



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION  
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

September 15, 2022

Dear Chief State School Officer:

On June 25, 2022, President Biden signed into law the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* (BSCA), an important first step toward reducing the risk of gun violence in our schools and communities. Through this legislation, Congress authorized \$1 billion in formula funding under Title IV, Part A of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) to State educational agencies (SEAs) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments. Under the BSCA, SEAs must award these funds competitively to high-need local educational agencies (LEAs) to fund activities allowable under section 4108 of the ESEA. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is pleased to announce your State's allocation of these funds under the BSCA **Stronger Connections grant program** (see enclosure). The Department's approach is intended to ensure transparency and successful implementation, while also providing access to these funds as soon as possible to support the ongoing needs of students, educators, families, and communities.

Research consistently shows that safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments are associated with improved academic achievement and emotional well-being of students, as well as with reductions in disciplinary actions.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, students who experience a sense of belonging in school are also more likely to exhibit positive behaviors.<sup>2</sup> This includes learning environments that provide culturally and linguistically responsive practices where students are surrounded by adults they can trust and who are committed to building strong relationships.<sup>3</sup> Environments like these also help build connections that make students less likely to bring weapons to school and more likely to report the presence of weapons in school.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the benefit to the individual student, safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments benefit their fellow students, educators, and the community at large.

Nurturing learning environments can also help students overcome challenging and traumatic experiences and provide a sense of emotional and physical safety. When young people feel connected to school and to school staff, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, be absent from school, or experience emotional distress and are more likely to earn higher grades. Recent research has also begun to identify specific strategies, such as those that teach pro-social behaviors, that can improve school performance and reduce violence in the community at large.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, to maximize the positive and lasting impact of these funds, the Department is encouraging States to prioritize funds for LEA applicants that demonstrate a strong commitment to the following:

**1. Implementing comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being needs; create positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments; and increase access to place-based interventions and services.**

There is a compelling body of research on the practices that are most likely to make for safer and more supportive learning environments, as well as those that can undermine this objective and positive outcomes for students. The ESEA emphasizes the use of evidence-based approaches, including in activities to support safe and healthy students in ESEA section 4108, under which your State is receiving these additional funds. In identifying appropriate evidence-based strategies to promote a positive school climate and student and educator well-being, the Department urges States and LEAs to rely on the strongest types of evidence—*i.e.*, “strong” (Tier 1) and “moderate” (Tier 2) evidence under the ESEA and the Education Department General Administrative Regulations.<sup>6</sup> Such evidence is backed by rigorous, well-designed, and well-implemented studies with positive results (and without strong negative results) based on a robust sample size that matches the local context.

The Department’s [What Works Clearinghouse](#) reviews high-quality research that can help in selecting evidence-based strategies, including Tier 1 and Tier 2 evidence. In addition, evidence-based strategies can be found in the [Best Practices Clearinghouse](#) and through the Department’s [technical assistance centers](#). The Department also urges schools to [continuously evaluate](#) interventions, strategies, and practices so that they can ensure efforts are leading to improvement and success. Schools should use high-quality measures of student engagement, [school climate](#), and school safety to monitor the outcomes associated with their efforts and make any necessary adjustments to implementation. For example, research on child and adolescent development has established that while adverse experiences (particularly in early childhood) can have profound effects on students, learning environments and conditions can be designed in [culturally competent and responsive ways](#) that can help students overcome these effects and thrive.<sup>7</sup>

**2. 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.**

Family engagement is a strong predictor of both elementary and secondary students’ school success and is linked to beneficial outcomes for students, educators, and families alike.<sup>8</sup> When schools welcome and [partner with families](#) in ways that respect their cultures, assets, aspirations, and needs, it has the potential to strengthen the entire community. It is essential that LEA leaders and educators consistently engage parents, families, and community partners, paying close attention to communities that face systemic barriers. Experts suggest that family engagement is most effective when it brings a diverse group of families, educators, and community members together to co-create policies, practices, and strategies that achieve mutually agreed upon school climate outcomes for students, schools, and communities.<sup>9</sup> These efforts can also extend to parent representatives, nonfamilial caregivers, individuals, and organizations that represent the interests of students and parents with disabilities or who are English learners.

To support strong engagement, schools should implement strategies for all voices to be heard—and families and communities should know how their feedback was incorporated into final decisions to build and sustain trust. This engagement should begin early in the decision-making process and be ongoing and collaborative. This type of engagement should help facilitate selections of strategies based on a community’s values and designed for systemic change that can build long-term buy-in and capacity at the local level.

### **3. Designing and implementing policies and practices that advance equity and are responsive to underserved students, protect student rights, and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.**

All students deserve to experience trust and belonging in a safe, inclusive, and supportive school environment. Therefore, the Department strongly encourages States and LEAs to use these funds to design and implement student-centered policies and practices that increase student belonging and provide safe, nurturing, and welcoming environments. While limited infrastructure improvements (e.g., the repair of locks and building entry improvement) are permissible under ESEA section 4108, it is important to note that there is some research that shows that visible security measures alone – and without efforts to promote student learning, growth and positive learning environments – may have detrimental effects, and some of these measures are unlikely to reduce or eliminate serious incidents.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the Department encourages States and LEAs to increase investments in professional development, [comprehensive emergency management planning](#), [behavioral](#) and trauma- or grief-informed [mental health supports](#) for students (including addressing hate, bullying, and harassment), and other best practices that increase students’ safety, belonging, and mental health and well-being.

Further, in designing and implementing measures funded by this program, States and LEAs should consider the proposed uses and foreseeable effects of any measures in light of their legal obligations not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability. The Department’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) provides [resources](#) that may be helpful in addressing this concern.

More specifically, States and LEAs should recognize that students and families may experience school safety and discipline policies in different ways. For example, research demonstrates that students of color who need mental health supports have been more likely to be met with discipline rather than the appropriate identification, treatment, and supports they need.<sup>11</sup> The data show that exclusionary discipline practices can have a disproportionate impact on students of color who are [frequently](#) disciplined more harshly than their white peers, especially for minor and more subjective offenses (e.g., willful defiance).<sup>12</sup> Research also suggests that these disparities can be exacerbated by subjective evaluations of students’ actions rather than being the product of objective differences in student behavior.<sup>13</sup> These disparities in the application of discipline policies have also been reported by and among [students with disabilities](#), English learners, and LGBTQI+ students.<sup>14</sup>

The Department encourages States and LEAs to select developmentally and culturally appropriate and trauma-informed emergency training, security measures, and other schoolwide policies. These could include implementing effective approaches to engaging and supporting

students, providing professional development opportunities that build equitable and emotionally and physically safe learning environments for students and educators, developing and implementing inclusive and culturally and linguistically affirming discipline practices, addressing the root causes of any disparities in discipline, and implementing positive behavioral interventions and supports.

Finally, as States consider establishing **criteria for high-need LEAs** consistent with Congressional intent, the Department encourages States to consider a focus on LEAs with high rates of poverty and with one or more of the following characteristics: (1) a high student-to-mental health professional ratio; (2) high rates of chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, referrals to the juvenile justice system, bullying/harassment, community and school violence, or substance abuse; or (3) where students recently experienced a natural disaster or traumatic event. The Department encourages a measurement of poverty that considers LEAs with high numbers of students living in poverty, as well as LEAs with high percentages of students living in poverty (e.g., at least 40 percent). Such a consideration allow for a more accurate reflection of the concentrations of poverty.

The Department is committed to providing technical assistance to States and LEAs to use these funds in evidence-based ways that build the trusting and inclusive learning environments we all want for all students. We know that States and LEAs are managing multiple demands as we enter the school year, and we will remain available to you to provide technical assistance and share resources that are responsive to the needs of States and LEAs for the effective administering of this funding. The Department also intends to issue answers to BSCA Stronger Connections Grant Frequently Asked Questions in the coming months as part of our efforts to support successful implementation of the program.

Your State may begin to draw down its Stronger Connections allocation, consistent with the requirements of your Grant Award Notification that includes assurances related to statutory uses of funds, accountability, reporting, and equitable services. These assurances support a streamlined award process aimed at providing States with funding as efficiently as possible. If you or your staff have questions, please contact your State's Title IV, Part A program officer.

Thank you for your commitment to supporting all students' safety, well-being, and success.

Sincerely,



Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.  
U.S. Secretary of Education

Enclosure

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, M. T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational psychology review*, 28(2), 315-352.

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- <sup>2</sup> Allen, K., Kern, M.L., Vella-Brodrick, D. et al. What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis. *Educ Psychol Rev* 30, 1–34 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-3>
- <sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth.
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- <sup>6</sup> Sec. 8101(21)(A)(i)(I)-(II) and 34 C.F.R 77.1(c).
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- <sup>9</sup> Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*. SEDL.
- <sup>10</sup> Tanner-Smith, E. E., Fisher, B. W., Addington, L. A., & Gardella, J. H. (2018). Adding security, but subtracting safety? Exploring schools' use of multiple visible security measures. *American journal of criminal justice*, 43(1), 102-119; Price, J. H., & Khubchandani, J. (2019). School firearm violence prevention practices and policies: functional or folly?. *Violence and Gender*, 6(3), 154-167; Livingston, M. D., Rossheim, M. E., & Hall, K. S. (2019). A descriptive analysis of school and school shooter characteristics and the severity of school shootings in the United States, 1999–2018. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64(6), 797-799.
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- <sup>13</sup> Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (2000). *The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment*. Policy Research Report.
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