**Stronger Connections Grant**

Questions and Answers

*Updated 4/15/23: This document will be updated as we receive additional questions.*

**General**

**Q:** Will the Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) be offered annually?

**A:** As far as we know, this is one-time funding.

**Q:** What is the expected timeline for the launch of the grant?

**A:** The application will be open in iGrants by end of March 2023: FP 400 for individual applicants and FP 404 for consortia. Proposals will be due by 4 pm in iGrants on Monday, May 22, 2023. The application will be open for approximately 7–8 weeks for applicants to submit proposals. We anticipate announcing the results of the competition in June. Selected grantees must begin implementation no later than September 2023.

**Q:** Will I receive a confirmation that my application was submitted?

**A:** No, but you can easily determine the status of your application by looking at your list of grants and applications in iGrants. Make sure that the status of your FP 400 or 404 is **Request OSPI Approval** before 4 pm on Monday, May 22, 2023. If it is not fully submitted by the deadline, then it cannot be reviewed.

Once the application is open, click on the “Instructions” link on the left side navigation to see the following.

1. Complete the contact page, then press the “Mark Completed” icon.
2. Complete the application page(s), then mark each one completed by pressing the “Mark Completed” icon.
3. Mark the form package finished by pressing the “Finish” icon.
4. Press the “Notify” button to email district officials (Fiscal Officer, Grants Administrator and iGrants District Administrator) that the form package is ready for internal review.
5. The iGrants District Administrator will send a request for approval to OSPI for processing.

**Q:** Can an LEA apply to work with specific schools?

**A:** This grant is intended to work on districtwide initiatives as opposed to focusing on individual schools. In larger districts, it may be acceptable to focus on specific grade levels as opposed to all grades, all schools. The application guidance includes this statement on the goal for the SCG program:
OSPI’s goal for this funding will be to award subgrants to LEAs, or consortia of LEAs, to fund proposals that directly address the Safe and Healthy Students goal of Title IVA. Successful applicants will propose to develop and sustain districtwide systems to implement and maintain comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that build capacity and provide direct services to:

1. Meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being needs.
2. Create positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments.

Q: How are the Stronger Connections Grant funds different than the Title IV, Part A funds?
A: These funds were appropriated through a different spending bill, the BiPartisan Safer Communities Act. But Title IV, Part A is the mechanism they designated for disseminating funds to States, who then award subgrants to high-need LEAs on a competitive basis. This funding is in addition to the annual Title IV, Part A formula funding and it must be tracked separately.

Q: Are you hoping for big innovative ideas that have never been done before? Or more traditional needs funding?
A: We are relying on you to assess your needs and determine a plan and the activities that will best address those needs. We do not want to rule out innovative ideas that are based on sound theory, and build off evidence-based practices. But we are not ruling out those ideas that aren’t designated by the US Department of Education as having the highest levels of evidence.

Q: Is there an estimated amount per grant?
A: We did not set a minimum or maximum award size. OSPI has $15 million to award, and we are estimating there will be between 8–15 three-year awards.

Q: Would there be a circumstance in which you would reward a lesser amount than what is proposed? Or does too high of a proposal disqualify the application?
A: Yes, it is always possible we could offer a smaller award. But we really want applicants to think about how much they need and what can be accomplished during the grant period.

Q: Are there specific community-based organization stakeholders you are looking for in strong applications?
A: No, we are just looking to see inclusion of existing or potential new partnerships that can help your LEA provide supports to address needs outlined in the application. These partners can help extend the supports that the LEA is able to offer alone.

Q: If a district receives this funding, would it have any impact on their funding allocated for their regular Title IVA formula grant?
A: No. This is a different pool of funding and will have no impact on your formula funding for Title IVA.

Q: Will you be scoring consortium grants and LEA grants together as one large group of applications and you award from that big pool, or will you score consortiums as separate from LEA’s and award a few consortiums and few LEAs?

A: We will establish review panels that will evaluate a group of individual OR consortia applications. We did not set aside a specific amount for consortia vs. individual, but we do expect to award both. We also want to ensure some geographic distribution of these resources and allow for different types of approaches. But it will all be tied to quality of proposals on both sides.

Q: Will you be reviewing all grants at once and then award or will they be reviewed and awarded as they are reviewed and come in?

A: We will review them all at once and announce awards on the same timeline.

Q: What is the funding cycle?

A: This is a one-time funding through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, and it is separate from the Title IVA formula funds awarded each year. Since this is a competitive grant, the start date will be whatever date the grants are finally awarded after the process conclude, and we hope that the work will begin by the start of the 2023–24 school year, and it must conclude by September 2026. That end date already factors in the carryover year, and there is no provision for extension beyond that date.

Q: What type of reporting will be required?

A: The grant assurances include an agreement to participate in US Department of Education information collection, though they have not informed us of what that might include. We added the requirement for applicants to include some sort of self-assessment tool, such as the Tiered Fidelity Index, so that they can keep track of how their implementation is going across the grant period. You would also be asked to report against the metrics you included in your application in order to document how the program is doing in term impacting the need identified in the beginning, as well as reporting on other short- and longer-term outcomes.

Q: Is evaluation a requirement?

A: Formal evaluation is not a requirement. You do need to make sure that you have staff capacity, both at a consortium lead and individual applicant level, to track the implementation progress and outcomes. We have had some discussions about whether to hire an external SCG evaluator, but that decision and what that might look like really depends on what ends up in this portfolio. We do think this is a great opportunity to evaluate the impact these funds and the

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associated programming are having, but we want to strike a balance in terms of ensuring enough funding is going toward providing services and building capacity.

**Q:** Is a new needs assessment process required, or can we use analysis that has already been done?

**A:** You do not need to start over with a needs assessment process if you already have a good foundation to work with. But you may need to build on it to ensure you are including meaningful and inclusive opportunities for stakeholder input. And the needs assessment must be relevant to the focus of this funding opportunity.

**Q:** Is there a good forum for discussing a general proposal idea to see if it fits with the grant?

**A:** Feel free to send an email to titleiva@k12.wa.us, or join the scheduled drop-in office hours. That would be an opportunity for you to ask if something would be allowable, but we couldn't comment on the quality of the proposal.

**Q:** I’ve never written a competitive grant proposal before. Do you have any advice?

**A:** If you are reading this document, you are off to a great start! Additionally, you will want to carefully review the [Stronger Connections Grant Application and Guidance](https://example.com) document to ensure this funding opportunity is a good fit. Fully answer all questions in the application and do not assume reviewers have advance knowledge about your community or programming. Once the review rubric is completed, that document will include additional insights into what reviewers will be looking for in the responses. We anticipate posting that rubric by the end of April. Lastly, make sure your application is fully submitted to iGrants before 4:00pm on May 22, 2023.

**Eligibility**

**Q:** Why are you requiring a school climate survey, and where can I find a list of evidence-based school climate surveys?

**A:** The purpose of the Stronger Connections Grants is to support the Safe and Healthy Students priority of the Student Success and Academic Enrichment (Title IV, Part A) program. This program area is devoted to creating positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments that improve school conditions for student learning. When students are healthy and feel safe and supported, they are more likely to succeed in school.

The [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)](https://example.com) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and serves as a technical assistance resource for school climate.

According to NCSSLE, school climate is closely related to school success and can impact attendance, achievement, retention, and even rates of graduation. A positive school climate is...
the product of a school’s attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting.

The measurement of school climate provides educators with the necessary data to identify school needs, set goals, and track progress toward improvement. School climate measurement involves a comprehensive assessment of student engagement, school safety, and the learning environment. And reliable school climate surveys for students, families, and staff are great tools for measuring school climate. For this reason, OSPI is requiring all Stronger Connections grantees to use a school climate survey as one strategy for determining the success of grant funded activities.

NCSSLE maintains a growing list of valid and reliable school climate measurement tools on their School Climate Survey Compendium. The intent of the compendium is to share student, faculty and staff, family, administrator, and community surveys in elementary, middle and high school. The surveys can be used in whole or in part. All scales in the compendium have been tested for validity and reliability. NCSSLE reviews surveys for inclusion in the School Climate Survey Compendium on an ongoing basis. Survey developers and users are welcome to nominate a survey if it is not included in the list.

Q: Does an LEA need to have already completed a school climate survey in order to apply?

A: School climate surveys provide an excellent source of data to analyze during the needs assessment process and can help identify underlying causes of other challenges that LEAs may be facing. But the requirement is for LEAs to implement or continue to implement a school climate survey as one strategy for determining the success of grant funded activities.

Q: Are very small LEAs and private schools required to participate in the Healthy Youth Survey?

A: OSPI believes the state level data from the HYS is very useful and would love for all LEAs and private schools to participate. State level data can be used to identify and monitor factors that affect the health and safety of youth in Washington, and potentially inform policy and funding priorities. Students in 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grades take the survey on a voluntary and anonymous basis. In smaller districts, where there are 150 students or less in a grade, the survey can be administered to students in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades. Schools do not receive reports when the number of valid survey responses is too small to protect student anonymity. If privacy concerns cannot be adequately addressed, then this requirement could potentially be waived as a requirement for the SCG program. Please send a note to titleiva@k12.wa.us if you would like to discuss the requirement.

Q: Where can I find the district poverty averages?

A: We understand that there are slight differences among data sources. You can use the OSPI Report Card or the Child Nutrition Services data.
Q: Can districts with a district poverty average of less than 40% apply?
A: We are using the Department of Education’s suggested criteria of a poverty level above 40%. If your LEA is under that level, then it would not qualify for this grant.

Q: If multiple districts wish to contract with Educational Service Districts (ESDs) for services embedded in their program proposals, would that be considered ineligible in terms of being ”part of more than one application”?
A: It depends on the circumstances. The intention is to broaden the reach of the portfolio. If the ESD or Community Based Organization (CBO) is contracted for specific services as part of a larger program plan, then that would be fine. But they should not serve as the lead applicants or significant partner in a proposal.

Q: Some of our schools meet the 40% criteria and some do not. Can I apply for all schools who meet the criteria even if it is not entire district? Or can I choose one school?
A: The eligibility criteria is at the LEA level. For this grant opportunity, we are looking for district-wide efforts to make systemic change. So the district as a whole must qualify. This includes private schools within eligible LEA boundaries.

Q: Is there an LEA size that would be considered too small to apply for an individual grant?
A: We have not set a minimum grant size, but we would expect that a smaller district would not apply for the same amount as a larger one. The budget and program plan should be appropriate for the size of the LEA and what can be implemented in the grant period.

Q: Can childcare centers apply?
A: No. Only local educational agencies (school districts, charter schools, tribal compacts) or ESDs leading a consortium of LEAs are eligible to apply for these funds.

Q: Can an ESD be in more than one LEA proposal if the ESD is not submitting the grant (e.g. subcontracting for training or mental health counselor)?
A: Yes; however, they could not serve as the consortium lead, either by application or contract.

Q: If a district joins an ESD for a consortium proposal, are they unable to also apply as a lead LEA?
A: Yes. We want to reach as many students as we can with these resources. So it doesn’t make a lot of sense to make award two different grants that are supporting the same school district.
Consortia

Q: Who can form a consortium?
A: There are several options for consortia. In all cases, the goal of this funding is to build LEA/district capacity, as opposed to the capacity of the consortium.

1. A group of eligible LEAs, with one of them serving as a lead applicant that then contracts with a CBO to manage the grant
2. A group of eligible LEAs led by an ESD
3. A group of eligible LEAs, with one of them serving as a lead applicant

Q: In a consortium, do all the participating LEAs need to qualify with a district poverty rate of 40% or more?
A: Each of the participating LEAs in a consortium need to meet the poverty criteria to be eligible.

Q: The guidance encourages small districts to form consortia. What is the definition of small district in this context?
A: Any eligible LEA can form a consortium. We have not defined "small schools" and larger districts are not excluded from consortia applications, because we recognize that smaller districts may not have the capacity to write or manage the grant.

Q: Can a consortium include districts that are outside of their ESD?
A: Yes, but the LEA should not be included in multiple applications.

Q: What role should a consortium lead applicant play?
A: These grant funds are intended to build the capacity of the LEAs to support the Safe and Healthy Students goals of Title IVA. We would like to see consortia where the lead works with a group of districts to not only provide services and supports that extend what the districts are able to provide to their students, but also helps the participating districts to align those services with other activities, strategies, and initiatives within their own Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) framework. This would include ensuring a solid foundation of universal supports at the district/building level that builds the capacity of the district and its staff, incorporates the unique views of students and families within the individual school community, and is sustainable beyond the grant.

Q: Can a community-based organization or public agency apply to lead a consortium?
A: CBOs cannot serve as the legal applicant, but a district, or group of districts could contract with a community partner to provide leadership and support.
Q: How would you suggest organizing the varied MTSS descriptions between different school sites?

A: We envisioned this grant opportunity as a way to develop and sustain districtwide systems that build capacity and provide direct services, so we would not expect to see different activities at each of the different schools within multiple LEAs. The application is structured so you only need to provide information on those activities that are most relevant to the overall plan and provide the context for what you are proposing.

Q: Can we hire someone to coordinate the consortium?

A: Yes, if it makes sense in the context of the plan and the work of the consortium.

Q: Do all LEAs in a consortium need to implement the same programming?

A: We think it is important that we are able to aggregate some data that results from a consortium grant. For this reason, the identified need should be the same across LEAs, and the indicators used to measure progress should be the same. The specific activities for each LEA may be slightly different, but do keep in mind the benefit of shared learning and cost efficiencies for multi-site activities.

Q: Can an application propose a year-by-year cohort model for a consortium where a group of LEAs receives intensive support in year one, and then in the following years there would be a lighter touch and new LEAs would be added for intensive support in years two and three?

A: Part of the goal for this funding is to build LEA capacity, which is difficult to accomplish within a single year of support and funding. The expectation for consortia is that the LEAs are working on the same need(s) and tracking progress in addressing those needs through the same indicators. Your proposal would need to clearly describe the activities for each LEA for each year, and what outcomes are expected for LEAs that join in years two and three and whether they are the same as those in the year one cohort.

Q: Do you have any suggestions for how to convene LEAs for a discussion on whether and how a consortium approach would work for them?

A: You can begin by determining whether they have a recent needs assessment or analysis of available data that points to particular needs they need to address. Then you can determine whether there are areas of alignment on a common set of needs and potential metrics that could be used to determine progress in addressing those needs. You will also want to understand their commitment on early and ongoing stakeholder engagement since this is an important component of the proposal.
**Equitable Services**

**Q:** How can private schools participate?

**A:** Private schools located within the boundaries of an eligible LEA that opts to apply can participate, but participation includes involvement throughout the planning process and not just post award.

**Q:** If a private school has a poverty rate less than 40%, is the private school still eligible to participate?

**A:** Similar to how not all buildings within an LEA must separately have a poverty rate above 40%, any private school within the boundaries of an eligible LEA can participate. Services and support for each building may be determined based on relative need.

**Q:** Are LEAs required to consult with private schools about participation in the SCG program separately from the Title IV, Part A formula grants?

**A:** If an eligible LEA opts to submit an SCG application, it is obligated to reach out to private schools within its boundaries to determine their interest in participation. If the private school chooses not to participate, OSPI recommends that the LEA maintain documentation that the opportunity to participate was offered and declined by the private school. Keep in mind, this is a separate process than the formal consultation for participation in federal programs with private schools.

For SCG, it is our expectation that a private school that indicates interest in participation would be included in the planning, overall implementation, and evaluation of the program. Costs for private school participation should be included in the budget narrative.

**Q:** Do participating private schools and the LEA need to agree on the proposed need and activities?

**A:** Yes. This is a competitive grant application process where the needs identified using data are half of the applicant’s eligibility (the other half being that the LEA has a district poverty rate at or above 40%). You can think of this as similar to how you might approach a consortium. The basis of the proposal should be common needs and the use of a common set of metrics to track progress, but the specific activities may be slightly different. The proposal should reflect the agreed upon services and activities and associated costs. Do keep in mind the benefit of shared learning and cost efficiencies for multi-site activities.
Allowable Use of Funds

Q: Are we allowed to fund activities that are not included on the list in the guidance document?
A: The guidance documents include examples of needs and activities that are well-aligned with the Safe and Healthy Students focus of Title IV, Part A. LEAs should engage stakeholders and conduct a needs assessment to serve as the foundation for the proposal. If you are uncertain whether a specific activity is allowable, please feel free to reach out to titleiva@k12.wa.us to ask. Please note that we can advise you on allowability but will not comment on whether an idea is competitive.

Q: Can Stronger Connections grant funds be used for professional development?
A: Professional development that meets the definition in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) may be funded through SCG.

According to ESSA Section 8101(42). The term “professional development” means activities that:

A. Are an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators (including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, and as applicable, early childhood educators) with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standards; and

B. Are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused.

Q: Can an LEA include stipends/salaries to individuals of partnering organizations?
A: In general, yes, but context matters. You must ensure costs are reasonable and necessary to accomplish program objectives.

Q: Could we apply to help our balanced calendars in sessions?
A: We would have to see the rationale for this, and how it applies to the articulated Safe and Healthy Students goals. It may not be directly aligned.

Q: Could mental health needs be identified as the need to address?
A: Yes, absolutely. You would identify specific data points from whatever different sources you work with that point in the direction of a need to increase access to mental health supports.

Q: When developing the proposal, can an applicant name partners they plan to contract with for services, or do federal procurement rules apply?
A: Yes. And general federal procurement standards do apply. 2 CFR Part 200 Subpart D - Procurement Standards. Please consult with your business office and review your organization’s

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internal procurement policies. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) set the “Micro-Purchase” threshold at $10,000 for goods and services and allows low-risk LEAs that self-certify to go up to $40,000 for goods and $50,000 for services. The “Small Purchase Procedures” threshold is impacted by state law, with a range of $10,000–$75,000 for goods ($40,000–$75,000 for LEAs that self-certify they met low-risk criteria) and $10,000–$250,000 for services (low-risk LEAs, $50,000–$250,000). That means that in most situations, a formal competitive procedure is not required. Please review the OSPI Accounting Manual for additional details (pages 9-15 through 9-17).

Q: Is it allowable to use these funds to support services that were previously supported by ESSER funds?

A: We realize that when you are hiring people and implementing services and support for students, you need people to continue to get paid, so in some cases these activities are not always sustainable. When you are continuing work that you began with another source of funding, such as ESSER, you must ensure that you are also working on the capacity-building side and putting systems, practices, and policies in place that can be sustained.

Q: Can funds be used to pay for things like door locks and security staff?

A: These purchases may be allowable if they are part of a larger comprehensive school safety initiative. It must also be clear how expenditures support the LEA in meeting a need identified through a needs assessment process that incorporates the views of stakeholders and addresses the goals OSPI set for this grant competition.

OSPI’s goal for this funding will be to award subgrants to LEAs, or consortia of LEAs, to fund proposals that directly address the Safe and Healthy Students goal of Title IVA. Successful applicants will propose to develop and sustain districtwide systems to implement and maintain comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that build capacity and provide direct services to:

1. Meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being needs.
2. Create positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments.

Budget

Q: Cash match is not required, but will district members providing a cash match to demonstrate commitment and progress toward sustainability be scored favorably?

A: This grant was developed to increase the capacity of districts to create positive, inclusive, and supportive environments, and meet student needs. If the districts are paying to participate, then what funds are available for them to do this work? This would need more explanation in terms of how this strategy advances the goals of this grant opportunity, which is not one practice or program, but a set of activities and supports designed to build capacity at the LEA, as well as support students.

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Q: Can you define what the direct administrative costs are that would fall under the 2% maximum?

A: The direct administrative costs are in addition to the indirect expenses which are already delineated in your federally negotiated indirect cost rate agreement. It can include work that is more administrative in nature, like general supervision of someone implementing grant activities, but can still be directly allocable to the grant. If you have specific questions about what might or not be considered a direct administrative cost, please feel free to send specific questions to titleiva@k12.wa.us.

Q: At what level of funding do you think it is worth applying as a consortium instead of as an individual district?

A: We do not have an expectation in terms of the size of consortia vs individual grants. We ask that you consider your needs and what the activities are when creating the proposal. Consortia may be especially helpful for LEAs that lack capacity for grant writing and management. If it is harder for you to hire people, for example, it might be advantageous to apply with other LEAs. We couldn’t definitively say what would be worthwhile. Concerning your question around what is too small and what is too big — keep in mind that we estimate awarding approximately 8–15 grants and we do intend for there to be grants in both the consortia and individual categories.