

California Department of Education

Executive Office

SBE-003 (REV. 11/2017)

sssb-wcd-jul23-item01

# California State Board of EducationJuly 2023 AgendaItem #12

## Subject

California's Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Grant Program Proposal: Approval of the Criteria to Define High-needs

## Type of Action

Action, Information

## Summary of the Issue(s)

President Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) on June 25, 2022, in response to the gun violence epidemic that has affected many schools and communities across the United States.

The BSCA-SCG Program is designed to encourage locally developed school safety and climate plans informed by authentic community support to accelerate meaningful partnerships between school staff and students, families, and community members. The program focuses on evidence-based strategies for creating safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that address local conditions, elevate communal assets, and strengthen communal infrastructure in neighborhoods. The LEA plans should include culturally and linguistically responsive practices, where students are surrounded by adults they can trust and who are committed to building strong relationships. Such environments help build connections that make students less likely to bring weapons to school and more likely to report the presence of weapons in school. Safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments benefit not only individual students, but also their fellow students, educators, and the community at large.

Under the U.S. Department of Education (ED) provided guidance, the SEA is encouraged to provide the public with an opportunity to comment and provide input related to the grant implementation and must define "high-need LEA" for purposes of eligibility for the Stronger Connections program. The definition of “high-need LEA” can include LEAs with high rates of poverty, characteristics such as chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, referrals to the juvenile justice system, and substance use.

## Recommendation

The California Department of Education (CDE) recommends that the SBE approve the criteria for the definition of “high-need LEA” as required in the California’s Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) Stronger Connections Grant (SCG) program, pending the SBE Executive Director approval of final revisions requested by the SBE, correction of any typographical errors, and necessary, non-substantive clarifying edits.

## Brief History of Key Issues

President Biden signed the BSCA in June 2022 to address the epidemic of gun violence in schools and communities. Congress authorized $1 billion in formula funding under Title IV, Part A of the ESEA to SEAs to provide safer and healthier learning environments for students. The CDE will award $113 million to LEAs demonstrating high-need based on a competitive process. LEAs may apply individually or in a consortium of LEAs. The BSCA-SCG program is designed to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments, and accelerate partnerships between school staff, students, families, and community members. LEA plans should include evidence-based strategies such as safety assessments, emergency operation plans, positive school culture and climate, and integrated student supports to support student well-being.

The BSCA-SCG grant aims to increase school safety, address mental health needs of students, and promote the emotional and physical wellbeing of all students. Participating LEAs/consortia will ensure that their program goals, proposed activities, and targeted outcomes align with these goals. Funded activities may include providing mental health services and counseling, promoting community involvement, establishing dropout prevention programs, implementing systems to prevent bullying and harassment, and purchasing security equipment. Programs that link BSCA-SCG focused goals and activities could involve addressing chronic absenteeism in elementary school, providing early intervention to middle school students with disruptive behavior or mental health challenges, supporting high school students to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, and providing training for staff to improve school climate and student engagement. Programs and strategies supported by the grant must address the needs and challenges experienced by students of any age who are experiencing or have experienced trauma or mental health challenges.

To be eligible, an LEA/consortia will need to meet the definition of “high-need LEA” adopted by the State Board of Education.

The CDE will award grants to LEAs/consortia to support evidence-based, non-punitive programs and practices to keep the state's most vulnerable students in school. The grantees must use the grant funds for planning, implementation, and evaluation of such activities. The LEAs/consortia must evaluate the activities undertaken, submit annual reports (ARs), annual expenditure reports (AERs), and an End of Project (EOP) report to the CDE.

### Educational Partner Engagement

In accordance with the released guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, the SEA is encouraged to provide the public with notice and a reasonable opportunity to comment and provide input on the design of its competitive subgrant process, including on the definition of “high-need LEA,” to maximize the impact of these funds in providing a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for schools and students most in need of services.

To meet this requirement, the CDE sent out a public survey on June 6, 2023. The survey was open through June 12, 2023. The full survey is provided in attachment 2.

The survey, composed of two main questions, was sent to educational partner groups including, but not limited to, State and Federal program directors, school safety partners from all counties, school districts, school site administrators, and service providers. The CDE received 343 survey responses. The first question asked for input on the definition of “high-need LEA”. Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that a “chronic absenteeism rate higher than the state average” as high importance as a characteristic to define “high-need LEA”. The survey also allowed respondents to provide open-ended feedback and 41% of respondents provided comments covering a wide range of topics. Amongst the most common were references to the specific challenges faced by rural schools, the presence of community crime and violence, and homelessness. The second question asked respondents to rank the importance of strategies and approaches to improve safety and student outcomes, and “adding or increasing staff within an LEA whose primary purpose is to address the mental health needs of students” was rated as high importance by 82% of the respondents.

In addition to the input provided by the survey, public comments received as part of this board item will inform the final BSCG-SCG Request for Applications.

### Proposed Definition of High-Need LEA

The California Department of Education proposes using the following state-wide data elements to define “high-need LEA” and establish eligibility for the BSCG-SCG grant.

Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) with a concentration of 80% or above of students from low-income families, English learners, and students in foster care, plus one or more of the following characteristics:

* A chronic absenteeism rate higher than the state average
* An exclusionary discipline (in and out of school suspension) rate higher than the state average
* A school stability rate lower than the state average
* A dropout rate higher than the state average

## Summary of Previous State Board of Education Discussion and Action

During the July 2021 State Board Meeting, the SBE approved California’s submission of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) State Plan.

## Fiscal Analysis

California's allocation for the BSCA-SCG Program is $119 million, and the CDE will award $113 million on a competitive basis to high-need LEAs.

## Attachment(s)

* Attachment 1: Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Grant Program Request for Applications (42 pages)
* Attachment 2: Bipartisan Safer Communities Act-Stronger Connections Grant Survey (2 pages)