

FY 2025 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act

Stronger Connections Grant FAQ

All questions asked concerning the fiscal year 2025 Stronger Connections Grant NOFO/RFP will be added to this document, which will be updated frequently.

UPDATES

Updated 03/19/24 ****Stronger Connections Grant Attachments****

- Attachment 6 - Sustainability was added to the attachments.
- Attachment 9 - Equitable Services for Private Schools replaced Equitable Services for Public Schools in the NOFO/RFP and in the attachments package.
- The fiscal year was changed to FY 2025.

Updated 03/22/24 ****Stronger Connections Grant NOFO/RFP****

- “Greater” was changed to “less” on page 1 under **Eligibility and Application Information** - High student-to-mental health professional ratio, an average of **less** than one professional per 250 students, including school counselor, school social worker, and school psychologist.

Updated 3/29/24 ****Stronger Connections Grant NOF/RFP****

- The DUE DATE for the grant has been changed to 5 p.m. on FRIDAY, APRIL 12, 2024.
- The last date the FAQ document will be updated is Friday, April 5, 2024.

A. Eligibility

Note: An eligible school district can submit a Stronger Connections Grant application even if it missed the Letter of Intent deadline.

A1a. The link provided to the FY 2024 Free and Reduced-Priced Meal Eligibility Data is broken down by site, yet eligibility for this grant is determined at the district level. If my district includes four sites -- all with varying eligibility percentages -- what percentages will be used by ISBE to determine my eligibility?

Eligibility is determined at the district level, so the percentages of all the schools combined into one district level will be used.

A1b. Our district doesn't meet the 40% free/reduced lunch as a whole; however, some of our schools do meet these criteria - could we apply for funding to utilize only at specific sites/schools that do meet the 40%

No. Eligibility is determined at the district level so the percentages of all the schools combined into one district level percentage is used.

A2a. The NOFO/RFP also indicates that there is a nonpublic programs proportionate share. Our total student enrollment inclusive of nonpublic programs is 376,220, which exceeds the range provided. I am wondering if we are reading the NOFO/RFP wrong and there is not a private school share?

Timely and meaningful consultation with private schools within their district boundaries is required (page 1 of the NOFO/RFP). Please refer to A-2 on page 7 and Section E Equitable Services on page 31 of the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act \(BSCA\) Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#).

A2b. We have a follow-up question related to this from page 32 of Section E of the federal guidance. Our total enrollment public and private is 376,220. Do we apply for the total award amount for public programs and then, based on a per pupil amount of \$15.17, include a budget for nonpublic programs at \$789,670?

Read E-3 on page 31 of the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#) thoroughly to ensure that eligibility requirements are met before determining the per pupil amount: An eligible Local Education Agency (LEA) applying for a Stronger Connections subgrant must consult with appropriate private school officials before the entity makes any decision that affects the opportunities of eligible private school children and educators to participate (ESEA Section 8501(c)(3)). Such consultation might include a brief survey of nonpublic schools or other information gathering to indicate the schools' interest in participating and the population to be served. Such consultation will allow the LEA to consider the needs of all students and educators — both public and private — in developing its application, and to include the projected costs for equitable services in the application. If an LEA is successful in receiving a Stronger Connections subgrant, it must continue to consult with interested private school officials on the specific services the LEA will provide students and educators, consistent with the LEA's approved application, including any

limitations or priorities established by ISBE. A private school also must meet the same eligibility requirements listed on pages 1 and 2 of the NOFO/RFP, including the FY 2024 Free and Reduced-Priced Meal percentage.

A3. Are Regional Safe Schools eligible to apply for the Stronger Connections Grant? I know the ROEs themselves can't apply but I want to make sure my Safe School can.

No. ISBE defines an LEA as a school district for the Stronger Connections Grant (page 1, NOFO/RFP).

A4. Where can I find my district's percentage for Free and Reduced-Price lunch?

Please refer to this listing of districts that meet the [Free and Reduced-Price Lunch](#) 40% threshold for the Stronger Connections Grant. This document is also located on the Stronger Connections Grant webpage.

A5. I wanted to know if this grant is applicable to nonpublic schools, too?

Timely and meaningful consultation with private schools within their district boundaries is required (page 1 of NOFO/RFP). Please refer to A-2 on page 7 and Section E of the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#); they reference the private school share requirement. ISBE defines an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school. Charter schools authorized by LEAs are not eligible to apply independently from their authorizing LEAs.

A6. Regarding the BSCA NOFO/RFP, can the high-needs LEA be a public school or does it need to be the school district?

It must be a public school district. ISBE defines an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school.

A7. Are Regional Offices of Education qualified applicants for the Stronger Connections Grant?

No. ISBE has defined an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school for the Stronger Connections Grant.

A8. Are the funding amounts based on PreK-12 enrollment totals or K-12 enrollment totals?

Stronger Connections funds may be used to support preschool-aged students served by an LEA through a range of allowable activities that encourage the healthy growth and development of preschool-aged students. Therefore, Stronger Connections funds can be used to invest in

developmentally appropriate approaches tailored to the needs of our youngest learners (page 21, [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#)).

A9. Can school districts go together (e.g., school districts in one county) to write the grant application or should each school district write the grant application separately?

ISBE defines an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school. Charter schools authorized by LEAs are not eligible to apply independently from their authorizing LEAs. Each school district should write its own grant application.

A10. Are special education cooperatives eligible to write for this grant?

No. ISBE defines an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school.

A11. How does Stronger Connections define an LEA? Are charter schools defined as an LEA?

ISBE defines an LEA as a school district or an ISBE-authorized charter school for the Stronger Connections Grant. Please see the [list](#) of ISBE-authorized charter schools. Charter schools authorized by LEAs are not eligible to apply independently from their authorizing LEAs.

A12. We currently have counselors, restorative practice, and social work personnel who assist students with meeting their mental and emotional needs. As we develop a plan to continue this under the Stronger Connections guidelines, are their salaries and benefits eligible for the grant?

Please review the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#). School districts should determine the best way to utilize funds based on their needs assessment, and the funds must be used to support safe and healthy environments under Section 4108 of the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (ESEA). Please carefully consider if the use of funds would supplement or supplant any current programming. Supplanting occurs when a state or local unit reduces state or local funds for an activity, specifically because federal funds are available (or expected) to be available to funds that same activity or program.

A13. Is there a private school share? Does the private school have to meet the same requirements as a public school?

Yes, private schools must meet the same requirements as the public schools. Refer to pages 31 and 32 of [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#). Please refer to pages 1 and 2 of the RFP/NOFO as private schools must meet the same eligibility requirements as a public school.

A14. We are a small, rural school district with a social worker of FTE .5 with an enrollment of 230 students. Would we qualify to apply for this grant?

Please review pages 1 and 2 of the RFP/NOFO to determine your district's eligibility based on Free and Reduced-Price Lunch percentage.

A15. What is the threshold for chronic absenteeism?

According to ISBE's [Chronic Absenteeism Presentation](#), a student is "Chronically Absent" if they missed 10% or more of the school year regardless of excuse.

B. Allowables

B1. In the "Allowable Use of Funds" section on pages 9-10 of the NOFO/RFP, I see information about "developing threat assessment systems and teams" as well as "implementing school-based violence prevention strategies." Can funds be used for school behavioral threat assessment training?

An LEA may choose to use Stronger Connections funds for the implementation of threat assessment systems or teams, according to the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#) (page 29). [Section 4108](#) of the ESEA states that high-quality training for school personnel, including specialized instructional support personnel related to school-based violence prevention strategies, is allowable.

B2. I understand that I cannot write for construction. Can the grant be written for a phone system, master locks, or cameras?

Yes. Please refer to pages 28 and 29 (C-22) of the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#).

B3. Do allowable uses of this grant include weapons detection systems?

Yes. Please refer to pages 28 and 29 (C-22) of the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#).

B4. Can funds be used to pay stipends for students, parents, and/or community members to be a part of collaboratives to support needs identified in the grant?

Stipends may be paid to school personnel only for allowable activities aligned with the grant's purpose. Stipends may not be paid for time and/or activities already compensated as part of regular contractual duties. Awards, gifts, incentives, and cash payments are not allowable under the Stronger Connections Grant.

B5. The NOFO/RFP indicates that these funds are for "new or expanded programs." Can these funds be used to continue programs/services after the original funding source ends at the end of the school year?

Please review A-2 on page 7 and B-10 on page 12 in the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#). Carefully consider if the use of funds would supplement or **supplant** any current programming. Supplanting occurs when a state or local unit reduces state or local funds for an activity, specifically because federal funds are available (or expected) to be available to fund that same activity or program.

B6. Are public service announcement systems allowable as they will be used for security-related and emergency purposes?

Yes. Please review C-22 on page 28 and C-23 on page 29 in the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#).

B7. Before completing a proposal, I would like to know if our district would qualify for this grant. We do exceed 40% Free/Reduced-Price Lunch. There are 932 students in the district with three school counselors and one district outreach worker, who is not a mental health professional but works closely with students and families on attendance, mental and physical health resources, basic needs, etc. We do also have a school social worker and school psychologist who work in our schools four-five days a week. They are employed by the special education cooperative with whom we contract. Would we qualify for this grant due to "high student-to-mental health professional ratio"?

An applicant should consider all available resources when determining the ratio of mental health provider(s) to students. Resources may include providers funded directly by the school district, a special education cooperative, or other agreement (e.g., sharing a provider with another district, etc.).

B8. We want to use the Stronger Connections Grant to create a Multi-System of Support (MTSS) specialist position to improve our MTSS model. Is this allowable?

Yes, please review Section C-19 on page 26 of the [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ](#). ESEA Section 4108 allows funds to be used to “develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs and activities” that foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments that support student academic achievement. Therefore, Stronger Connections funds may be used to hire professionals who are essential when implementing such programs. For example, ESEA Section 4108(5)(B) describes school-based mental health services “which may be provided by school-based mental health services providers.” These providers might include school psychologists, school counselors, social workers, or other professionals to supplement other such staff funded with non-Federal funds. In addition, ESEA Section 4108(5)(F) and (G) describe activities, such as designing and implementing plans to reduce discipline or implementing positive behavioral supports in schools. These types of activities might require the involvement and specialized expertise of behavior specialists or other professionals. This also may include other professionals and school-based staff who provide mentoring and counseling or a site resource coordinator.

B9. If there is a current position in the district that could be realigned for the job to be focused 50% of the time on mental health and social-emotional learning, could we put half of the salary/benefits into this grant? We have been a recipient of the Community Partnership Grant and added new positions with the funding, but this would be a realignment and using 50% of the grant to pay for the position.

On pages 12 and 27 of [BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Program FAQ \(B-10 and C20\)](#), it states that Stronger Connections funds may be used to hire professionals to the extent that such individuals will provide services that support K-12 student mental health and well-being. If an LEA wants to use Title IV-A funds to pay for a staff position(s), they must first determine if that staff position or teaching activity is allowable under Title IV-A, the position would need to support at least one of the three purposes of the Title IV-A program statute: well-rounded education, safe and healthy students, and effective use of technology. School districts should carefully consider if the utilization of BSCA Stronger Connections funds may lead to supplanting. Supplanting occurs when a state or local unit reduces state or local funds for an activity, specifically because federal funds are available (or expected) to be available to fund that same activity or program.

C. Other Questions

C1. The letter of intent is not required but it is recommended. Upon completion, will you send us an application package to put together before April 5?

No. The application materials are on the [ISBE Stronger Connections webpage](#). It is recommended you read the NOFO/RFP in its entirety to determine your eligibility.

C2. What is the limit on administrative costs?

The limit is 2%.

C3. Can you please define "newcomer" as it relates to priority for the NOFO/RFP?

"Newcomers" are defined on the [ISBE Newcomer Resources](#) webpage as foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education offers a [Newcomer Toolkit](#) that offers additional explanations and supports.

C4. Should the budget detail page reflect the one year of the grant?

Yes, the budget detail page should be for one year.

C5. We are completing the NOFO/RFP for the FY 2025 Stronger Connections Grant. Where can we get a copy of the FY2025 Programmatic Risk Assessment?

Please refer to page 2 of the NOFO/RFP: "Successful grant applicants will be required to complete an FY 2025 Fiscal and Administrative Risk Assessment in the form of an Internal Controls Questionnaire (ICQ) available through the GATA Web Portal, an FY 2025 Organizational Risk Assessment through the ISBE Web Application Security (IWAS) system, and the FY 2025 Programmatic Risk Assessment that is found within the electronic Grant Management System budget." See the [ISBE Electronic Grants Management System webpage](#).

C6. I am having difficulty getting an electronic signature on the actual application. Can I attach Attachment 9 in a separate file that has the signature needed, or will I lose points if it's not completed on the actual application?

Please refer to page 3 of the NOFO/RFP for all submission requirements. It is best to have the signature on the actual application. Continue to explore ways to do that.

C8. I have two nonpublic schools; one is participating, and one is not. Can I attach them both in the Attachment Manager?

Yes, please attach them both in the Attachment Manager.

C9. In the Attachment Manager platform, there is a dropdown menu for ISBE Email Name. Am I putting Sarah Littrell's name there?

Yes, you will click on LITRELL, SARAH E.

C10. The NOFO/RFP states that we need to use data from an "evidence-based" needs assessment. This is also referenced in Section 2 of the RFP/Grant. Do you have examples of assessments that would qualify as "evidence-based"?

Page 5 of the NOFO/RFP offers the following links as evidence-based resources:

"LEAs should plan activities that are evidence-based. LEAs are advised to consult various resources (e.g., U.S. Department of Education's [What Works Clearinghouse](#), the [Best Practices Clearinghouse](#), the [Office of Elementary and Secondary Education Technical Assistance Comprehensive Centers](#), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [Evidence Based Practice Resource Center](#), [SchoolSafety.gov](#), or other related resources)."

C11. Our district facilitates a five-day-a-week After-School Exploration program across three schools that provides kindergarten-8th grade students 12-plus hours a week of evidenced-based, out-of-school time opportunities to increase social-emotional development, relationship building, and academic growth. Analyses of these interventions show that their success is creating a positive school culture that prioritizes student wellness and academic outcomes; therefore, they offer strong alignment to the Stronger Connections Grant. A major barrier for students to participate in After-School Exploration is transportation. Is student bus transportation from this after-school program to home would be allowable under Section 8526 of the ESEA?

The After-School Exploration program is an allowable activity, but further determinations as to the allowability of costs in accordance with the cost principles in the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards must be made. This includes determining if the cost is allowable and reasonable/necessary for performance of the grant and allocable. While transportation in this instance is a barrier to participation, it does not prevent the activity from taking place. The funds must supplement, not supplant, other non-federal funds that would otherwise be used to pay for the allowable activity. LEAs may not use program funds for transportation if transportation would have been paid for with state or local funds without Student Support and Academic Enrichment program funds (ESEA Section 4110).

C12. The NOFO/RFP lists the Performance Measures, Targets, and Performance Standards. We want to have measurable objectives directly correlated with the Performance Measures. Are we expected to reach the target of 25% or the Performance Standard of 50%? Also, is it required to create objectives different from the Performance Targets/Standards provided to us in the NOFO/RFP?

The Performance Measures, Targets, and Performance Standards are designed to judge the end performance. It is not required to create objectives different from the performance targets/standards.

Performance Measures list the target level of performance for the program expressed as a measurable objective against which actual achievement can be compared, including a goal expressed as a quantitative standard, value, or rate.

- Examples:
 - Number of teachers trained -- The program trained 4,000 teachers annually.
 - Percentage of assessments completed -- 95 percent of all students must complete the standardized assessment.

Targets are what the grantees will meet or are expected to meet during each quarter of the grant.

- Example:
 - Number of teachers trained -- The program will train 1,000 teachers each quarter.

Performance Standards provide the minimum thresholds for acceptable performance and should correlate to Performance Measures. Once the grantee goes below this threshold, remedial action should be implemented by the program area or the grantee can be removed from the program.

- Examples:
 - Two thousand teachers are trained annually or 500 teachers or fewer are trained each quarter.
 - Ninety percent or less of eligible students completed the standardized assessment.

C13. Can you please share with me the link that I need to upload our Stronger Connections Grant application once it's completed?

The link to submit the grant application can be found on page 3 of the NOFO/RFP.

"Electronic Submission: Completed proposals submitted electronically should be scanned into a PDF with all supporting documents and required signatures, then submitted via the [ISBE Attachment Manager](#). Under Receiver Information, choose Sarah Littrell. Please attach all files. Submit the application using the 'Submit' button at the bottom of the page."