: Competitive Criteria

Area	Description	Points
Mental Health Professional Ratio > 300:1	A student to mental health professional ratio greater than 300:1	5
Exclusionary Discipline >10%	A student suspension/expulsion rate is 10% or higher.	5
Chronic Absenteeism > 30%	A student who has been absent for at least 18 days of the school year.	5
Natural Disaster or Tragic Event	<p>The LEA has been recently impacted by a natural disaster or traumatic event.</p> <p>The LEA can demonstrate a measurable impact to the learning environment.</p> <p>Examples include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts of violence • Tornado/other high wind disasters • Flash flood • Fire • Death (student and/or staff) suicide, terminal illness, accident 	3
Community and School Violence or Substance Abuse	<p>Community and school violence or substance abuse</p> <p>(*school violence (physical aggression) and substance abuse rates, community violence and substance abuse rates, student victims of crimes)</p>	2
Bullying/Harassment 1%	Number of reports equal to or greater than 1% of the student population.	2
Referrals to Juvenile Justice	Multiple student referrals to the juvenile justice system	1



Area	Description	Points
District Submitted Plan	<p>District submitted action plan that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementing evidence-based strategies that meet students' social, emotional, physical and mental well-being needs; create positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; and increase access to place-based interventions and services. (2) Engaging students, families, educators, staff and community organizations in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions to create safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments. (2) Designing and implementing policies and practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential. (2) Process to evaluate effectiveness of proposed plan. (2) 	8

Selection Criteria

The below process will be used to select grantees after district proposals are evaluated by the Iowa Department of Education on the competitive criteria.

1. Gate 1: Mandatory Competitive Criteria
2. Gate 2: Competitive Criteria
 - a. District applications will be ranked highest to lowest in each size category based on the criteria listed above
3. Funding will be awarded based on the highest scoring districts and availability of funding.

*If a tie occurs, funds will be awarded to the district with the highest poverty rate.

*If there is an insufficient number of district applicants within the district size category to completely distribute the awards, remaining awards will be allocated across remaining district size categories.

Application Deadline: April 14, 2023

Questions and Contact Information

For general questions regarding the Stronger Connections Grant application, you may contact:

Veronica Andersen 515-402-2736 or veronica.andersen@iowa.gov

Jillian Dotson 515-979-7237 or jillian.dotson@iowa.gov

For questions regarding allowable activities that support preschool age students, you may contact: Kimberly Villotti 515-339-5519 or kimberly.villotti@iowa.gov