PROGRAM GUIDELINES: 2024–2025 STRONGER CONNECTIONS GRANT PROGRAM

APPLICATION DUE DATE

11:59 p.m. Central Time, July 18, 2023

PROGRAM AUTHORITY

PL 117-159 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Title II School Improvement Programs (June 25, 2022) Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA)

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Introduction to the Program Guidelines

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), as the pass-through entity¹, is the grantee² from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and TEA awards subgrants to non-federal entities³ such as local educational agencies (LEAs), including school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, and education service centers, and to a lesser degree institutions of higher education (IHEs), and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) who are the agency's subgrantees⁴. These guidelines apply to all subgrantees of TEA, regardless of whether referenced herein as subgrantee or grantee. For purposes of this document, TEA may use the terms grantee and subgrantee synonymously for its subrecipients.

This part of the request for application (RFA). Program Guidelines are to be used in conjunction with the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u> and the specific program instructions. The Adobe Acrobat Standard Application System (SAS) consists of all forms to be completed in order for the applicant to be eligible for funding.

For applicants selected for funding, all guidelines and instructions will be incorporated by reference into the Notice of Grant Award (NOGA).

Reference to the General and Fiscal Guidelines

The Program Guidelines provide information specifically relevant to this grant program. The <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u> provide information relevant to all TEA grant programs.. Throughout the Program Guidelines, cross-references are given to applicable sections of the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u>. It is critical that you review all referenced sections of the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u> when preparing your application.

¹ Pass-through entity is defined as a non-Federal entity that provides a subaward to a subrecipient to carry out part of a federal program. (2 CFR 200.74)

² Grantee is defined as the legal entity to which a grant is awarded and that is accountable to the federal government for the use of the funds provided. The term "grantee" does not include any secondary recipients, such as subgrantees and contractors that may receive funds from a grantee. (34 CFR 77)

³ Non-federal entity is defined as a state, local government, Indian tribe, institution of higher education, or nonprofit organization that carries out a federal award as a recipient or subrecipient. (2 CFR 200.69)

⁴ Subgrantee is defined by TEA to be the same as a subrecipient which is defined as a non-federal entity that receives a subaward from a pass-through entity to carry out part of a federal program; but does not include an individual that is a beneficiary of such program. (2 CFR 200.93) Subgrantee is defined in 34 CFR 77 as the legal entity to which a subgrant is awarded and that is accountable to the grantee for the use of the funds provided.

U.S. Department of Education and/or State Appropriations

The following is provided in compliance with the U.S. Department of Education Appropriations Act:

Category	Amount
Total funds available for this project	\$89,285,990
Percentage to be financed with federal funds	100%
Amount of federal funds	\$89,285,990
Percentage to be financed from nonfederal sources	0%
Amount of nonfederal funds	\$0

Grant Timeline

All of these dates except the grant ending date may vary slightly as conditions require.

Date	Event	
May 19, 2023	RFA available; notice of the RFA published in the <i>Texas Register</i>	
June 1, 2023	Last date to submit questions to be addressed in the applicant's Conference/Webinar	
	See General and Fiscal Guidelines, Applicants' Conference/Webinar	
June 6, 2023	Applicants' Conference/Webinar	
	Register for the 10:00 AM webinar <u>here</u> .	
	Register for the 2:00 PM webinar <u>here</u> .	
June 23, 2023	Last date to submit FAQs to TEA contact person	
	See General and Fiscal Guidelines, Frequently Asked Questions	
June 30, 2023	Due date for the Notice of Intent to Apply; Notice of Intent to Apply	
June 30, 2023	Due date for Reviewer Information Form; Reviewer Information Form	
June 30, 2023	FAQs posted to TEA Grant Opportunities page	
July 18, 2023	Due date for the application in the TEA Document Control Center, 11:59 p.m., Central Time	
	See <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u> , Competitive Application Due Date and Time	
August 3, 2023– August	Competitive review period	
31, 2023	See General and Fiscal Guidelines, Competitive Review Process	
November 15, 2023	Beginning date of grant	
	See General and Fiscal Guidelines, Grant Period	
July 3, 2025	Final date to submit an amendment	
September 30, 2025	Ending date of grant	
	See General and Fiscal Guidelines, Grant Period	

For all dates related to the grant, including reporting dates, see the page. If a report due date falls on a weekend or holiday, the report will be due the following business day. All dates except the grant ending date may vary slightly as conditions require.

Grant at a Glance

This section provides fundamental information pertinent to the grant program.

Authorizing Legislation

This grant program is authorized by the P.L. 117-159 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Title II School Improvement Programs (June 25, 2022) Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA).

Where to Submit the Application

See the Where to Submit the Competitive Application section of the <u>General and Fiscal</u> Guidelines.

Submission Requirements

TEA requires one copy of the PDF application for competitive grants to be signed, with a digital ID or by hand, by a person authorized to bind the applicant to a contractual agreement.

See the Signature Requirements for Competitive Grants section of the <u>General and Fiscal</u> <u>Guidelines</u>.

Note: TEA requires applications to be emailed. Multiple applications per applicant must be submitted in separate emails.

Purpose of Program

The purpose of this program is to support systemic change in the way that school districts address and respond to bullying, violence, and acts of hate. Supporting the academic and nonacademic needs of students by providing safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments will result in improved academic achievement as well as mental, behavioral, emotional, and physical health and well-being of students. Applicants will be required to work with the Texas Center for Student Support to develop and implement a student support program.

Eligible Applicants

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Eligibility To Apply for Competitive Grants.

Local educational agencies (LEAs) that meet the TEA definition of a high-need LEA, any LEA 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%) where students recently experienced a natural disaster or traumatic event, including the pandemic.

Eligibility List

An eligibility list is posted on the <u>TEA Grant Opportunities page</u>, with all documents pertaining to the RFA.

Shared Services Arrangement

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Shared Services Arrangements.

Shared services arrangements (SSAs) are not allowed for this grant program.

Application Funding

See the following sections of the General and Fiscal Guidelines:

- Grant Funding
- Continuation Funding
- Fund Management
- Use of Funds

It is anticipated that approximately 60 grants will be awarded. Grants will be awarded in amounts up to \$1,000,000 for LEAs with a district enrollment of 10,000 or fewer students and \$1,200,000 to \$1,500,000 for LEAs with a district enrollment of more than 10,000 students.

Selection of Applicants for Funding

Applicants will be selected in the following order:

- 1. The highest ranking LEA with a district enrollment of 10,000 or fewer students from each region served by a regional ESC.
- 2. The highest ranking LEA with a district enrollment of more than 10,000 students from each region served by a regional ESC.
- 3. All other LEAs in rank order until funding is expended.
- 4. If additional funding becomes available, additional LEAs may be funded in rank order.

Cost Share or Matching Requirement

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, Cost Share/Match Requirement.

TEA requires a 5% cost share for this grant program.

Limitation of Administrative Funds

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, Administrative Costs.

Direct Administrative Costs

TEA limits the amount of direct administrative costs for this grant program to no more than 2% of the total grant award.

Indirect Administrative Costs

The grantee may claim a maximum for indirect costs equal to their current approved restricted indirect cost rate for this grant program.

Use the Maximum Indirect Costs Worksheet, posted on the Federal Fiscal Compliance and Reporting Division's Indirect Cost Rates page, to calculate the maximum indirect costs that can be claimed for a grant.

Pre-Award Costs

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Pre-Award Costs.

Pre-award costs **are not** permitted for this grant program.

Applicant Assistance

The following types of assistance are available to applicants for this grant program.

Contact for Clarifying Information

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, TEA Contacts.

The following TEA staff member should be contacted with questions about the RFA, the grant program, or for assistance with the applicants' webinar:

Hank Weikert, Director of Student Supports Implemention Division of Supportive Schools hank.weikert@tea.texas.gov

Phone: (512) 463-9270

Frequently Asked Questions

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Frequently Asked Questions.

The FAQs for this grant program will be posted to the <u>TEA Grant Opportunities</u> site no later than the date listed on the Grant Timeline. Applicants may email their questions to the TEA staff member listed in the *Contact for Clarifying Information* section.

Applicants' Conference/Webinar

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines Applicants' Conference/Webinar.

Questions that applicants wish to have addressed during the applicants' webinar must be submitted no later than the date given in the grant timeline.

Date of Webinar	Time	Registration Link	Туре
June 6, 2023	10:00 AM	Register for the 10:00 AM webinar here.	live
June 6, 2023	2:00 PM	Register for the 2:00 PM webinar here.	live

Errata Notices

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Errata Notices.

GovDelivery Email Bulletins

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, GovDelivery Email Bulletins.

Program Elements

This section provides detailed information about the grant program.

Program Description

On September 15, 2022, the Texas Education Agency was awarded a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) Stronger Connections grant program. The BSCA was established to support the development of safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments in the nation's schools. Under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) funding was made available to state educational agencies (SEAs) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments.

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. Research recommends that effective supportive learning environments have the following goals:

- 1. Students experience a sense of belonging in school
- 2. Learning environments provide culturally and linguistically responsive practices
- **3.** Students are surrounded by adults they can trust and who are committed to building strong relationships.
- **4.** Learning environments are nurturing and help students overcome challenging and traumatic experiences and provide a sense of emotional and physical safety.

These supportive learning environments help build connections that make students less likely to engage in harmful, threatening, or violent behavior at school, including bullying and harassment. They also provide benefit to the individual student, their fellow students, educators, and the community at large.

This program will focus on incorporating resources and supports developed by the Texas Center for Student Supports and regional ESCs to access coaching, job-embedded professional development, and training to implement a Student Support Program that includes improving school climate, a student support team structure, and behavioral threat assessment implementation. Participating LEAs will implement the program at three district campuses, one at each level (elementary, intermediate/middle school, and high school) where the campus will:

- establish and improve school culture resulting in strong relationships between staff and students, while addressing harmful, violent, and threatening behavior resulting in reductions in behavioral and disciplinary incidents, chronic absenteeism, incidents of bullying and harassment, and improved overall academic outcomes;
- implement effective mental health training, support, and use of resources; and
- implement an effective student support team structure

Each LEA will also establish sustainable practices to continue the program beyond the grant funding period and develop a plan to expand the initiative to additional campuses in the district.

Supplement, Not Supplant

For supplement, not supplant guidance, see the Supplement, Not Supplant Handbook on the Grants Administration Division's <u>Administering a Grant</u> page.

The supplement, not supplant provision applies to this grant program.

SMART Goal

See the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u>, SMART Goals, Additional SMART Goal Guidance from TEA, and Measurable Goals and Progress.

Measurable Progress

See the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u>, SMART Goals, Additional SMART Goal Guidance from TEA, and Measurable Goals and Progress.

Application Requirements and Assurances

This section describes the two types of requirements that applicants must address in the application (such as with a narrative description, an activity timeline, or a checklist) to be eligible to be considered for funding:

- Statutory requirements (requirements defined in the authorizing statute)
- TEA program requirements (requirements defined by TEA program staff)

Statutory Requirements

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, Statutory Requirements.

Per TEC §22.0834, any person offered employment by any entity that contracts with TEA or receives grant funds administered by TEA (i.e., a grantee or subgrantee) is subject to the fingerprinting requirement. TEA is prohibited from awarding grant funds to any entity, including nonprofit organizations, that fails to comply with this requirement. For details, refer to the <u>General and Fiscal Guidelines</u>, Fingerprinting Requirement.

TEA Program Requirements

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Program Requirements.

In addition to the statutory requirements, TEA has established the following program requirements. Applicants must address within the application how they will achieve the following:

- 1. Describe how the LEA will identify the campuses that will participate in the establishment of the Student Support Program described in the program description. Include the criteria or considerations that will influence the determination by the LEA.
- 2. Describe how the LEA will ensure that campus leaders and staff are committed to the success of the Student Support Program.
- 3. Describe how the LEA will engage parents and families to solicit support for the program.
- 4. Describe how the LEA will ensure that there is adequate staff to support the establishment and implementation of the Student Support Program.
- 5. Describe how each of the campuses will be supported by the grant program, if awarded, currently conduct behavioral threat assessments and how the campuses will incorporate current systems into the student support team structure.
- 6. Describe how the LEA currently identifies student support needs and how it identifies and establishes partnerships with external mental health and behavioral health providers to meet student needs.
- 7. Describe how the LEA currently partners with the regional ESC to support improvement in student mental health, behavioral and emotional health, physical health and wellbeing, and improving academic outcomes for students.
- 8. Describe how the LEA will use this grant program to supplement current work to improve services and supports for the mental, behavioral, emotional, and physical health and wellness of students.

Program-Specific Assurances

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Provisions and Assurances.

- Formally establish a Student Support Program at three district campuses (one elementary, one intermediate/middle school, one high school) to address school climate and establish a student support team structure aligned to the training and support provided by the Texas Center for Student Supports and the regional ESC. If the awarded applicant has fewer than three campuses or does not have three of the listed types of campuses, the applicant will establish the Student Support Program and the student support team structure at all campuses, up to three, served in the district.
- Allocate 6% of awarded funds for professional and contracted services for technical assistance provided by the regional ESC. Complete the transaction with the regional ESC in a timely manner. Time is of the essence in completing the transaction to ensure that the program is implemented efficiently and effectively to successfully achieve the goals of the program.
- Allocate 10% of awarded funds to the Texas Center for Student Supports for
 professional and contracted services with a partner approved by TEA. Complete the
 transaction with the Texas Center for Student Supports in a timely manner. Time is of
 the essence in completing the transaction to ensure that the program is implemented
 efficiently and effectively to successfully achieve the goals of the program.
- Use the family engagement playbook developed by the Texas Center for Student Supports to partner and build support with parents and families prior to a student support team assessment, and during the student support implementation process to facilitate a student support partnership with families.
- Establish a parent, student, and staff advisory committee to provide input on the establishment of the Student Support Program.
- Engage in Student Support Program planning activities from the beginning of the grant program through implementation at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year.
- Establish and implement at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year, the Student Support Program aligned to the content and training provided by the Texas Center for Student Supports.
- Incorporate a case management system into the student support team structure aligned to the training and support provided by the Texas Center for Student Supports.
- Align the student support team structure with behavioral threat assessment team operation and outcomes to ensure that students are well supported and that the effectiveness of interventions are monitored.
- Implement the data collection and reporting system developed by the Texas Center for Student Supports to gather and analyze data to monitor efficacy of the implementation of the Student Support Program, including student support team structure, quality of support leading to positive outcomes, and data related to increases in desired outcomes (e.g. increase in student support team referrals for nonacademic needs, increase in effective supports received by students, reduction in disciplinary incidents, reduction in bullying and harassment, increase in referrals for mental health services, reduction in removals from class, etc.).
- Provide timely response to requests from TEA for information and data regarding program development, implementation, and performance and evaluation measures.

Activities and Use of Funds

See the <u>Administering a Grant</u> page for general guidance on allowable activities and use of funds.

Allowable activities and use of funds for this grant may include but are not limited to the following:

Advisory Council

An advisory council may be funded under the grant program. Only the following types of advisory councils are allowable:

• Staff, student, parent advisory council established to provide input and feedback on the development and implementation of the Student Support Program.

General Allowable Activities and Use of Funds

- Payroll costs
- Costs associated with conference attendance for staff, advisory council members, and other stakeholders in conjunction with training and support provided by the Texas Center for Student Supports.
- LEAs must allocate 6% of awarded funds for contracted services for technical assistance provided by the regional ESC.
- LEA must allocate 10% of awarded funds to the Texas Center for Student Supports.
- General costs associated with fulfillment of program requirements.
- Stipends for non-employees
- Capital outlay, expenditures must be pre-approved by TEA

General Unallowable Activities and Use of Funds

In general, refer to the Budgeting Cost Guidance Handbook on the page for unallowable costs.

In addition, unallowable activities and use of funds for this grant may include but are not limited to the following:

- Debt service (lease-purchase)
- Field trips
- Cost of membership in any civic or community organization
- Hosting or sponsoring conferences
- Out-of-state travel
- Travel costs for officials such as executive director, superintendents, or board member

Project Evaluation and Modification

By submitting this application, the applicant agrees to comply with any evaluation requirements that may be established by TEA and agrees to submit the required evaluation reports in the format and time requested by TEA. TEA will collect and analyze relevant data from PEIMS if it is available.

Specific critical success factors and milestones will be developed in a manner determined appropriate by TEA.

Performance Measures

The applicant agrees to collect data and report on the following mandatory performance measures:

1. Execution of the required transaction between the LEA and the regional education service center that serves the LEA.

- 2. Execution of the required transaction between the LEA and the Texas Center for Student Supports.
- 3. Quarterly report of the number of students referred for and receiving support for non-academic needs disaggregated by source of referral, type of need, type of support, level of support, time of year, length of support provided as measured through the case management system.
- 4. Quarterly report on student attendance, behavior referrals, removal from class, and disciplinary outcomes for student referrals.
- 5. Quarterly report on behavioral threat referrals for harmful, threatening, or violent behavior, threat assessments conducted, and outcomes of threat assessments including hand-off to the student support team. Student support team data will be reported in performance measure 3.
- 6. Annual report on school climate survey outcomes and action steps taken to improve school climate.
- Annual report on parent and family engagement efforts including strategies and number
 of engaged families in alignment with the playbook developed by the Texas Center for
 Student Supports.
- 8. End of first year summary and reflection of progress towards the establishment of the Student Support Program and next steps to advance the support provided to students.
- 9. End of project report that includes a summary and reflection of the district Student Support Program, support provided to students and families, and the plan for sustaining the program and expanding it to other campuses within the district.

Limits on Contracted Evaluators

When a grantee chooses, or is required under a grant, to hire a contracted evaluator, TEA believes that the evaluator must have the capability to remain independent and objective in carrying out the evaluation. "Independent and objective" implies that there is no influence or control, real or perceived, exerted on the evaluator by any person who is involved in the provision of program services. Therefore, the only way in which a contracted evaluator can be truly independent and objective is not to be involved in any manner with the provision of program services or activities. Otherwise, the evaluator is, at least in part, evaluating its own services.

In addition, TEA is aware that some grant writers develop and design the grant program, write the entire grant application, and then wish to evaluate the grant program. TEA also believes that this scenario poses a conflict of interest for the evaluator, in that the evaluator is evaluating the grant program that he or she designed, developed, and wrote. Again, it is not possible for the evaluator to function independently and objectively if the evaluator performed in this capacity. It is certainly acceptable for the grant writer to receive some information from a potential evaluator to include in the evaluation section of the grant application with regard to an appropriate evaluation plan or design, but communication between the grant writer and evaluator should be limited to that specific topic.

Applicants should make every effort to ensure that contracted evaluators be independent and objective.

Federal Grant Requirements

Equitable Access and Participation

See the Equitable Access and Participation.

This requirement **does** apply to this federally funded grant program.

Private Nonprofit School Participation

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Private Nonprofit School Participation.

This requirement **does** apply to this federally funded grant program.

Maintenance of Effort

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Maintenance of Effort.

This requirement **does not** apply to this federally funded grant program.

Application Elements

This section describes the requirements and attachments that must be addressed in and included with the application.

Notice of Intent to Apply

For competitive grants, prospective applicants are requested to submit the Notice of Intent to Apply (NOI) by the date specified in the Grant Timeline. The NOI provides helpful information that allows TEA staff to plan for the management of the applications and review processes. Failure to notify TEA of the intent to apply will *not* disqualify the applicant from applying for grant funds.

The NOI is published along with the RFA on the <u>TEA Grant Opportunities</u> page.

Reviewer Information Form

For every application submitted for a competitive grant, the applicant is required to submit the names of three individuals to serve as reviewers in the competitive review process for the grant program. For LEAs submitting multiple campus grant applications, the LEA must submit a minimum of three reviewers per campus application or a total of ten reviewers, whichever is less.

Individuals who are hired to prepare grant applications may not serve as reviewers, and their names should not be submitted. Applicants must notify the people whose names they submit that they may be asked by TEA to serve as reviewers.

Once reviewers are selected, they will receive detailed information about the review process. The competitive review for the grant program will take place during the time period given in the Grant Timeline.

The Reviewer Information Form is published along with the RFA on the <u>TEA Grant</u> <u>Opportunities</u> page. All applicants are required to complete the form and to submit it online on or before the date given in the Grant Timeline.

Required Attachments

See the following section of the General and Fiscal Guidelines:

Required Program-Related Attachments

Required Program-Related Attachments

There will be no required program-related attachments.

Scoring and Review

This section provides information on the scoring and review of applications for competitive grants.

Standard Review Criteria

See the **General and Fiscal Guidelines**, Standard Review Criteria.

Specific Review Criteria

See the Specific Review Criteria.

There will be no specific review criteria for this grant program.

Priorities for Funding

See the General and Fiscal Guidelines, Priorities for Funding.

Priority points will be awared based on the following percentage of students in the district living in poverty.

Percent of district students living in poverty	Priority points
90.0%-100.0%	5
80.0%-89.9%	4
70.0%-79.9%	3
60.0%-69.9%	2
50.0%-59.9%	1

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