

# FY24 Stronger Connections Grant

## Overview for Public Comment

Updated March 23, 2023

### Background

On June 25, 2022, President Biden signed the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act \(BSCA\)](#) into law. This legislation expands mental health services and provides additional support for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) to design and enhance initiatives that will promote safer, more inclusive, and positive school environments for all students, educators, and school staff.

The BSCA includes \$1 billion through Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for state educational agencies (SEAs) to award competitively subgrants to high-need LEAs to establish safer and healthier learning environments, and to prevent and respond to acts of bullying, violence, and hate that impact school communities at individual and systemic levels, among other programs and activities. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has designated this component of the BSCA as the Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program.

Under the SCG program, an SEA must make subgrant awards on a competitive basis to high-need LEAs, as determined by the SEA, and funds may be used only for activities authorized under ESEA Title IV, Part A § 4108 (i.e., Safe and Healthy Students). Funds allocated under the program must be administered and tracked separately from an SEA's or LEA's regular Title IV, Part A formula allocation.

This document serves as public notice of the Tennessee Department of Education's (department) intended design of the upcoming SCG program. Comments and feedback regarding the information in this document must be sent to [Brinn.Obermiller@tn.gov](mailto:Brinn.Obermiller@tn.gov) by March 31.

### Purpose of Title IV, Part A and the SCG

Congress provided funding for the SCG program under ESEA Title IV, Part A and established some requirements unique from the typical Title IV, Part A program, which are outlined throughout this document.

#### ***Title IV, Part A Purpose***

The overall purpose of the Title IV, Part A program is to improve students' academic achievement by increasing state and LEA capacity to:

- provide all students with access to a well-rounded education;
- improve school conditions for student learning; and
- increase the use of technology to enhance the academic achievement and digital literacy of all students.

The second purpose listed above, known as the **Safe and Healthy Students** focus area, is intended to fund activities that foster safe, supportive, inclusive, and culturally-responsive learning environments and to support students' physical and mental health. Any activity funded through the SCG program must be

allowable within the Safe and Healthy Students focus area and follow any other requirements outlined by the department in the SCG application.

### ***SCG Purpose and Intent***

In September 2022, ED released a [Dear Colleague letter](#) formally announcing state allocations for the SCG program. The letter also provided important insight into the intent of the grant.

Research consistently shows that safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments are associated with improved academic achievement and emotional well-being of students, as well as with reductions in disciplinary actions.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, students who experience a sense of belonging in school are also more likely to exhibit positive behaviors.<sup>2</sup> This includes learning environments that provide culturally and linguistically responsive practices where students are surrounded by adults they can trust and who are committed to building strong relationships.<sup>3</sup> Environments like these also help build connections that make students less likely to bring weapons to school and more likely to report the presence of weapons in school.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the benefit to the individual student, safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments benefit their fellow students, educators, and the community at large.

Nurturing learning environments can also help students overcome challenging and traumatic experiences and provide a sense of emotional and physical safety. When young people feel connected to school and the school staff, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, be absent from school, or experience emotional distress, and are more likely to earn higher grades. Recent research has also begun to identify specific strategies, such as those that teach pro-social behaviors, that can improve school performance, and reduce violence in the community at large.<sup>5</sup>

Further, within the letter, ED encourages states to prioritize funds for LEAs to do the following:<sup>6</sup>

Implement 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.

Engage students, families, educators, staff, and community organizations in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions to create safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Design and implement policies and practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

### Program Eligibility

The BSCA requires SEAs to define “high-need LEAs” for the purposes of eligibility for SCG funds. In defining “high-need,” ED recommended that SEAs consider high-need definitions that focus on LEAs with high concentrations of poverty, as well as other factors that might indicate a need for further mental health and social-emotional supports.

For the purposes of the SCG, Tennessee’s definition of a high-need LEA is:

- LEAs with at least one (1) school with a school safety index of 1.5% or higher in 2021-22; and
- LEAs reporting 20+ zero tolerance incidents and 20+ bullying/harassment incidents in 2021-22; and
- Highest-Poverty LEAs (as calculated for ESSER MOEquity); and
- LEAs within the Governor’s FY23 distressed counties.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the above definition, the following LEAs would be eligible to apply for SCG funding:

Eligible LEAs			
Achievement School District	Fayetteville City Schools	Knox County Schools	Roane County Schools
Alamo City Schools	Fentress County Schools	Lake County Schools	Robertson County Schools
Anderson County Schools	Franklin County Schools	Lincoln County Schools	Rogersville City Schools
Athens City Schools	Greene County Schools	Macon County Schools	Rutherford County Schools
Benton County Schools	Grundy County Schools	Madison County Schools	Scott County Schools
Bledsoe County Schools	Hamilton County Schools	Marshall County Schools	Sequatchie County Schools
Bristol City Schools	Hancock County Schools	Maury County Schools	Sumner County Schools
Campbell County Schools	Hardeman County Schools	Memphis-Shelby County Schools	Sweetwater City Schools
Carter County Schools	Hardin County Schools	Metro Nashville Public Schools	Tennessee School for the Deaf
Cheatham County Schools	Hawkins County Schools	Montgomery County Schools	Tipton County Schools
Chester County Schools	Haywood County Schools	Morgan County Schools	Union City Schools
Clay County Schools	Henry County Schools	Murfreesboro City Schools	Union County Schools
Cleveland City Schools	Hollow Rock-Bruceton SSD	Newport City Schools	Van Buren County Schools
Cocke County Schools	Humboldt City Schools	Oneida SSD	Warren County Schools
Cumberland County Schools	Jefferson County Schools	Paris SSD	West Tennessee School for the Deaf
Dayton City Schools	Johnson City Schools	Perry County Schools	Williamson County Schools
Dyersburg City Schools	Johnson County Schools	Rhea County Schools	Wilson County Schools
Etowah City Schools	Kingsport City Schools	Richard City Schools	

## Allowable Use of Funds

In general, SCG funds may be used for activities authorized under [ESEA Title IV, Part A § 4108](#), otherwise known as the **Safe & Healthy Students** focus area. In Tennessee, the SCG will be structured around allowable activities in four (4) focus areas:

1. Mental Health/Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Supports for Students
2. Mental Health/SEL Professional Development (PD) for Educators, School Resource Officers (SROs), Administrators, and Other Staff
3. Family and Community Engagement (e.g., training, resources, and activities for families and communities focused on mental health/SEL)
4. Improving School Climate and Culture

Grantees will have access to SCG funds beginning in FY24. All SCG funds must be obligated by **Sept. 30, 2026**, and liquidated by **Dec. 15, 2026**.

## Equitable Services

As funding for the SCG program is provided through ESEA Title IV, Part A, LEAs receiving grant funds must, after timely and meaningful consultation with appropriate non-public school officials, provide eligible non-public school students and educators services and other benefits that are equitable in comparison to services and other benefits provided with SCG funds to public school students and educators.<sup>8</sup>

## Grant Competition Design

As previously noted, SEAs are required to award SCG funds to high-need LEAs on a competitive basis. Applications are submitted through ePlan, and all complete applications meeting the program requirements and received by the department on or before the due date will be forwarded to a grant review committee. The committee will provide each application with a technical merit score based on the review criteria and rubric, which will also be shared with applicants when the application opens. Technical merit scores will serve as the foundation for grant award decisions. The department anticipates awarding approximately 15-20 grants with awards varying from LEA to LEA based on a number of factors, including LEA need, availability of funds, the number of applicants, and the quality of the subgrant application.

## Application Design

Eligible LEAs who wish to apply for grant funds must complete the SCG application in ePlan. The application will include, at a minimum, the following components, which are subject to change:

- **Needs Assessment:** Applicants must conduct a needs assessment to determine projects and initiatives to be funded with grant dollars. LEAs must describe in detail:
  - Stakeholder engagement: Engaging students, parents, families, community members, and district and school staff is essential to the successful planning for and implementation of activities supported by SCG funds.
  - LEA data and analysis: LEA planning teams should consider the use of data in order to identify areas where grant-funded activities have a reasonable likelihood to create a positive impact.
  - Assessment and description of resources already available: How will SCG funds be coordinated with other programs and initiatives and/or how will they be used to fill gaps in programming?

- **Spending Plan:** Based on the results of the needs assessment, applicants must develop a plan based on one or more of the SCG program focus areas:
  1. Mental Health/Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Supports for Students
  2. Mental Health/SEL Professional Development (PD) for Educators, SROs, Administrators, and Other Staff
  3. Parent and Family Engagement (e.g., training and resources for families focused on mental health/SEL)
  4. Improving School Climate and Culture
  - For each focus area selected, applicants must provide a detailed spending plan, including a budget and:
    - At least one SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goal
    - A detailed description of the activity. All activities must be evidence-based, high-leverage activities that are designed to address the identified need(s).
    - A description of how the measurable goals of the activity will be evaluated
    - A description of any external partnerships
    - A detailed timeline for implementation
- **Equitable Services:** Applicants must provide a description of the consultation process and include any required documentation, such as intent to participate and affirmation of meaningful consultation forms.
- **Personnel Page:** Standard funding application personnel page for any staff funded with SCG dollars.
- **Assurances:** Grant assurances

#### **SCG Timeline** *(subject to change)*

- **March 20 - 31:** Public comment period
- **April 7:** Eligible LEAs will be sent an invitation to apply and further guidance regarding the grant and application process
- **April 14, 2023:** Intent to apply due
- **April 17, 2023:** Application opens in ePlan
- **May 17, 2023:** Application due in ePlan
- **June 15, 2023:** LEAs notified of awards
- **July 1, 2023:** Allocations loaded in ePlan

**Note:** *Technical assistance and written guidance will be provided to applicants throughout the application and award process.*

#### **Comments?**

Comments regarding the proposed SCG program must be sent to [Brinn.Obermiller@tn.gov](mailto:Brinn.Obermiller@tn.gov) by March 31.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, M. T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational psychology review*, 28(2), 315-352.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, K., Kern, M.L., Vella-Brodrick, D. et al. What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis. *Educ Psychol Rev* 30, 1–34 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth.

<sup>4</sup> Connell, N. M., Barbieri, N., & Reingle Gonzalez, J. M. (2015). Understanding school effects on students' willingness to report peer weapon carrying. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 13(3), 258-269; Watkins, A. M. (2008). Effects of community, school, and student factors on school-based weapon carrying. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 6(4), 386-409.

<sup>5</sup> Valiente, C., Lemery-Chalfant, K., Swanson, J., & Reiser, M. (2008). Prediction of children's academic competence from their effortful control, relationships, and classroom participation. *Journal of educational psychology*, 100(1), 67; Harms, W. (2012). Study: Chicago counseling program reduces youth violence, improves school engagement. *UChicago News*.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Dep't. of Educ., Dear Colleague Letter: Stronger Connections Grant Program (Sept. 15, 2022), [https://oese.ed.gov/files/2022/09/BSCA-Stronger-Connections-DCL\\_9.12\\_signed.pdf](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2022/09/BSCA-Stronger-Connections-DCL_9.12_signed.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD). (2023). Distressed Counties. <https://www.tn.gov/transparenttn/state-financial-overview/open-ecd/openecd/tneecd-performance-metrics/openecd-long-term-objectives-quick-stats/distressed-counties.html>

<sup>8</sup> Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) § 8501(a)(1), (3)(A) (2015).