

# Stronger Connections Guidance

## Introduction

The Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is a component of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022, that provided \$1 billion in funding for states to distribute to high-need schools. Through a competitive award process, Iowa Department of Education (Department) awarded 44 subgrants to high-need pre-kindergarten through grade 12 (Pre-K-12) local education agencies (LEAs). The overall goal of the Stronger Connections program is to help recipients provide all students with safe and supportive learning opportunities and environments that are critical for their success by prioritizing student wellness.

Recipients 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 spending window for funds expires September 30, 2026.

## Program Funding

Program	Amount
LEA subgrants (95%)	\$5,688,647
State Activities (4%)	\$239,552
Administration (1%)	\$59,880
<b>Stronger Connections Grant Total</b>	<b>\$5,988,079</b>

## Nonpublic Equitable Services

Each eligible LEA receiving a Stronger Connections subgrant must, after timely and meaningful consultation with appropriate nonpublic school officials, provide eligible nonpublic school students and educators special educational 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 § 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 nonpublic school students and educators (34 C.F.R. § 299.7(b)(3)). Additional information available in the [Equitable Services Non-Regulatory Guidance](#).

## Activities to Establish Safer and Healthier Learning Environments

The Stronger Connections program supports subgrantees in building 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 may also be used to provide all students with safe and supportive learning opportunities and environments that are critical for their success (see section 4108 of [Title IV, Part A § 4108 \[Activities to Support Safe and Healthy Students\]](#)).

*\*To ensure allowability, the LEA must reach out to the Department’s program contact for more information.*

Allowable Activity Examples*
Federal funds may be used to provide light refreshments at family events or workshops that are provided for an educational purpose for families, particularly when an event overlaps with normal mealtimes, as long as they adhere to federal cost principles, such as "reasonable, necessary and allocable." They must also adhere to state and local regulations. <a href="#">2 CFR 200.404.</a> ; and <a href="#">2 CFR 200.405</a> . Full meals are not allowable.
Safety and violence prevention
Evidence-based interventions that have been shown to significantly improve student safety and health as well as academic outcomes
Anti-bullying and harassment plans (e.g., positive behavior interventions and supports [PBIS], mental health supports, instructional practices for developing relationships building skills, high-quality training for school personnel)
Develop and implement positive and fair discipline policies and practices
Implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to support and respond to student needs
School-wide implementation of strategies to meet social, emotional, and academic needs (e.g., 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 (e.g., 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 (e.g., 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

## Allowable Activity Examples\*

Increase students' connections and a sense of belonging at school
Promote student physical fitness (e.g., programs to build classroom physical activity, before and after school)
Implement plans to prevent and respond to bullying and harassment (e.g., cultivate positive student-teacher relationships, MTSS, PBIS)
Professional development for educators in support of providing safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning environments (e.g., provide educators job-embedded and ongoing professional development)
Professional development to support trauma-informed practices
Professional development for principals and school leaders to implement and sustain evidence-based strategies school-wide (i.e., job-embedded professional development; e.g., simulation-based training, cohort-based learning, network opportunities, coaching, mentoring, 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 (e.g., chronic absenteeism, bullying, calls to community crisis centers, grade retention, community health care and substance abuse factors and early indicators)
Develop early detection, screening, or warning systems to identify students who may be at risk or those in need of additional supports (e.g., implementing or enhancing MTSS)
Hire mental health professionals and other critical student support staff (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, social workers, behavior specialists, mentors, 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct a comprehensive vetting process,</li> <li>● Provide training and ongoing professional development on MTSS,</li> <li>● Establish clear roles,</li> <li>● Conduct community and family engagement, and</li> <li>● Implement accountability measures and data-driven evaluations.</li> </ul>
Infrastructure-related security equipment (e.g., surveillance cameras, metal detectors, minor remodeling for installation of security equipment)

## Prohibited Activities\*

The LEA cannot use funds for any of the following prohibited activities. Please note that the following table provides examples of unallowable activities and is not exhaustive. *\*To ensure allowability, the LEA must reach out to the Department's program contact for more information.*

Unallowable Activity Example*
School construction, renovation, or repair of any school facility, except as authorized ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(1)</a> );
Transportation unless otherwise authorized ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(2)</a> );
Districts should not use federal funds to provide food for a purely social occasion; it should have an instructional element for parents. See <a href="#">2 CFR 200.438</a> . Schools must consider whether the expense for food is excessive and whether other funding sources or donations could be available for procuring refreshments before using federal funds. The time of day the parent and family engagement activity takes place is another consideration.
To develop or distribute materials, or operate programs or courses of instruction directed at youth, that are designed to promote or encourage sexual activity, whether homosexual or heterosexual ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(3)</a> );
To distribute or to aid in the distribution by any organization of legally obscene materials to minors on school grounds ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(4)</a> );
To provide sex education or HIV-prevention education in schools unless that instruction is age appropriate and includes the health benefits of abstinence ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(5)</a> );
To operate a program of contraceptive distribution in schools ( <a href="#">ESEA § 8256(6)</a> );
For the provision to any person of a dangerous weapon, as defined in section 930(g)(2) of Title 18 [“a weapon, device, instrument, material, or substance, animate or inanimate, that is used for, or is readily capable of, causing death or serious bodily injury, except that such term does not include a pocket knife with a blade of less than 2½ inches in length”], or training in the use of a dangerous weapon (20 U.S.C. § 7906(7)).
To transfer funds to another authorized program.
To supplant non-Federal funds that would otherwise be used for Title IV, Part A activities ( <a href="#">ESEA § 4110</a> ).
For entertainment costs, including amusement, diversion, and social activities and any associated costs ( <i>in regard to family engagement events the following regulations would apply</i> )  § 200.438 Entertainment and prizes.  (a) Entertainment costs. Costs of entertainment, including amusement, diversion, and social activities and any associated costs (such as gifts), are unallowable unless they have a specific and direct programmatic purpose and are included in a Federal award.  (b) Prizes. Costs of prizes or challenges are allowable if they have a specific and direct programmatic purpose and are included in the Federal award. Federal agencies should refer to OMB guidance in M-10-11 “Guidance on the Use of Challenges and Prizes to Promote Open Government,” issued March 8, 2010, or its successor. ( <a href="#">2 C.F.R. § 200.438(a)</a> )

## Reporting Requirements

The LEA must submit status reports annually by September 30<sup>th</sup>. Subgrantees will report progress with action plans and upload annual evaluation data starting September 30, 2023, through September 30, 2026 in [IowaGrants.gov](http://IowaGrants.gov).

Status reports are directly aligned with the subgrantee’s SCG action plan. The obligation to respond to this collection is required to obtain or retain a benefit under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) of 2022 for the SCG program annual performance reporting to the U.S. Department of Education under the Education Department’s General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR, Section 75.720).

Status Report Components:

- Program Action Plan Implementation Steps and Status description for all three areas
- Annual Action Plan Evaluation Data Uploaded
- Year End Action Plan Impact Analysis- based on evaluation data results

## Reimbursement

Quarterly reimbursement claims are directly aligned with subgrantee budget and **must include an uploaded year-to-date general ledger** (7/1- 6/30) that includes:

1. Project Code - **4668**
2. Project Code totals
3. Accounting Object Codes
4. Expenditure Descriptions

Reimbursement claims are submitted in [IowaGrants.gov](http://IowaGrants.gov) and reviewed during the quarterly claim period windows.

Quarter	Period Dates	Last day to submit corrections
Quarter 1	November 30 – December 1	December 10
Quarter 2	January 31 – February 1	February 10
Quarter 3	April 30 – May 1	May 10
Quarter 4	June 1 – July 15* <i>(*all expenses must occur by June 30th)</i>	July 25

## Questions and Contact Information

For questions regarding the Stronger Connections Subgrant, refer to the subgrantee resources and program contact information on the [Stronger Connections Grant page](#).