

**New Jersey Department of Education
Bipartisan Safer Communities - Stronger Connections NGO TA
Frequently Asked Questions**

FAQs

1. Q. When will the grant be posted in EWEG?

A. The Stronger Connections Grant is currently available in the EWEG system; please review your local education agency's (LEA) grant portal for the 2024 fiscal year.

2. Q. Would Covid-19 be considered a natural disaster?

A. The United States Department of Homeland Security and the Centers for Disease - Control (CDC) have categorized COVID-19 as [a pandemic](#) and not [a natural disaster](#). However, while the experience of trauma already was widespread before the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 has been an additional **traumatic event** for many children and adults. As such, trauma-informed practices directly support most of the activities identified in section 4108. Refer to [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for Trauma-Informed Approaches](#).

3. Q. Does the "maximum 2% administrative cost" apply to the hiring of a project director, data collection clerk, or other administrative personnel costs?

A. The "maximum 2% administrative costs" refers to costs for managing and operating the grant program. For more information, please refer to the [ESEA Quick Start Guide](#) and the [Uniform Grant Guidance \(2 CFR 200.413.\)](#)

4. Q. Is the cost for an independent evaluator an acceptable expenditure?

A. 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 necessary to implement such programs. Please refer to [Final Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Frequently Asked Questions – Nonregulatory Guidance](#) (C-19 & C-20) for additional guidance.

Additionally, for a use of funds to be permitted, the applicant must determine if the activity is:

1. Authorized under [section 4108](#) of the ESEA;
2. Reasonable and necessary for the performance of the grant;
3. Allocable to the grant;

4. Supplements, and does not supplant, other non-Federal funds that would otherwise be used to pay for authorized activities;
5. Not one of the prohibited activities in ESEA [section 4001\(b\)](#) or [section 8526](#); and
6. Consistent with any other applicable Uniform Guidance provisions (see 2 CFR 200 et seq., in particular [2 CFR Part 200, Subpart E](#)).

5. Q. How will the number of students, parents and other community members impact the scoring of the application?

- A.** Engaging students, parents, families, and community members is critical to the successful implementation of activities supported by Stronger Connection funds. It is essential that local leaders and educators consistently engage students, parents, and community partners, paying close attention to communities who face systemic barriers and how they are experiencing the implementation of selected policies, strategies, and activities. These funds can be used to support consistent and accessible family outreach, including systems to support one-on-one conversations among school leaders, teachers, and families and sharing accurate and up-to-date information about how students are doing in school. Engagement can be in the form of town halls (in-person and virtually); and using high-quality school climate surveys and/or surveys of school organizational conditions. Additionally, school and LEA leaders can conduct outreach to community-based youth serving organizations and parent organizations, establish youth or family advisory boards, and host focus groups and listening sessions with these communities. Please refer to [Final Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Frequently Asked Questions – Nonregulatory Guidance](#) (B9) for additional guidance.

6. Q. What is the allowable indirect cost rate?

- A.** If the district has an NJDOE approved indirect cost rate, enter an amount equal to or less than the calculated maximum. The total for administrative plus indirect costs may not exceed 2%.

7. Q. Can these funds be used for staff to attend conferences?

- A.** ESSA defines Professional Development (PD) as activities that are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused. Stronger Connections funds may be used to provide PD related to programs and activities that fosters safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free school environments (as authorized under [section 4108](#) of the ESEA.) To implement and sustain evidence-based strategies school-wide, staff must have access to high-quality, research-based PD that effectively positions them to implement this work. As with all high-quality PD, these learning opportunities

should include ongoing feedback and be sustainable. Please refer to the [United State Department of Education’s \(USED\) Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants](#) for additional guidance.

8. Q. Does the district need to have the money first and later get reimbursed or does the grant provide the money up front?

A. Payment of grant funds is made through a reimbursement system. Once the ESEA application has received final NJDOE approval, the district may go into EWEG and request reimbursement for funds already expended or anticipated to be expended through the end of the current month. Only one (1) reimbursement request may be submitted per month through EWEG. The discretionary grantee may begin submitting reimbursement requests as soon as the application has been approved and the grant acceptance certificate has been completed in EWEG.

9. Q. Can these funds be used to upgrade a building with air conditioning to make the learning environment more comfortable for students and staff?

A. For the cost of remodeling to be considered allowable, it must meet the definition of “minor remodeling” under [34 CFR 77.1](#) and not require construction, renovation, or repair, which is a prohibited use of Stronger Connections funds. BSCA Stronger Connections grants are appropriated for carrying out activities under subpart 1 of Part A of Title IV of the ESEA, specifically for activities under ESEA section 4108. ESEA section 8526(1) prohibits using funds under the ESEA “for construction, renovation, or repair of any school facility, except as authorized under [the ESEA],” and there is no specific authorization for construction, renovation, or repair in ESEA Title IV, Part A. Please refer to [USED’s Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants](#) for additional guidance.

Important Note: LEAs may explore using of the [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief \(ARP ESSER\)](#) funding to upgrade projects to improve the indoor air quality in school facilities, including mechanical and non-mechanical heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, filtering, purification and other air cleaning, fans, control systems, and window and door repair and replacement.

10. Q. Can the Stronger Connections Grant funding be braided into the ESSER funding? If an LEA is using ESSER funding for a program that ends in 2024, can the Stronger Connections Grant be used to continue the program?

A. LEAs are encouraged to build upon existing initiatives as defined in Appendix 2 of the NGO in order to continue implementing evidence-based strategies that support

safe and healthy learning environments; thereby improving the safety and health of students.

11. Q. Can the funds be used to hire School Resource Officers?

- A. If an LEA chooses to use funds for this purpose, as a recipient of Federal funds, LEAs must ensure school-based officers (e.g., law enforcement, security, or school resource officers and others with arresting powers), like all school employees or other individuals with whom a recipient contracts or otherwise exercises some control over, comply with Federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability. Please refer to the [Final Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Frequently Asked Questions – Nonregulatory Guidance](#) (C-21) for additional guidance.

12. Q. Can partnering regional school districts (grades 7-12) and sending school districts (grades Pre-K-6) that are both eligible for this grant apply together to ensure all grade levels would benefit from program funding?

- A. If an LEA meets the definition of “high-need,” and is listed in Appendix 1 of the BSCA SCG NGO, it is eligible to compete in the NJDOE’s Stronger Connections grant competition. LEAs may form partnerships, however, the EWEG system does not allow LEAs to apply jointly.

13. Q. Are nonpublic school districts eligible for funding through this grant?

- A. Nonpublic schools are ineligible to apply directly. However, an eligible LEA applying for a Stronger Connections subgrant must consult with appropriate nonpublic school officials before the entity makes any decision that affects the opportunities of eligible nonpublic 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 nonpublic 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 nonpublic—in developing its application, and to include the projected costs for equitable services in the application. Additional information can be found in the [BSCA SCG NGO](#).

14. Q. Are charter school LEAs required to complete the Nonpublic School Affirmation of Consultation Form?

- A. With respect to discretionary (competitive) grant programs, such as the Stronger Connections Grant program, Charter Schools, as with all LEAs, are required to provide equitable services for eligible nonpublic school children or educators, unless these children or educators are served under the same program by an LEA in the area. A charter school may consult with nonpublic school officials representing

nonpublic schools and may limit consultation and services to nonpublic schools within a reasonable proximity of the Charter School, even if the Charter School LEA serves a larger geographic area.

15. Q. Can the Stronger Connection grant funds be used for transportation to off-site educational experiences as long as it is not entertainment?

A. The NJDOE expects proposed activity costs to be complete, cost effective, and allowable (e.g., necessary, reasonable, and allocable for project activities under this grant opportunity). The provisions of [N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-7: School District Travel Policies and Procedures](#) contain additional requirements concerning prior approvals, as well as expenditures related to travel. It is strongly recommended that the applicant work with their business administrator when developing the budget to ensure that all costs, including transportation, are necessary for the successful implementation of program activities.

16. Q. Are transportation to meetings and transportation for students to get services an allowable use of funds through this grant program?

A. Program funds may be used for any program or activity that fosters safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free school environments, including direct student services and professional development and training for school staff. Activity costs must be necessary, reasonable, and allocable and based on the needs of each LEAs unique student populations. Please refer to [USED's Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants](#) for additional guidance.

17. Q. Do larger districts have an advantage over LEAs with smaller student populations?

A. This is a competitive grant opportunity. Applications are reviewed by an evaluation panel as part of the competitive process, and applications that are of the highest quality are funded to establish and promote programs with the greatest chance of success. In its role as guardian of public funds, the NJDOE is responsible for selecting only those applications that demonstrate the greatest need; provide the most comprehensive plan to address the need; provide a clear, competent and professional presentation of the proposed project; provide an appropriate basis for all costs necessary to sustain the project; and, consequently, offer the best chance of success in achieving the NJDOE's goal(s) for the grant program.

18. Q. What is the Stronger Connections Grant program award amount?

A. The NJDOE expects to make 15 awards of approximately \$1.38 million each for successful applicants.

Additional Resources:

- [USDE Final Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Frequently Asked Questions – Nonregulatory Guidance](#)
- [USDE Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants](#)
- [Federal Uniform Grant Guidance \(2 CFR Part 200, Subpart E\)](#)
- [NJDOE ESEA Quick Start Guide - FY 2022-2023](#)
- [NJDOE BSCA Stronger Connection Grant – Grant Webpage](#)
- [NJDOE BSCA Stronger Connections Grant - Notice of Grant Opportunity \(NGO\)](#)