

# STRONGER CONNECTIONS GRANT

## Guidance Document

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### **Building Safe and Healthy School Communities in the US Virgin Islands**

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) Stronger Connections Grant Program is funded through 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.

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The purpose of the guidance document is to provide the Virgin Islands Department of Education school districts with steps and guidance to develop a narrative that includes a comprehensive plan to prioritize safe and healthy activities based on the needs unique to the school community (SEC. 4108 [20 U.S.C. 7118]).



# STRONGER CONNECTIONS GRANT

## SAFE AND HEALTHY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

On September 15, 2022, the Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) was awarded \$809,852.00 in federal K-12 funding from the U.S. Department of Education under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) Stronger Connections Grant program. The VIDE is awarding these funds to local educational agencies (LEAs). Additionally, equitable services will be provided with SCG funds to students and teachers in non-public schools as required under [section 8501](#) of the ESEA. LEAs must provide evidence of meaningful consultation with private school partners to determine what equitable services will look like. Funds may be used only for activities authorized under [section 4108](#) of the ESEA. Funds allocated under the program must be administered and tracked separately from a SEA's or LEA's regular Title IV, Part A allocation. **Federal law requires monitoring of Federal Title IV-A programs to ensure compliance with programmatic and fiscal regulations.**

## GRANT PURPOSE

The Stronger Connections Grant Program aims to provide funding for LEAs to develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive approach that prioritizes physical and emotional safety for their unique school community (SEC. 4108 [20 U.S.C. 7118]). Funded activities and practices should prioritize safety, create a sense of belonging, implement trauma-responsive approaches and teach positive behaviors in order to provide safe and supportive learning environments that improve academic achievement and the well-being of students.

The Stronger Connections grant provides:

- Professional development and funding for training.
- Technical assistance to support development, implementation, and sustainable practices.
- Development of family and community engagement partnerships.
- External coaching to support safe and healthy development and implementation.
- Trauma-Informed practices, emergency plan development, and site assessments.
- Development of personnel for safe and healthy school Initiatives.

SEA, LEA, and school leaders should provide ongoing and meaningful opportunities for educators and staff to be involved in the selection of evidence-based strategies and activities implemented to increase student, educator, and staff safety and well-being. Communication and collaboration between LEA and school leadership and educators and other school staff is crucial to supporting the effective use of funds, and Section 4108 specifically authorizes activities or programs that promote the involvement of parents and families.

The resources can also be used to support educators' and staff's health and well-being. For example, many educators and staff face challenges similar to those faced by their students and may also struggle as they watch students they serve and care deeply about going through

challenging experiences. It is important to hear directly from educators about what their students need to feel safe, seen, and cared for and what they themselves need to create safe and inclusive environments for teaching and learning. Planning for the use of funds should allow for educators and staff to contribute substantively to the process, feel that their voices are valued, and allow LEA and school leaders to identify ways to delegate and share responsibilities for implementation. For example, funds may be used to support educator and school staff surveys, convenings, and other opportunities to hear directly from educators and other school staff.

## IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

### Getting Started

- Collaborate with stakeholders to identify the school's needs surrounding a safer and healthier learning environment.
- Develop a plan for activities, practices, and programs to include in the implementation plan.

### Implementation Plan Writing and Management Support

For support or additional information, contact:

- Tammy Sasso, STTJ Director of Intervention Services, [tammy.sasso@vide.vi](mailto:tammy.sasso@vide.vi)
- Rhona Pinney-Simon, STTJ Director of Student Services, [rhona.pinney@vide.vi](mailto:rhona.pinney@vide.vi)
- DeShawn Williams, STTJ Program Manager, [deshawn.williams@vide.vi](mailto:deshawn.williams@vide.vi)
- Rena Francis, STX Coordinator, Pupil Personnel Services, [rena.francis@vide.vi](mailto:rena.francis@vide.vi)
- Aisha Williams, STX Director of Safe & Healthy Students, [aisha.williams@vide.vi](mailto:aisha.williams@vide.vi)
- Gisele Schjang, STX SEW Program Manager, [gisele.schjang@vide.vi](mailto:gisele.schjang@vide.vi)

### Timeline

Stronger Connections Implementation Plan

- **Submit the plan and budget by 5:00 p.m. on January 25, 2023, to [maria.melendez@vide.vi](mailto:maria.melendez@vide.vi).**
- Plan should include school profile, project narrative features to include a project description and project budget.
- Anticipatory notification of the approved plan will be on **February 17, 2023.**

### Allocation Amounts

LEAs allocations are **\$299,084.35 STX Public, \$65,082.41 STX Non-Public, \$302,139.23 STTJ Public, and \$103,043.40 STTJ Non-Public.** Allocation amounts to schools range from **\$489.77 to \$58,747.66.** Stronger Connections Grant Program funds are available for obligation by SEAs and LEAs through September 30, 2025. As with any Federal Funds, they are intended to be expended during the grant period.

## Implementation Plan Narrative Features

Implementation plans should include the following narrative features:

### **PART 1: DEMONSTRATION OF NEED** *(No more than 15-20 sentences.)*

The narrative should include local school and community data. Be sure to show data in one or more of the following areas:

- Community and school violence
- Substance abuse and Bullying/harassment
- Chronic absenteeism
- Referrals to the juvenile justice system
- Referrals for Behavioral Health Services
- High reports of "threatening behavior"
- Exclusionary discipline
- Disproportionate disparities in discipline policies
- Student-to-mental health professional ratio
- Students recently experienced a natural disaster or traumatic event
- Students living in poverty

Schools can also attain data from **School Climate Surveys**.

### **PART 2: IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES**

LEA must demonstrate development and implementation practices and activities to address needs through these areas: 1) evidence-based practices, 2) connecting students, families, and communities, and 3) developing comprehensive policies and practices. For example:

- **Implement comprehensive, evidence-based practices to meet students' behavioral, physical and mental well-being needs through positive school climates.**

Safety in a predictable environment is foundational for students who experience trauma, adversity, and toxic stress. The ESEA emphasizes the use of evidence-based approaches, including activities to support safe and healthy students in section 4108, which identifies appropriate evidence-based strategies and practices to promote a positive school climate along with student and educator wellbeing.

Schools using a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) prevention and intervention-based framework create a school climate where all students and staff receive the level of support needed to thrive and minimize the risk of harm.

When selecting evidence-based programs and activities, schools should outline how they will provide support to all students, or describe which of the five parts of school preparedness the activities or programs will focus on: 1) **Prevention**: avoid, prevent or stop crises; 2) **Protection**: safeguard against crises; 3) **Mitigation**: lessen impact and reduce damage; 4) **Response**: reduce traumatic stress, stabilize and assist; or 5) **Recovery**: return to pre-crisis function and restore normal operations.

- **Engaging students, families, educators, staff and community organizations in the selection and implementation of prevention and interventions that create safe and supportive learning environments.**

LEA should implement strategies for engagement that allow for all voices to be heard and provide transparency on how input is incorporated into school-wide decisions to build and sustain trust. LEAs must engage with members of the school community (ESEA section 4106(c)(1 & 2)). Schools are encouraged to utilize existing teams or build a school-wide team during the process or writing the implementation plan. Team examples include the Safe and Healthy Committee, District or School MTSS Teams, Advisory or Leadership Committees, Mental Health Teams, PLC or Data Teams, and Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams.

SEA technical assistance will include external coaching and technical assistance to support the sustainable practices of an integrated teaming structure throughout the duration of the grant.

Activities should outline how the school will build relationships and engage families, students, and the community.

- **Designing and implementing policies and practices responsive to under-resourced students, to protect student rights and demonstrate respect for student dignity and potential.**

Positive school climates actively ensure policies, practices, interactions, and resources provide access and representation that create meaningful outcomes and have positive outcomes from high-quality learning experiences, regardless of individual characteristics and group memberships.

### **PART 3: BUDGET**

LEA will include the provided Stronger Connections budget and narrative that supports the grant activities. All implementation activities and program funding must be tied directly to improving safety and health needs. Include a cost-effective budget and justification to determine allowability for line items that reflect the goal and objectives of the project.

**Special Note:** Some schools may not have enough funding for activities across three years. Hence, they will be able to expend their funds during the first year of the grant.

### **PART 4: DATA COLLECTION/EVALUATION PLAN (District Only)**

LEA will provide a clear description on how the goal and desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated. The evaluation plan should clearly identify what data will be collected and the

frequency of monitoring for implementation effectiveness. The outcome of the evidence-based activities, programs, and practices should have direct impact on students.

## Types of Evaluations

<p><b>Formative</b></p>	<p>Ensures that a program or program activity is feasible and appropriate before it is fully implemented. It allows for modifications to be made to the plan before full implementation begins and maximizes the likelihood that the program will succeed. Teams can use the problem-solving model worksheet to accurately identify problems using data and develop solutions.</p>	<p><b>Guiding questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do staff, students, and parents rate the quality and relevance of program activities?</li> <li>• How can the activities of the program be refined and strengthened during project implementation so they better meet the needs?</li> <li>• Which elements of the program do staff, students, and parents find most beneficial, and which least beneficial?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Process</b></p>	<p>Documents the fidelity of implementation of a program. This type of evaluation provides an early warning for any problems that may occur and allows programs to monitor how well their program plans and activities are working.</p>	<p><b>Guiding questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the program’s services reach their intended audiences?</li> <li>• To what extent were programs delivered as originally designed?</li> <li>• What kinds of challenges did the program encounter?</li> <li>• What, if any, steps were taken to address challenges, or what adaptations were made to the program?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Outcome</b></p>	<p>Measures the effects of the program(s) following its implementation and can reveal whether the program(s) produced the anticipated short- and long-term outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Guiding questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What effect(s) did the program have?</li> <li>• Did the activities, actions, and practices of the program provide high-quality services and resources to students, staff, and parents?</li> <li>• Did the activities, actions, and practices of the program raise awareness and provide new and useful knowledge to the school community?</li> </ul>

Adapted from *Stronger Connections Grant Guidance Document*. Oklahoma State Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2023

## FAQs

**SEC. 4108. [20 U.S.C. 7118] ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SAFE AND HEALTHY STUDENTS** Review for a list of allowable programs and activities.

### **What can be purchased with this grant?**

Activities, programs and items directly related to implementation activities that address the school community's physical and psychological safety and health needs. Purchased items cannot be deemed equipment. Some examples might include, but are not limited to: life skills programs, go/stay kits, violence prevention programs, disaster or trauma training, social media safety training, Stop the Bleed kits, substance use or vaping programs or detectors, glare-resistant window film, speed bumps or safety signage for loading zones, community programs that provide mentoring, restorative interventions for delinquent or criminal behaviors, or suicide prevention (allowable under 4108C). Remember, you must stay under the \$5,000 threshold for supplies. NO EQUIPMENT.

### **Can we hire staff?**

Yes. Staff hired must directly address the safety and health needs of students and the school community, and must be licensed or certified. Examples include, but are not limited to: School Resource Officer, School Psychologists, Counselor, Social Worker, LMHP or LPC, Nurse, Recreational therapist, Prevention Specialists, Emergency Medical Responder, and Behavioral Health Aids.

### **What about building a safe room?**

Building a facility is not allowable under 4108C.

### **Are mental health first aid and prevention/intervention training for members of the school community allowable?**

Yes, program costs that educate and provide mental health awareness and increase practice skills among students, staff, families, and community members in behavioral and mental health are allowable.

### **Can a school send staff to national conferences?**

Yes. As long as the conference content aligns with safe and healthy activities and is aligned with addressing stated needs. You will need to outline how participants will relate the training back to staff post-conference.

Adapted from *Stronger Connections Grant Guidance Document*. Oklahoma State Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2023

## ALLOWABLE PROJECTS/ACTIVITIES

### SEC. 4108. [20 U.S.C. 7118] ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SAFE AND HEALTHY STUDENTS.

Subject to section 4106(f), each local educational agency, or consortium of such agencies, that receives an allocation under section 4105(a) shall use a portion of such funds to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs and activities that —

- (1) are coordinated with other schools and community-based services and programs;
- (2) foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments that support student academic achievement;
- (3) promote the involvement of parents in the activity or program;
- (4) may be conducted in partnership with an institution of higher education, business, nonprofit organization, community-based organization, or other public or private entity with a demonstrated record of success in implementing activities described in this section; and
- (5) may include, among other programs and activities —
  - (A) drug and violence prevention activities and programs that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available) including—
    - (i) programs to educate students against the use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, smokeless tobacco products, and electronic cigarettes; and
    - (ii) professional development and training for school and specialized instructional support personnel and interested community members in prevention, education, early identification, intervention mentoring, recovery support services, and where appropriate, rehabilitation referral, as related to drug and violence prevention;
  - (B) in accordance with sections 4001 and 4111 —
    - (i) school-based mental health services, including early identification of mental health symptoms, drug use, and violence, and appropriate referrals to direct individual or group counseling services, which may be provided by school-based mental health services providers; and
    - (ii) school-based mental health services partnership programs that—

(I) are conducted in partnership with a public or private mental health entity or health care entity; and

(II) provide comprehensive school-based mental health services and supports and staff development for school and community personnel working in the school that are —

(aa) based on trauma-informed practices that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available);

(bb) coordinated (where appropriate) with early intervening services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.); and

(cc) provided by qualified mental and behavioral health professionals who are certified or licensed by the State involved and practicing within their area of expertise;

(C) programs or activities that—

(i) integrate health and safety practices into school or athletic programs;

(ii) support a healthy, active lifestyle, including nutritional education and regular, structured physical education activities and programs, that may address chronic disease management with instruction led by school nurses, nurse practitioners, or other appropriate specialists or professionals to help maintain the well-being of students;

(iii) help prevent bullying and harassment;

(iv) improve instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills, such as effective communication, and improve safety through the recognition and prevention of coercion, violence, or abuse, including teen and dating violence, stalking, domestic abuse, and sexual violence and harassment;

(v) provide mentoring and school counseling to all students, including children who are at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school, involvement in criminal or delinquent activities, or drug use and abuse;

(vi) establish or improve school dropout and reentry programs; or

(vii) establish learning environments and enhance students' effective learning skills that are essential for school readiness and academic success, such as by providing integrated systems of student and family supports;

(D) high-quality training for school personnel, including specialized instructional support personnel, related to—

(i) suicide prevention;

(ii) effective and trauma-informed practices in classroom management;

(iii) crisis management and conflict resolution techniques;

(iv) human trafficking (defined, for purposes of this subparagraph, as an act or practice described in paragraph (9) or (10) of section 103 of the Trafficking

Victims Protection Act of 2000 (22 U.S.C. 7102));

(v) school-based violence prevention strategies;

(vi) drug abuse prevention, including educating children facing substance abuse at home; and

(vii) bullying and harassment prevention;

(E) in accordance with sections 4001 and 4111, child sexual abuse awareness and prevention programs or activities, such as programs or activities designed to provide—

(i) age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate instruction for students in child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, including how to recognize child sexual abuse and how to safely report child sexual abuse; and

(ii) information to parents and guardians of students about child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, including how to recognize child sexual abuse and how to discuss child sexual abuse with a child;

(F) designing and implementing a locally-tailored plan to reduce exclusionary discipline practices in elementary and secondary schools that—

(i) is consistent with best practices;

(ii) includes strategies that are evidence-based (to the extent the State, in consultation with local educational agencies in the State, determines that such evidence is reasonably available); and

(iii) is aligned with the long-term goal of prison reduction through opportunities, mentoring, intervention, support, and other education services, referred to as a “youth PROMISE plan”; or

(G) implementation of school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, including through coordination with similar activities carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.), in order to improve academic outcomes and school conditions for student learning;

(H) designating a site resource coordinator at a school or local educational agency to provide a variety of services, such as—

(i) establishing partnerships within the community to provide resources and support for schools;

(ii) ensuring that all service and community partners are aligned with the academic expectations of a community school in order to improve student success; and

(iii) strengthening relationships between schools and communities; or

(I) pay for success initiatives aligned with the purposes of this section.