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Stronger Connections Grant Overview

Brinn Obermiller

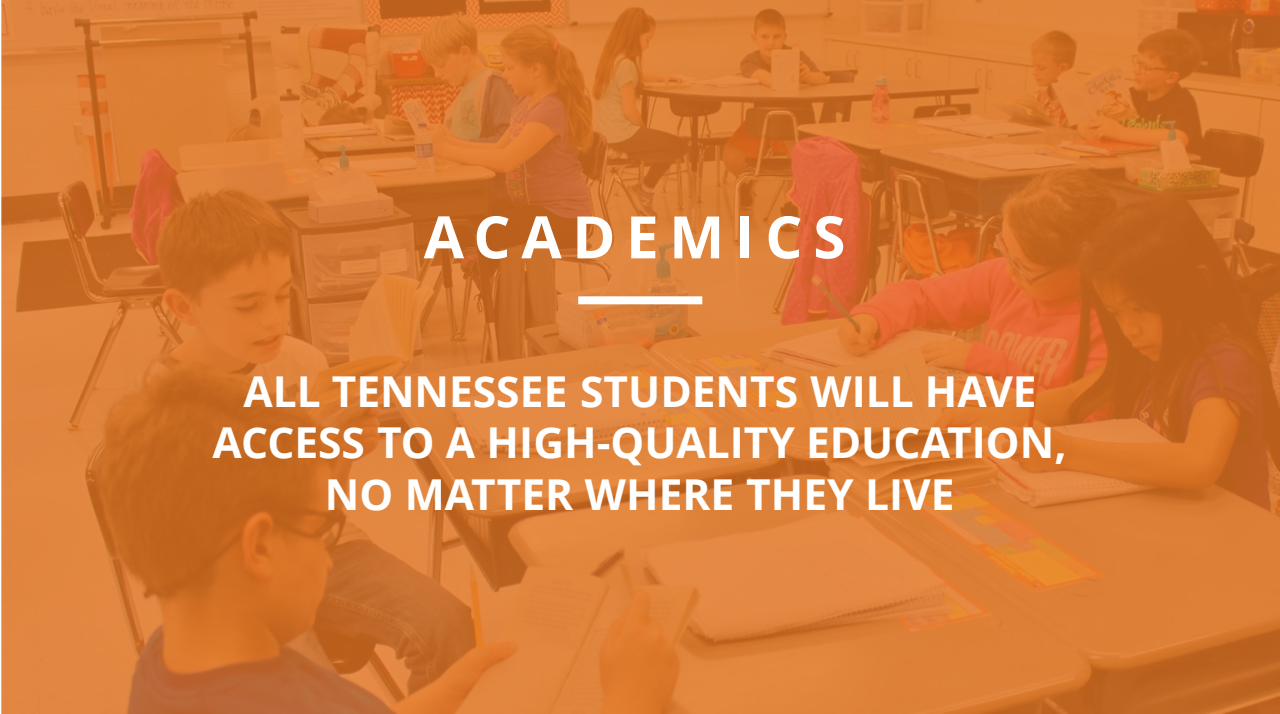
*Senior Director of ESEA Oversight
Federal Programs and Oversight*





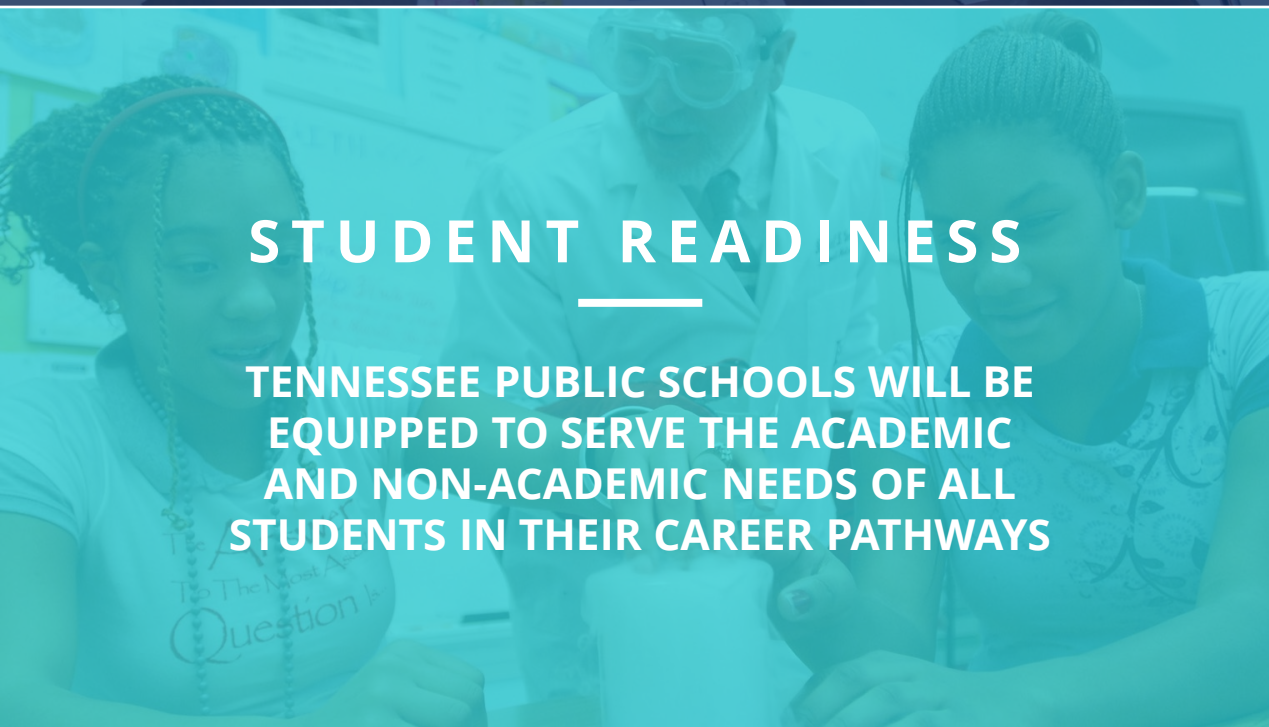
BEST FOR
ALL

We will set all students on a path to success.



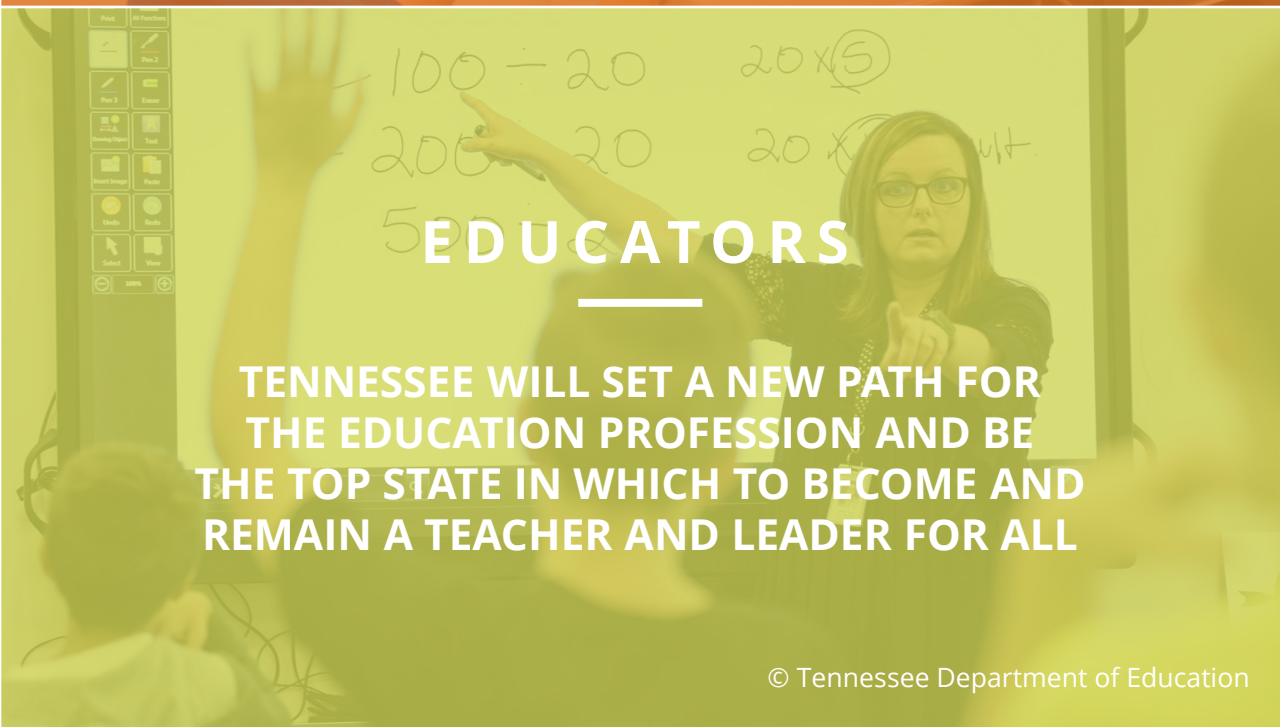
ACADEMICS

**ALL TENNESSEE STUDENTS WILL HAVE
ACCESS TO A HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION,
NO MATTER WHERE THEY LIVE**



STUDENT READINESS

**TENNESSEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL BE
EQUIPPED TO SERVE THE ACADEMIC
AND NON-ACADEMIC NEEDS OF ALL
STUDENTS IN THEIR CAREER PATHWAYS**



EDUCATORS

**TENNESSEE WILL SET A NEW PATH FOR
THE EDUCATION PROFESSION AND BE
THE TOP STATE IN WHICH TO BECOME AND
REMAIN A TEACHER AND LEADER FOR ALL**



Agenda

- SCG Background & Purpose
- Program Eligibility
- Funding Timeline & Levels
- SCG Application Review Process
- Allowable Use of Funds
- Stakeholder Involvement
- Evidence-Based Practices
- Equitable Services
- SCG Application Instructions & Walkthrough
- SCG Application Tips
- Closing



SCG Background & Purpose

Background

- On June 25, 2022, President Biden signed into law the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act \(BSCA\)](#), which includes \$1 billion through Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for state educational agencies (SEAs) to competitively award subgrants to high-need local education agencies (LEAs).
- The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has designated this component of the BSCA the Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program.
- The purpose of the SCG is 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.
- Detailed information regarding the SCG can be found in ED's [Stronger Connections Grant Program Frequently Asked Questions](#).



Program Purpose

In September of 2022, ED released a [Dear Colleague letter](#) providing important insight into the intent of the grant:

- Research consistently shows:
 - 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.
 - when young people feel connected to school and to 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.
 - Environments with strong connections make students less likely to bring weapons to school and more likely to report the presence of weapons in school.

Program Purpose

Further, within the letter, ED encourages states to prioritize funds for LEAs to do the following:

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



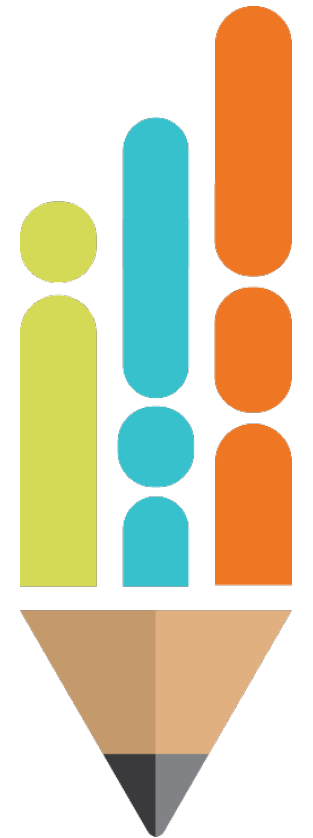
Program Eligibility

- The BSCA requires SEAs to define “high-need LEA” for the purposes of eligibility for SCG funds.
- In defining “high-need,” ED encourages SEAs to consider definitions that focus on LEAs with high concentrations of poverty as well as other indicators that might indicate a need for further mental health and social-emotional supports.
- In Tennessee, 71 LEAs will be eligible to apply for SCG funding:
 - LEAs with at least one (1) school with a [school safety index](#) of 1.5% or higher;
 - LEAs reporting 20+ zero tolerance incidents and 20+ bullying/harassment incidents in 2021-22;
 - Highest-Poverty LEAs (as calculated for ESSER MOEquity); and
 - LEAs within the Governor’s [FY23 Distressed Counties](#).



Eligible LEAs

Achievement School District	Fayetteville City Schools
Alamo City Schools	Fentress County Schools
Anderson County Schools	Franklin County Schools
Athens City Schools	Greene County Schools
Benton County Schools	Grundy County Schools
Bledsoe County Schools	Hamilton County Schools
Bristol City Schools	Hancock County Schools
Campbell County Schools	Hardeman County Schools
Carter County Schools	Hardin County Schools
Cheatham County Schools	Hawkins County Schools
Chester County Schools	Haywood County Schools
Clay County Schools	Henry County Schools
Cleveland City Schools	Hollow Rock-Bruceton SSD
Cocke County Schools	Humboldt City Schools
Cumberland County Schools	Jefferson County Schools
Dayton City Schools	Johnson City Schools
Dyersburg City Schools	Johnson County Schools
Etowah City Schools	Kingsport City Schools



Eligible LEAs

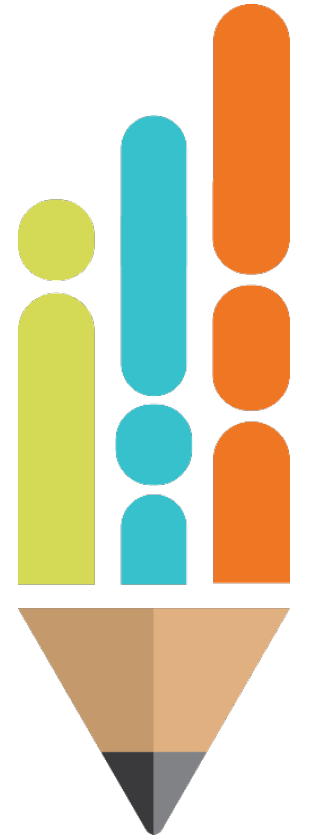
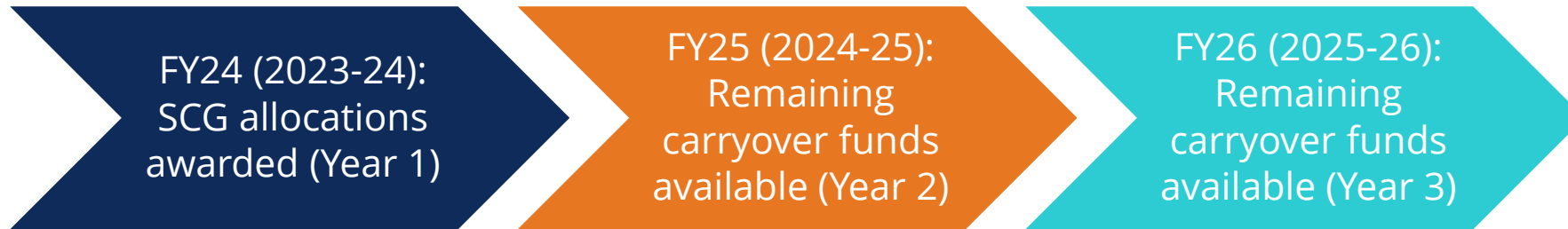
Knox County Schools	Roane County Schools
Lake County Schools	Robertson County Schools
Lincoln County Schools	Rogersville City Schools
Macon County Schools	Rutherford County Schools
Madison County Schools	Scott County Schools
Marshall County Schools	Sequatchie County Schools
Maury County Schools	Sumner County Schools
Memphis-Shelby County Schools	Sweetwater City Schools
Metro Nashville Public Schools	Tennessee School for the Deaf
Montgomery County Schools	Tipton County Schools
Morgan County Schools	Union City Schools
Murfreesboro City Schools	Union County Schools
Newport City Schools	Van Buren County Schools
Oneida SSD	Warren County Schools
Paris SSD	West Tennessee School for the Deaf
Perry County Schools	Williamson County Schools
Rhea County Schools	Wilson County Schools
Richard City Schools	



Funding Timeline & Levels

Funding Timeline

- The SCG is one-time funding: **LEAs will have until Sept. 30, 2026, to obligate all grant funds.**
- LEAs who are granted an award will receive their total SCG allocation in FY24 (on or around July 1, 2023).
- LEAs will be able to submit a multi-year budget and then carry over the remaining funds into the next fiscal year (including funds for equitable services) through the annual completion of the SCG application in ePlan.



Funding Levels

- Allocations for the SCG will vary based on a variety of factors: LEA needs, the amount of funding available, the amount of funding requested, and the quality of submitted applications.
- SCG award amounts will fall within one of three tiers.
- Within the initial application in ePlan, LEAs must select a tier of funding that aligns with their needs and provide a justification for that selection.
 - The needs identified within the needs assessment, the number of students/educators/families to be served, the cost of the proposed plan, and other LEA-specific factors (including the estimated costs for required equitable services) should drive the decision of how much funding an LEA will apply for.
- **Note:** LEAs may be granted an award outside of the requested funding tier depending on any of the factors discussed above.

Tier	Funding per Year	Total Funding
1	\$150,000	\$450,000
2	\$300,000	\$900,000
3	\$450,000	\$1,350,000


SCG Application Review Process

Grant Competition Design

- As previously noted, SEAs are required to award SCG funds to high-need LEAs on a competitive basis.
- Applications will be 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 ([Appendix A of the SCG Technical User Guide](#)).
 - Technical merit scores will serve as the foundation for grant award decisions.
- The department anticipates awarding approximately 20 grants with awards varying by LEA.



SCG Competition Timeline



Date	Event
April 20, 2023	SCG intent to apply due in ePlan
April 21, 2023	SCG application opens in ePlan
April 24, 2023	SCG webinar
April 25, 2023	SCG office hours begin
May 22, 2023	SCG application due in ePlan
June 23, 2023	SCG awards announced

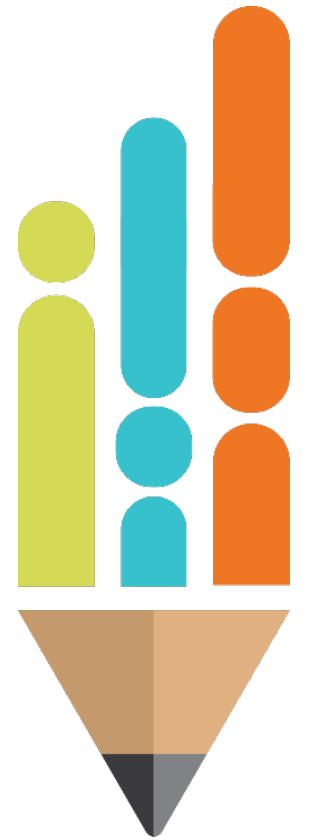


Allowable Use of Funds

Allowable Uses of Funds

In Tennessee, the SCG will be structured around allowable activities in four (4) focus areas:

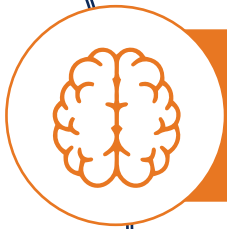
1. Mental Health/Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Supports for Students
2. Mental Health/SEL Professional Development (PD) for Educators, SROs, Administrators, and Other Staff
3. Parent and Family Engagement (e.g., training and resources for families focused on mental health/SEL)
4. Improving School Climate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



Mental Health & SEL Supports for Students: Examples of Allowable Uses



Expanding access to integrated social, emotional, and mental health supports for students involved in bullying



Providing educational resources for students about what mental health is and what it means to care for it



Increasing student access to mental health services



Developing social and emotional skills to support positive relationships, resilience, self-control, empathy, persistence, etc.

Mental Health & SEL PD for Educators & Staff: Examples of Allowable Uses



Providing PD and training in violence prevention, education, early identification, and supporting and responding to student needs



Providing PD in trauma identification and trauma-informed care or culturally and linguistically responsive practices

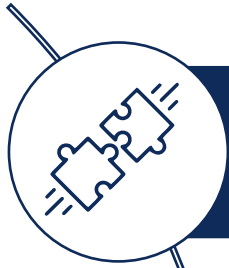


Providing PD related to bullying and harassment prevention



Providing PD for staff involved in a student mentoring program

Parent and Family Engagement: Examples of Allowable Uses



Providing opportunities for families to learn more about social-emotional well-being and how they build these skills at home



Creating a mental health/SEL resource center for families, containing resources or books related to social-emotional development

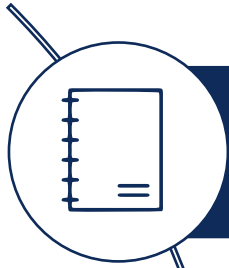


Engaging families in the development of whole-school Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or other programs addressing student social-emotional development



Providing educational resources and training for families about what mental health is, what it means to care for it, and how they can support student mental health

Improving School Climate and Culture: Examples Allowable Uses



Implementing a MTSS to collect data, assess students' needs, and provide real-time supports to students in a variety of areas such as academics or social, emotional, or behavioral health



Integrating anti-bullying practices or programs in school to enhance learning and help prevent bullying and harassment



Developing an early detection, screening, or warning systems to identify students who may be at risk, a danger to themselves or others, or in need of additional supports



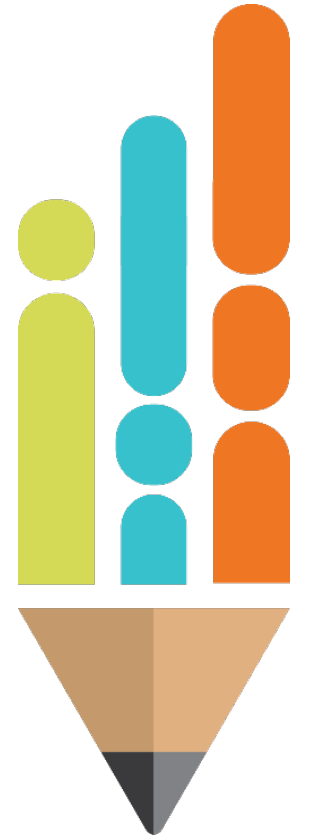
Implementing practices to increase student connections and a sense of belonging at school to further the creation of a safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environment that supports student well-being, academic success, and other positive outcomes

Other Fiscal Considerations

In addition to being allowable under ESSA § 4108 and meeting the intent of one or more of the above focus areas, activities funded with SCG funds must meet the following fiscal requirements:

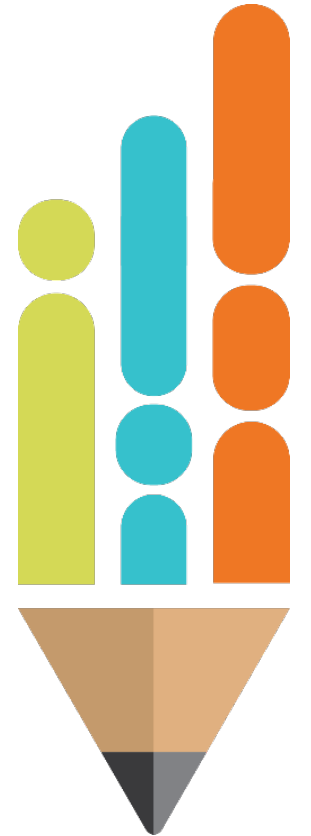
1. Be **reasonable and necessary** for the performance of the grant;
2. Be **allocable** to the grant;
3. **Supplement and not supplant** other non-Federal funds (i.e., state and local funds) that would otherwise be used to pay for authorized activities;
4. Not be of the **prohibited activities** in ESEA § 4001(b) or § 8526; and
5. Be consistent with any other applicable **Uniform Guidance provisions** (see [2 CFR 200 et seq.](#), in particular, 2 CFR Part 200, Subpart E).

Note: Narrative descriptions within the application and budget pages must contain details making it evident that all purchases and programs meet the above requirements.



Allowable Uses of Funds

- Resources:
 - [Frequently Asked Questions: Stronger Connections Grant Program](#)
 - [Information Sheet: Addressing School Mental Health](#)
 - [Key Approaches for Strengthening School Mental Health: A Primer & Resource Guide](#)
 - [Schools, Families, and Social and Emotional Learning: for Ideas and Tools for Ideas and Tools for Working with Working with Parents and Families](#)
 - [Schoolsafety.gov](#)
 - [Supporting Mental Health via Technology](#)
 - [Technical Application Guide: Stronger Connections Grant](#)
 - [Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants Guidance](#)



Stakeholder Involvement



Stakeholder Involvement

- Engaging students, parents, families, and community members is critical to the successful implementation of activities supported by SCG funds.
- LEAs must provide ongoing and meaningful opportunities for educators and staff to be involved in the selection of evidence-based strategies and activities implemented under the SCG.
- LEAs applying for SCG funds must provide a description of how stakeholders were involved in the design of the SCG program and application and how they will be involved in an ongoing manner throughout grant implementation.



Stakeholder Involvement

- Stakeholders involved must include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - Parents
 - Teachers
 - Principals
 - Students
 - School leaders
 - Charter school staff, when applicable
 - Specialized instructional support personnel
 - Local government representatives
 - Others with relevant and demonstrated expertise
 - Community-based Organizations

- Documentation of stakeholder involvement must be collected and maintained throughout the life of the SCG. Examples of documentation may include, but are not limited to:
 - Meeting invitations, agendas, sign-in sheets, minutes, etc.
 - Survey and survey results
 - Printed material or other communications regarding the SCG





Stakeholder Involvement

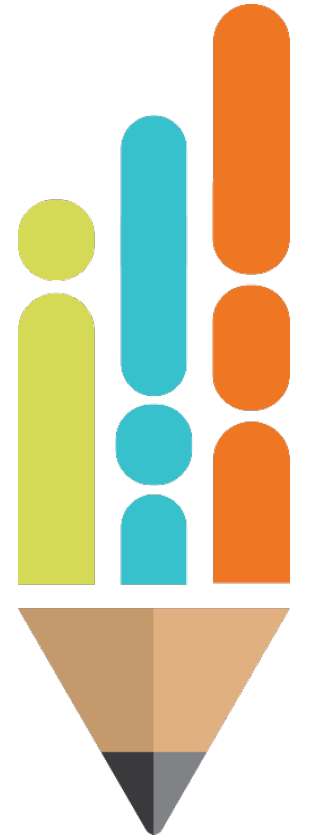
- LEAs are encouraged to utilize existing teams or build a new team during the SCG application process. Examples of already existing teams that could support SCG planning include:
 - LEA/school planning teams (i.e., teams utilized for the LEA/school InformTN planning process)
 - Mental health teams
 - Community supports teams
 - Parent and student advisory councils
 - PLC or data teams
 - RTI-B teams
 - School safety teams
 - Family engagement teams
 - Other advisory or leadership committees



Evidence-based Practices

Evidence-based Practices

- ESEA emphasizes the use of evidence-based approaches, including activities to support safe and healthy students in § 4108.
- LEAs are strongly encouraged to invest SCG funds on evidence-based interventions that have been shown to significantly improve student safety and health as well as academic outcomes.
- **LEAs that provide information and documentation showing that proposed SCG activities are evidence-based will receive priority points during the application review.**



Evidence-based Practices

- ESEA § 8101(21) defines the term “evidence-based” and the definition includes four tiers of evidence.
- Specifically, “evidence-based,” means an activity, strategy, or intervention that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on:
 - **Tier 1:** Strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;
 - **Tier 2:** Moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study;
 - **Tier 3:** Promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias; or
 - **Tier 4:** Demonstrating a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.



Evidence-based Practices

- Applicants who provide information and documentation that proposed activities are evidence-based will receive bonus points during the grant review.
- To receive bonus points, the applicant must:
 - provide narrative information and documentation (e.g., webpage link and/or uploaded document) showing that at least one of the proposed SCG activities falls within **Tier 3 or Tier 4** of the [ESSA tiers of evidence](#) – **10 points**; or
 - provide narrative information and documentation (e.g., webpage link and/or uploaded document) showing that at least one of the proposed SCG activities falls within **Tier 1 or Tier 2** of the [ESSA tiers of evidence](#) – **20 points**



Evidence-based Practices Resources

- [ERIC \(Educational Resources Information Center\)](#)
- [ESSA Tiers of Evidence Overview](#)
- [Evidence for ESSA](#)
- [Evidence-Based Decision Making for ESSA and ESSER Funds Presentation Slides](#)
- [Focus on ESSA Evidence Presentation Slides](#)
- [Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments](#)
- [Safer Schools and Best Practices Clearinghouse](#)
- [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\)](#)



Equitable Services



Equitable Services Overview

- Funding for the SCG program is provided through ESEA Title IV, Part A; therefore, LEAs receiving grant funds must provide equitable services to eligible non-public school students and educators.
- ESEA § 8501(a)(4) requires an LEA to ensure that its expenditures for equitable services for eligible non-public school students and educators under covered ESEA programs are equal on a per-pupil basis to the expenditures for participating public school students and educators, taking into account the number and needs of the eligible non-public school students and educators.
- In other words, the proportionate share for participating non-public schools must be based on the total enrollment of the non-public school – just as it works for equitable services under Title IV, Part A.



Consultation Requirements

- An eligible LEA applying for the SCG must consult with appropriate non-public school officials **before** the LEA makes any decision that affects the opportunities of eligible non-public school children and educators to participate [ESEA § 8501(c)(3)].
 - LEAs must consult with eligible non-public schools (i.e., non-public schools within the LEA's boundaries) during the SCG program and application design process.
 - Such consultation will allow the LEA to consider the needs of all students and educators, both public and non-public, in developing its application.
- LEAs awarded an SCG must continue to consult with interested non-public school officials on the specific services the LEA will provide students and educators, consistent with the LEA's approved application.
- Documentation of ongoing and meaningful consultation with non-public school officials will be required throughout the SCG.



Equitable Services Requirements for the Initial SCG Application

Consultation requirements:

- Consult with eligible non-public schools (i.e., non-public schools within the LEA's boundaries) during the SCG program and application design process.
- LEAs may choose to utilize the [Stronger Connections Grant Intent to Participate Form](#) for initial information gathering or may design their own method.
- It is important to explain to non-public schools that initial information gathering regarding the SCG does not guarantee a non-public school's final eligibility to participate in the program.

Within the initial SCG application:

- Describe how the LEA consulted with eligible non-public schools before the LEA made any decision that affect the opportunities of eligible non-public school children and educators to participate.
- Upload documentation of consultation (e.g., intent forms, survey results, program announcements).

**Equitable Services
Requirements for
LEAs
Awarded SCG Funds**

Consultation requirements:

- Continue to engage participating non-public school public officials in ongoing, timely, and meaningful consultation.
- LEAs may choose to utilize the [Stronger Connections Grant Affirmation and Agreement Form](#) to document the consultation process or may design their own method.
- Provide equitable services to eligible non-public school students and educators, ensuring that expenditures for equitable services for eligible non-public school students and educators under the SCG are equal on a per-pupil basis to the expenditures for participating public school students and educators, taking into account the number and needs of the eligible non-public school students and educators.

Within the funded SCG application:

- Provide a list of participating non-public schools and allocation amounts.
- Describe the process and timeline the LEA will utilize to conduct timely and meaningful consultation with non-public school officials.
- Describe the services that will be provided to non-public school students with SCG and:
 - How the activities connect to one or more of the SCG focus areas, and
 - How the activities will be evaluated/assessed.
- Upload documentation of meaningful consultation (e.g., affirmation forms, final agreements, meeting agendas/minutes) to the SCG application in ePlan by **Sept. 1, 2023**.
- Provide a detailed budget for all non-public school purchases.

Equitable Services Templates

- LEAs are encouraged to edit these documents and develop other documents/processes as applicable to ensure the needs of the LEA and non-public school(s) are met and proper documentation is maintained.
 - [Stronger Connections Grant Intent to Participate Form](#)
 - [Stronger Connections Grant Affirmation and Agreement Form](#)



SCG Application Instructions & Walkthrough



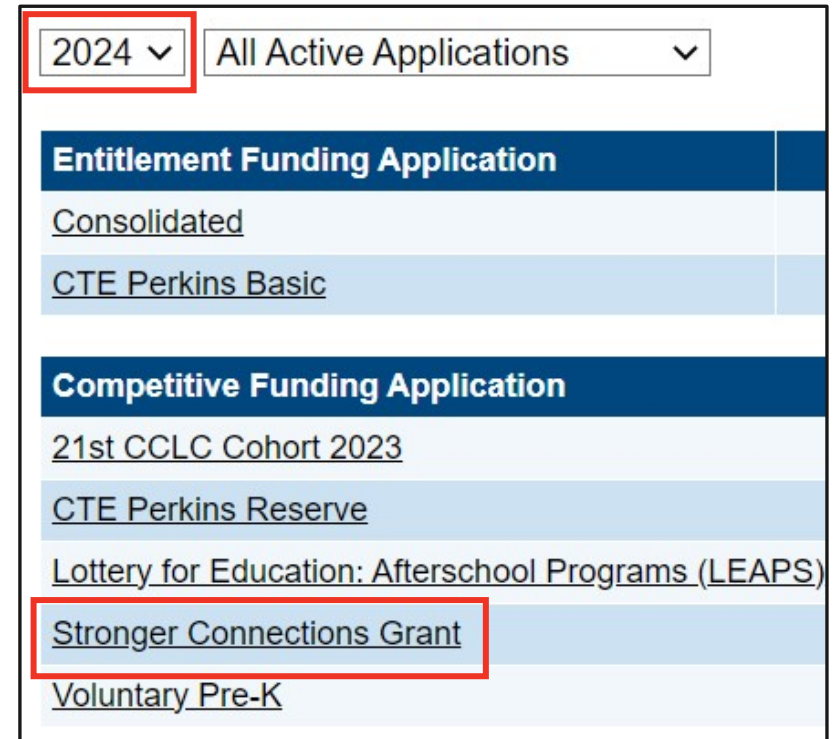
ePlan User Access

- Users must have the correct ePlan user access role (**LEA Stronger Connection Grant Director**) to access and complete the Stronger Connections Grant application in ePlan.
- Users with existing ePlan access can check their current user access roles.
- To view existing access, visit ePlan.tn.gov, navigate to the *Address Book* and *LEA Role Contacts*, and view who is listed with the **LEA Title IV Contact** role.
 - Users who had the LEA **Title IV Contact** role prior to April 2023 were automatically assigned the new LEA Stronger Connections Grant Director role.
- New ePlan users and existing ePlan users who need the new **LEA Stronger Connections Grant Director** user access role must request the additional role using the [ePlan User Access Form for LEAs](#).
 - Access the form by navigating to eplan.tn.gov > [TDOE Resources](#) > User Access Forms > [ePlan User Access Form for LEAs](#).



SCG Application Access

- Navigate to the SCG application from the ePlan homepage by hovering your mouse over the **Funding** tab on the left menu bar, then selecting **Funding Applications**.
- Select the desired fiscal year (2024) in the upper left corner of the screen. Funding applications are stored in ePlan according to the **state fiscal year**; 2024 indicates the 2023–24 school year.



The screenshot shows the SCG application interface. At the top, there are two dropdown menus: the first is set to '2024' and the second is set to 'All Active Applications'. Below these are two main sections: 'Entitlement Funding Application' and 'Competitive Funding Application'. Under 'Entitlement Funding Application', there are links for 'Consolidated' and 'CTE Perkins Basic'. Under 'Competitive Funding Application', there are links for '21st CCLC Cohort 2023', 'CTE Perkins Reserve', 'Lottery for Education: Afterschool Programs (LEAPS)', 'Stronger Connections Grant' (highlighted with a red box), and 'Voluntary Pre-K'.





SCG Application Walkthrough

- Detailed instructions on the SCG ePlan application can be found in the [SCG Technical Application Guide](#).



SCG Application Tips

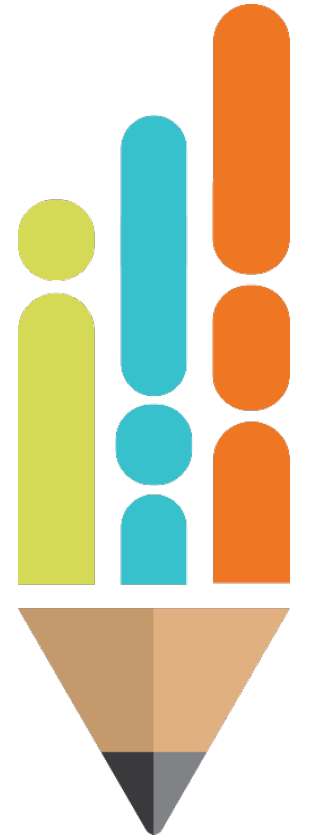
SCG Application Tips

1. To ensure the initial SCG application is submitted completely and in full, read the [SCG Technical Application Guide](#) carefully and refer back to it often as the SCG application is being completed.
2. Ensure alignment between all sections of the application. The information in the needs assessment should feed into the spending plan and request for funds sections, and the spending plan should align with the uploaded SCG budget template (and the final budget once funds have been allocated).
3. Utilize the SCG Rubric ([App. A of the SCG Technical User Guide](#)) to ensure responses are complete and high-quality.
4. Attend [SCG Office Hours](#) during the application window to ask department staff questions and hear from other LEAs on SCG application development.
5. Provide documentation and information regarding the [ESSA levels of evidence](#) for priority points during the grant review.



Resources

- [ePlan > TDOE Resources](#) > ESSA Information, Guidance, PPTs, & Webinars > Stronger Connections Grant Program:
 - [SCG Technical Application Guide](#)
 - [FY24 Stronger Connection Grant Office Hours](#)
 - [SCG Non-Public School Intent to Participate Form](#)
 - [SCG Equitable Services Affirmation and Agreement Form](#)
 - [Dear Colleague Letter: Stronger Connections Grant Program](#)
 - [Frequently Asked Questions: Stronger Connections Grant Program](#)



Questions

Contacts

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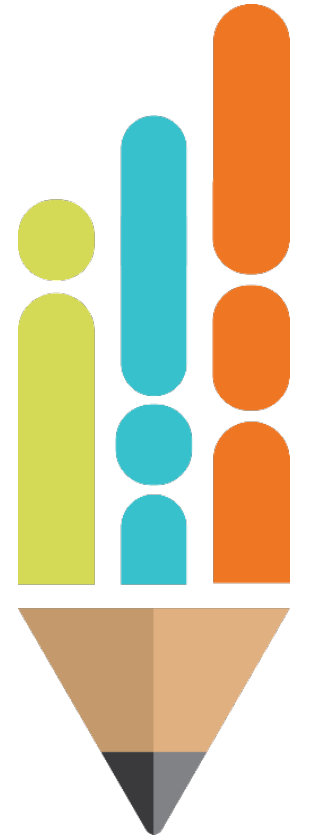
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References

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