

March 5, 2024

**TO:** Eligible Applicants

**FROM:** Dr. Tony Sanders   
State Superintendent of Education

**SUBJECT: NOTICE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY (NOFO)/REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP):**  
Fiscal Year 2025 Stronger Connections Grant Program

**CSFA Number:** 586-18-3213

**CSFA Title:** Stronger Connections Grant

**CFDA Number:** 84.424F

**CFDA Title:** Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program

### **Program Overview**

#### ***Eligibility and Application Information***

**Eligible Applicants:** High-need Local Education Agencies (LEAs) as determined by the state that provide activities that support safe and healthy students under Section 4108 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 are eligible to apply. Eligible high-need LEAs that apply for the Stronger Connections Grant must make timely and meaningful consultation with all private schools within their district boundaries.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has established that a high-need LEA is an LEA<sup>1</sup> in which at least 40 percent of the student population qualifies for free and reduced-price lunch as verified by the FY 2024 Free and Reduced-Priced Meal Eligibility Data, which can be accessed on the [ISBE Child Nutrition Data Analytics and Mapping Tools webpage](#), LEA **also must meet** at least one of the following three characteristics:

- (1) 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.
- (2) High rates of chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, referrals to the juvenile justice system, bullying/harassment, community and school violence, or substance abuse;  
or

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

(3) Students recently experienced a natural disaster or traumatic event.<sup>2</sup>

**NOTE:** The State of Illinois Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA) requires applicants to complete prequalification requirements **before** applying for any grant. This includes completion of the Grantee Registration and prequalification process through the [Illinois GATA Web Portal](#). Grant applications must be submitted by the application deadline indicated in this NOFO/RFP. Applicants are advised to complete the prequalification requirements well before the NOFO/RFP deadline. Any application that does not include evidence of the prequalification requirements will be deemed ineligible.

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. Grant awards will not be executed until the FY 2025 ICQ, Organizational Risk Assessment, and Programmatic Risk Assessment are completed.

**System for Award Management (SAM):** Each applicant (unless the applicant is an individual or federal or state awarding agency that is exempt from those requirements under 2 CFR § 25.110(b) or (c), or has an exception approved by the federal or state awarding agency under 2 CFR § 25.110(d)) is required to:

- (i) Be registered in [SAM](#) before submitting its application;
- (ii) Continue to always maintain an active SAM registration with current information during which it has an active federal or federal pass-through award or an application or plan under consideration by a federal or state awarding agency. ISBE may not consider an application for a federal pass-through award to an applicant until the applicant has complied with all applicable SAM requirements.

**[Code of Federal Regulations / Title 2 - Grants and Agreements / Vol. 1 / 2014-01-01192](#)**

**This grant is subject to the provisions of:**

- [Grant Accountability and Transparency Act, 30 ILCS 708/1 et seq.](#)
- [Administrative Rules for GATA, 44 Ill. Admin. Code Part 7000](#)

**Merit-Based Review and Selection Process for Competitive Grants:** ISBE is required to design and execute a merit-based review and selection process for applications. This process is incorporated by reference in all applicable funding opportunities. Applicants are advised to refer to the [ISBE Merit-Based Review Policy](#).

**Grant Award/Cost Sharing or Matching:** Funds in an amount not to exceed \$40,424,746 will be granted to successful applicant(s). Successful applicants will receive a **one-time award**. Funding Information is on page 7. Minimum grant awards will be no less than \$100,000 to a

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<sup>2</sup> [See page 24, Section C-15 BSCA.](#)

maximum of \$4,958,020 contingent upon district population to include a base and per student amount based on the most recent fall enrollment [report](#).

District Population to Be Served	Total Award Amount Not to Exceed
999 or fewer students	\$100,015 - \$115,000
1,000 - 4,999 students	\$115,015 - \$174,985
5000 - 9,999 students	\$175,000 - \$249,985
10,000 - 29,999 students	\$250,000 - \$549,985
30,000 - 326,868 students	\$550,000 - \$4,958,020

**Grant Period:** The grant period will begin no sooner than July 1, 2024, and will extend from the execution date of the grant until June 30, 2025, with an opportunity to utilize remaining funds via a continuation application through the expiration on the grant on September 30, 2026. Funding in the subsequent years will be contingent upon compliance with federal and state law, state grant-making rules, passage of sufficient appropriations for the program, and satisfactory performance in the preceding grant period. No promise or undertaking made in this NOFO/RFP is an assurance that a grant agreement will be renewed, nor does this NOFO/RFP create any right to or expectation of renewal.

**Submission Dates and Times/Other Submission Requirements:** Proposals are to be submitted electronically through the ISBE Attachment Manager no later than 5:00 p.m. on Friday, April 5, 2024. *Only ONE application per entity will be accepted. Hand deliveries, paper copies, or emailed submissions will NOT be accepted.*

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.

**Late proposals will NOT be accepted.**

**Grant Award Notice:** It is anticipated that successful applicants will receive a Notice of Award via email approximately 90 days after the application deadline. The award letter is NOT an authorization to begin performance or expenditures. After the merit-based appeal timeframe has ended, awardees will receive additional information from the program area that includes the next steps for finalizing the grant. Monies spent prior to programmatic approval are done so at the applicant’s own risk.

**Technical Assistance Session:** The technical assistance session is available on the [ISBE Stronger Connections Grant webpage](#). Attendance is not required. Any questions because of viewing the webinar may be sent to [strongerconnections@isbe.net](mailto:strongerconnections@isbe.net).

**Changes to NOFO/RFP:** ISBE will post any changes made to the NOFO/RFP prior to March 29, 2024, on the ISBE [Funding Opportunities webpage](#). Applicants are advised to check the site before submitting a proposal.

**Agency Contact/Contact to Request Application Package:** For more information on this NOFO/RFP, contact Sarah Littrell at 217-557-7075 or [strongerconnections@isbe.net](mailto:strongerconnections@isbe.net). Email is the preferred method of contact. All questions asked concerning this NOFO/RFP will be responded to in a Frequently Asked Questions document found at the Stronger Connection Grant webpage so all respondents can see all questions and the responses to the questions. Changes to the FAQ will not be made after March 29, 2024. Applicants are advised to check the site before submitting a proposal.

**Letter of Intent:** Applicants that plan to submit a proposal are asked to complete a [Letter of Intent form](#) by March 18, 2024. It is not required that a form be submitted but is highly encouraged. The information will assist ISBE in planning the proposal review process.

## **General Information**

### ***Program Background and Description***

#### **Program Purpose:**

The program's purpose is to support LEAs in their efforts to prevent violence and to establish safe, healthy, inclusive, and supportive teaching and learning opportunities and environments that create a positive school culture and climate and prioritize student wellness and academic outcomes through **evidence-based** activities.

#### **Program Description:**

The program will support high-need LEAs to develop comprehensive school systems grounded in local evidence-based school safety and climate plans, along with other evidence-based strategies for creating safe, healthy, and supportive schools. The program funds must supplement, not supplant, other federal and state funds.

- Focuses on a comprehensive approach by implementing school-based violence prevention programs in coordination and alignment with broader evidence-based community violence prevention strategies. These activities can be coordinated with community-based services and prevention programs and may include a wide variety of activities designed to meet students' physical, social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs and improve school safety and climate.
  - LEAs are encouraged to use Stronger Connections funds to establish partnerships within the community to provide resources (e.g., mental, and physical health services, parent engagement classes, housing assistance, and nutrition programs) and support for schools that will ultimately strengthen relationships between schools and communities to improve student success.
- Creates positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; increases access to school-based interventions and services.
- Allows funds to be used for a range of services and activities as allowed under [ESEA Section 4108](#).

- Supports local efforts to integrate evidence-based programs focused on the whole child and provides services and supports to reduce or eliminate exclusionary practices in consideration of non-cognitive development (social, emotional, and behavioral), mental wellness, and physical health for children while increasing student connections and a sense of belonging at school and the number of school-related activities extending beyond the school day, including out-of-school opportunities.
- Promotes integrated student wellness addressing out-of-school barriers through partnerships with community social and health service agencies, including, but not limited to, social-emotional learning, trauma, conflict resolution, restorative justice practices, access to mental health services, decreasing bullying, and punitive disciplinary actions.

See a more detailed overview of the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Grant Program](#).

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).

**Federal Description:**

On June 25, 2022, President Biden signed the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act \(BSCA\)](#), which provides \$1 billion in funding to State Education Agencies (SEAs) to be distributed under [Title IV, Part A of the ESEA](#). The BSCA specifies that SEAs must make competitive subgrants to high-need LEAs, as determined by the SEA, for activities to support safe and healthy students under Section 4108 of the ESEA. The department has designated BSCA Section 4108 funds as the Stronger Connections Grant program to distinguish it from the regular Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program, which funds a broader range of activities.

**Program Background/History:**

The BSCA provides historic funding to support SEAs, LEAs, and schools in establishing safe, healthy, and supportive learning opportunities and environments. This includes \$1 billion through Title IV, Part A of the ESEA for SEAs to competitively award 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 our school communities at individual and systemic levels, among other programs and activities.

**Program Objectives:**

The Stronger Connections Grant aims to improve or establish safe, healthy, and supportive learning opportunities and environments for students and educators. The Stronger Connections Grant allows for a wide array of services and activities as allowed under [ESEA Section 4108](#). This program, through the development or expansion of relationships involving LEAs, district/school leaders, educators, students, parents, families, and community members, will allow applicants to

utilize data from an evidence-based needs assessment to develop an action plan that aligns with U.S. Department of Education recommendations.<sup>3</sup> The following program objectives must be met:

- Implement comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and/or mental well-being needs; create safe, positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; and/or increase access to place-based interventions and services; and
- 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; and
- Design and implement policies and/or practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

**Policy Requirements:**

There are no State Board of Education policy requirements for this posting.

**Performance Measures:**

1. One hundred percent of students are offered new or expanded programming that improves the social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being of students.
2. One hundred percent of participants are engaged in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions that create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.
3. One hundred percent of students are offered opportunities that advance equity, respond to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

**Targets:**

1. Twenty-five percent of students are offered new or expanded programming that improves the social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being of students.
2. Twenty-five percent of participants are engaged in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions that create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.
3. Twenty-five percent of students are offered opportunities that advance equity, respond to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

**Performance Standards:**

1. Fifty percent of students are offered new or expanded programming that improves the social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being of students.
2. Fifty percent of participants are engaged in the selection and implementation of strategies and interventions that create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.
3. Fifty percent of students are offered opportunities that advance equity, respond to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

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<sup>3</sup> See [Dear Colleague Letter](#).

### **Deliverables and Milestones:**

**Deliverable 1:** A progress report outlining the results of the components detailed in the LEA's logic model and evaluation of services and supports provided through this grant will be submitted to ISBE's point of contact within 30 days of the grant's completion.

- a. Offering evidence-based social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health supports to students; creating positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; and increasing access to school-based interventions and services during and/or beyond the school day.
- b. 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.
- c. Designing and implementing policies and practices that advance equity and respond to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.

**Deliverable 2:** Completion of annual reporting in IWAS.

**Deliverable 3:** Submission of quarterly metric reports and an update on progress toward sustainability. This information will be collected via a Microsoft form sent by the grant manager.

### ***Funding Information***

#### **Introduction:**

This grant program was established through the BSCA, which provides funding under Title IV, Part A of the ESEA and allows for such funding to be used for a range of services and activities as specified in ESEA Section 4108. All grant funds disbursed to administer the Stronger Connections Grant and all related services must be handled in accordance with the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022](#). The requirements of Title IV, Part A also apply to these funds, including, but not limited to, the supplement, not supplant, requirement (ESEA Section 4110); the maintenance of effort requirement (ESEA Section 8521); and the requirement to provide equitable services to private school students and personnel (ESEA Section 8501 et seq.).

#### **Cost Sharing or Matching:**

A cost sharing or matching component is acceptable but not required for these funds.

#### **Indirect Cost Rate:**

The federal Uniform Guidance at 2 CFR 200 requires that grantees be provided the opportunity to seek indirect cost reimbursements based on negotiated indirect cost reimbursement rates. Rates are determined and applied as follows.

- LEAs
  - LEA indirect cost rates are developed in accordance with a delegation of authority agreement between ISBE and the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The plan includes both a restricted and unrestricted rate for each individual LEA. Both the restricted and unrestricted LEA rates are published annually on the [ISBE Indirect](#)



[Cost Rate Plan webpage](#). In the past, only the restricted rate was allowed when budgeting indirect cost reimbursements. LEAs can seek indirect cost reimbursement at the published unrestricted rate for any program other than those identified as restricted by ED.

- Newly organized LEAs, Regional Offices of Education, Intermediate Service Centers, area vocational centers, charter schools, university laboratory schools and governmental entities formed by a joint agreement among LEAs utilize either the statewide average of LEA unrestricted or restricted indirect rates as appropriate, depending on program.
- LEAs that jointly administer federal program(s) utilize either the approved unrestricted or restricted indirect cost rates for the administrative district of the joint program as appropriate, depending on program.
- Non-LEAs
  - Programs eligible for an unrestricted indirect cost rate; not-for-profit entities; community-/faith-based organizations; and other non-LEA, non-university subgrantees utilize rates negotiated through the Governor’s Office of Management and Budget centralized process in which they will have the option to:
    - Select the 10 percent de minimis rate.
    - Submit documentation supporting a rate determined through negotiation with their federal cognizant agency.
    - Negotiate a rate.
  - Non-LEA, non-university grantees may initiate the unrestricted indirect cost rate negotiation process through the [GATA Grantee Portal](#).
  - Federal programs requiring the use of a restricted indirect cost rate, not-for-profit entities, community-/faith-based organizations and other non-LEA subgrantees shall utilize the 8 percent default rate described at 34 CFR 76.564.
  - Colleges and universities will be limited to a maximum indirect cost rate of 8 percent or other indirect cost rate calculated by their cognizant federal agency, whichever is less, for grants administered by ISBE.

Costs associated with Fiscal Support Services (2520), Internal Support Services (2570), Staff Support Services (2640), Data Processing Services (2660), and Direction of Business Support Services (2510) charged to the Educational Fund are properly budgeted as indirect costs.

### **Funding Restrictions:**

The Stronger Connections Grant program is a federally restricted indirect cost program.

Program budgets must supplement not supplant other federal and state funds that would otherwise be used to pay for authorized activities. Funds may not be used for prohibited activities as indicated in [ESEA § 4001\(b\)](#) or § 8526.

### **Non-Allowable Use of Funds**

#### **BSCA Stronger Connections Grant funds may not be used for the following:**

- Dangerous weapons or the training in the use of a dangerous weapon.



- Section 13401 of the BSCA amended [Section 8526 of the ESEA](#) to prohibit the use of ESEA funds, including those under Stronger Connections, to provide to any person a dangerous weapon or training in the use of a dangerous weapon. A “dangerous weapon” as defined in Section 930(g)(2) of Title 18 of the United States Code is “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 pocketknife with a blade of less than two and a half inches in length.”
- Drug testing.
- Capitol assets, including land.
- Construction.
- No transfer of funds out of award to another authorized program.
- Food and beverages for students and staff.
- Medication.
- Entertainment or promotional items.
- Supplies/materials that are not reasonable/necessary to carry out the grant.
- For transportation unless otherwise authorized under [Section 8526 of the ESEA](#).
- Any activity outside the goals and objectives of this grant.

### **Allowable Use of Funds**

SCG funds must be used for activities authorized under [ESEA § 4108](#) to support safe and healthy students. To be allowable, a cost must be “necessary and reasonable” for proper and efficient administration of the BSCA Stronger Connections Grant program.

- Providing school-based mental health services.
- Preventing teen and dating violence, stalking, domestic abuse, and sexual violence and harassment.
- Meeting the social and emotional needs of students.
- Providing mentoring and school counseling.
- Offering information about suicide prevention.
- Providing instruction pertaining to crisis management and conflict resolution techniques.
- Developing threat assessment systems and teams.
- Promoting drug and violence prevention activities that are evidence-based.
- Providing integrated support services for students.
- Creating comprehensive health education programs.
- Integrating health and safety practices into school or athletic programs.
- Implementing schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports.
- Preventing bullying and harassment.
- Implementing activities that improve instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills.
- Providing mentoring and school counseling.
- Increasing student connections and a sense of belonging at school.
- Establishing or improving school dropout and reentry programs.
- Implementing strategies that prevent suicide.

- Offering professional development pertaining to crisis management and conflict resolution techniques.
- Implementing school-based violence prevention strategies.
- Reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices.
- Supporting students in alternative education programs.
- Offering nutritional education and physical education activities.
- Establishing partnerships within the community to provide resources and support for schools.
- Strengthening relationships between schools and communities.
- Offering high-quality training for school personnel in effective practices related to any of the above.
- Increasing student connections and a sense of belonging at school.
- Providing related professional development to educators, including principals and other leaders, to support strategy implementation such as trauma-informed practices.

*Please refer to this [BSCA FAQ document](#) for additional information related to allowable and non-allowable activities and expenses pertaining to the Stronger Connections Grant.*

### **Stevens' Amendment:**

For purposes of compliance with Section 511 of Public Law 101-166 (the Stevens' Amendment), applicants are advised that 100 percent of the funds for this program are derived from federal sources. Funds not to exceed \$40,424,746 will be granted to successful applicant(s).

### **LEA Reporting Requirements**

- Submission of periodic financial reporting completed at a minimum quarterly via the IWAS system.
- Submission of annual programmatic reporting via IWAS.
- Submission of quarterly metric reports and an update on progress toward sustainability. This information will be collected via a Microsoft form sent by the grant manager.
- Within 30 days of the award notice:
  - Grant project manager and fiscal manager are identified, and their names are submitted to ISBE.
  - The grant implementation timeline, including a sustainability component, is completed and submitted to ISBE.
    - Both documents should be submitted to [strongerconnections@isbe.net](mailto:strongerconnections@isbe.net).

### **Content and Form of Submission**

**Instructions:** Each application must be submitted in the format outlined below to be considered complete. A complete application will include all required components (the numbered items below) and signatures when mentioned. Please use the checkboxes in front of the numbers as a checklist when assembling your completed application. It is advised to attach a copy of the completed checklist with the application.

- 1. Uniform Application for State Grant Assistance (Attachment 1):** Include the name, address, and telephone and fax numbers of the entity; email, name, and telephone number

of the contact person; Federal Employer Identification number; UEI number; SAM CAGE Code; and all other listed information. The Application page must be signed by the official authorized to submit proposals.

- 2. Logic Model (Attachment 2):** Use the form provided to complete and submit the logic model.
- 3. Program Narrative (Attachment 3):** Maximum five pages. Provide an overview of the program plan and the relevance to the selected objective(s). Follow the specifications found under Program Narrative Requirements at the bottom of this page.
- 4. Objectives and Activities (Attachment 4):** Maximum five pages. Use the form provided to list the objectives and activities of the proposed project in a time-specific format.
- 5. Proposal Evaluation Design (Attachment 5):** Maximum five pages. Use the form provided to complete the evaluation design.
- 6. Sustainability Component (Attachment 6):** Complete as directed.
- 7. Federal Budget Summary (Attachment 7):** The budget **MUST** be submitted on this form. No other budget form will be accepted. District budgets **MUST** be signed by the district superintendent. Other applicants should have an authorized official sign the form. Salaries and fringe benefits should be requested at equal intervals.
- 8. Budget Summary Breakdown (Attachment 8):** The Budget Summary Breakdown **MUST** include descriptions of the anticipated expenditures, correlated to the line items set forth on the Federal Budget Summary. The Budget Summary Breakdown should also include subcontract information, if applicable.
- 9. Equitable Participation of Private Schools (Attachment 9):** Complete as directed. Duplicate as needed and as applicable.

#### **Program Narrative Requirements**

- Provide narrative responses to the following sections on the ISBE-provided attachments. Respond to each prompt in the space provided on each attachment page, ensuring your responses do not exceed the page limit specified, where applicable. Portions of responses that exceed the page limit will not be read or considered.
- Unless otherwise directed, compose responses in paragraph format. Including occasional bulleted lists within otherwise paragraph-formatted responses is acceptable.
- Ensure that there is a clear alignment between the logic model and all areas of the narrative as detailed below.
- See rubric starting on page 15 for more information on details to include.

**Make sure to address the following sections when writing the Program Narrative:**

### **Section 1. High-Need Population to be Served**

Clearly indicate the population(s) to be served and their specific needs. Include any evidence that supports the population's needs. The applicant should present data to clearly indicate that the LEA falls within the definition of a high-need LEA as verified by the [FY24 Free and Reduced-Priced Meal Eligibility Data](#) and the [2022-23 Report Card](#). See Priority Points on page 13 as they relate to Free and Reduced-Priced Meal Eligibility data, chronic absenteeism, and asylum-seeking students.

### **Section 2. Needs Assessment**

Complete and summarize the results from the comprehensive needs assessment. Include a description of the process used with the school and community to determine the need, the availability of resources, and the information used to determine the need (e.g., student achievement, demographic, student behavioral, substance abuse, teen pregnancy birth rates, high-need LEAs, and parent/family). The needs of populations to be served should be clearly articulated in the program narrative with a clear alignment to the objectives and activities and the populations to be served.

### **Section 3. Proposed Program Description**

Identify and describe how program systems, policies, services, and activities are developed and delivered in equitable ways for all populations. Focus on development of comprehensive school systems that are grounded in local, evidence-based school safety and climate plans along with other evidence-based strategies for creating safe, healthy, and supportive schools. Include consideration for meaningful engagement between school and LEA leaders, educators and students, parents, families, and community members, and strong relationships between students and adults. The proposal shall clearly indicate the intent of programming as identified in the description of this NOFO/RFP.

### **Section 4. Sustainability**

Use available data and collaborate with students, families, educators, staff, and community organizations to establish a plan to continue an amended scope of the project and to achieve desired outcomes for the targeted audience/outcomes. The applicant describes a plan for how the proposed program will be continued once grant funding has ended and how sustainability data will be collected, evaluated, and used to determine next steps. Short- and long-term goals are identified along with possible funding sources, partners, and the necessary resources for continuation. A description of program activities that build capacity from the start to the end of the grant is included.

### **Section 5. Program Evaluation**

Evaluation plans must be designed to document and demonstrate the successes and challenges of the program. The plan must, at a minimum, include the following information and be submitted as part of the proposal. The proposal has a compelling rationale for the multiple methods and measures for data collection including the data collection tools when applicable. This includes the methods used to gather, organize, summarize, analyze, and present qualitative and quantitative data. The proposal includes an evaluation plan of the proposal program, including the program's goals and objectives, evaluation question(s), evaluation method(s), logic model, sustainability plan, and a timeline of evaluation activities. Indicate who will be responsible for conducting the

evaluation. The evaluation plan is relevant to the measurement of the program's goals and objectives, including how well Grant Periodic Performance Report measures will be met. The proposal demonstrates that the program to be implemented is based on sound research and can be reasonably accomplished based on projected timelines, resources, staff, and facilities. Indicate how the resulting recommendations will be incorporated into the program annually for continuous improvement and evaluation of sustainability. The proposal describes how the applicant has worked with and supported other educational partners (schools, districts, regions, etc.) in developing programs for students.

## **Review Criteria**

### **Application Review and Selection Process**

The grantee selection will be based on the overall quality of the application. The scoring is based upon the following criteria:

- Need is defined as the identification of stakeholders, facts, and evidence that demonstrate the proposal supports the grant program purpose.
- Capacity is defined as the ability of an entity to execute the grant project according to the project requirements.
- Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a service, project, or product that indicates its ability to satisfy the grant program's requirements.
- Evaluation is defined as the ability to judge or determine the significance, worth, or quality of a service, project, or product.
- Sustainability is defined as the ability to maintain programming and its benefits over time.

**Priority Points No. 1:** The Stronger Connections Grant program prioritizes high-need districts based on the percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch based on the most recent FY 2024 Free and Reduced-Priced Meal Eligibility.

1. District with 40 percent to 59.99 percent free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rate (eligibility met): 1 point
2. District with greater than 60 to 74.99 percent FRPL rate: 5 points
3. District with greater than 75 to 89.99 percent FRPL rate: 8 points
4. District with 90 percent or greater FRPL rate: 10 points

**Priority Points No 2:** The Stronger Connections Grant program prioritizes high-need districts with a high level of chronic absenteeism. Districts that have exceeded the state average chronic absenteeism rate will be awarded 5 priority points.

**Priority Points No 3:** Districts educating high numbers of asylum-seeking students or newcomers will be awarded up to 5 priority points.

1. District with 1-4 newcomers: 1 point
2. District with 5-9 newcomers: 2 points
3. District with 10-14 newcomers: 3 points
4. District with 15-19 newcomers: 4 points
5. District with 20-plus newcomers: 5 points

## **Tiebreaker**

In the event of a tie, the applicant serving the higher number of asylum-seeking students or newcomers as indicated in the grant narrative will be given priority.

**Evaluation Criteria**

These overall criteria are built into the rubric, starting on page 15, that will be used to determine if the criteria have been met. The points for each section and the individual criteria are also included in the rubric.

Following the notification of grant awards, an applicant may request copies of reviewer scores and comments by contacting Sarah Littrell at [strongerconnections@isbe.net](mailto:strongerconnections@isbe.net).

**Selection criteria and point values are as follows:**

Not Provided	Very Limited	Somewhat Limited	Moderate	Strong	Very Strong
0	1	2	3	4	5
Proposal requirements are absent.	Proposal provides very few details to meet the project outcomes.	Proposal is unclear and lacks enough evidence to meet project outcomes.	Proposal provides moderate details and conveys potential to meet outcomes but doesn't provide a complete measurable plan for execution. There are several missing components.	Proposal provides good detail and strong, measurable evidence to meet project outcomes. There are very few missing components.	Proposal exceeds expectations and provides a solid, measurable plan to meet project outcomes. There are few to no missing components.
<b>Section 1: High-Need Population to be Served 15 Points</b>				<b>Attachments: 2, 3, 4</b>	<b>15 Possible Points</b>
The proposal describes the student population to be served, including student population size and demographics.					5
The data included clearly indicates that the LEA falls within the definition of a high-need LEA as described in the Program Narrative Requirements.					5
The proposal identifies stakeholders, facts, and evidence that demonstrate the proposal supports the grant program purpose.					5
<b>Section 2: Needs Assessment 25 Points</b>				<b>Attachments: 2, 3, 4, 5, 9</b>	<b>25 Possible Points</b>
A needs assessment has been conducted and summarized within the proposal.					5
The proposal provides a clear description of the district's needs to establish improvements for safe, healthy, inclusive, and supportive teaching and learning opportunities.					5
The proposal clearly describes the project need as it relates to one or more of the grant objectives.					5
The barriers to partnerships with community, social and health service agencies are relevant to the narrative and evaluation design.					5
The proposal specifies the process used by the school and community to determine the need for the project in the community, the availability of resources, and the data used to determine the need.					5
<b>Section 3: Proposed Program Description 30 Points</b>				<b>Attachments: 2, 3, 4, 7</b>	<b>30 Possible Points</b>



The proposal identifies and describes how program systems, policies, services, objectives, and activities are developed to support the intent of the grant.	5
The budget aligns with the objectives and activities.	5
The proposal includes equitable programs for all current populations served to develop comprehensive school systems.	5
There are clear connections made from the program’s objectives to comprehensive, evidence-based strategies and activities that meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being needs. The applicant shows evidence to support those connections.	5
The proposal includes specific opportunities to 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.	5
The proposal includes measurable policies and practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protecting their rights and demonstrating respect for student dignity and potential.	5
Section 4: Sustainability 10 Points	Attachment 6 10 Possible Points
The applicant describes a plan for how the proposed program will be continued once grant funding ends and how sustainability data will be collected, evaluated, and used to determine next steps.	5
The proposal identifies short and long-term goals, possible funding sources, partners, and the necessary resources for continuation. It also describes which activities build capacity from the start of the grant to the end.	5
Section 5: Program Evaluation 20 Points	Attachment 5 20 Possible Points
The proposal has a compelling rationale for the multiple sources of data collection.	5
The proposal includes an evaluation plan of the proposal program, including the program’s goals and objectives, evaluation question(s), evaluation method(s), logic model, sustainability plan and a timeline of evaluation activities.	5
The proposal demonstrates that the program to be implemented is based on sound research and can be reasonably accomplished based on projected timelines, resources, staff, and facilities.	5
The proposal describes how the applicant has worked with and supported other educational partners (schools, districts, regions, etc.) in developing programs for students.	5