

Stronger Connections Grant

Grant Guidance, Template, and Rubric

Stronger Connections Grant is funded through Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) for State Educational Agencies (SEAs) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments.



Putting Montana Students First **A⁺**

STRONGER CONNECTIONS GRANT Guidance

Safe and Healthy School Communities

On Sept. 15, 2022, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) was awarded \$4,560,000 in federal K-12 funding from the U.S. Department of Education under the BSCA Stronger Connections grant program. Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) for state educational agencies (SEAs) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments. The OPI is awarding these funds through competitive grants to high-need local educational agencies (LEAs) that ensure transparency and successful implementation of activities allowable under section [4108 of the ESEA](#) to support the ongoing needs of students, educators, families, and communities. For questions or more information, contact paige.sedhal@mt.gov.

Equitable services will be provided to private school students in accordance with the guidelines set forth in the Title IV, Part A formula grant process. LEAs must provide evidence in their SCG application of meaningful consultation with private school partners to determine what equitable services will look like.

GRANT PURPOSE

The Stronger Connections grant aims to provide funding for Montana 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 to provide safe and supportive learning environments that improve academic achievement and the well-being of students.

BENEFITS of PARTICIPATING

The Montana Stronger Connections Grant will provide:

- 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.

Safe and Healthy Allowable Uses

The following list is for safe and healthy allowable uses:

- Drug and violence prevention training
- Human trafficking awareness and training
- Preventing bullying and harassment activities and programs
- School-based mental health services
- Healthy/active lifestyle program

- Relationship-building activities and programs including but not limited to mentoring programs.
- Schoolwide positive behavioral interventions support (PBIS) activities and programs
- Violence prevention, crisis management, and conflict resolution training
- Building school and community relationships
- Child sexual abuse awareness and prevention
- Coordinate with other schools and community-based services and programs.
- Parental involvement activities
- Re-entry programs
- School dropout prevention programs
- Suicide prevention training
- Trauma-informed classroom management training and programs
- Reducing use of exclusionary discipline practices and promoting supportive school discipline
- Other safe and supportive programs or services
- Restorative Practices
- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Developing Early Warning System
- School-based mental health partnerships programs
- Nutritional education and physical education activities
- Integrating health and safety practices into school or athletic programs
- Training school personnel in effective practices related to the above

GRANT PERIOD

The grant will be for the following consecutive school years (SY); SY 23/24 and SY 24/25. Funds will be available July 1, 2023 and will need to be expended by June 30, 2025. As with any Federal Funds, they are intended to be expended during the grant period. We do not anticipate any further extension period for these funds.

Recipients will need to submit annual progress reports to the MT OPI in Egrants.

School Year 23/24:

- completion of a School Climate Survey submitted to MT OPI
- end of year program report (assigned in Egrants)
- completed action plan for the 24/25 SY submitted to MT OPI

School Year 24/25:

- complete continuing application in Egrants
- completion of a School Climate Survey
- end of year program report (uploaded into Egrants)
- an explanation of sustainable practices - how partnerships functioned including strength and challenges, if applicable (submitted to MT OPI)

APPLICATION OVERVIEW

Getting Started

- Review the hyperlinked resources in the guidance document for tools to support the writing process.
- Collaborate with stakeholders to identify the school's needs surrounding a safer and healthier learning environment.
- The school team develops a plan for activities, practices, and programs to include in the application.

Grant Management

For support or additional information contact:

- **Paige Sedahl**, paige.Sedahl@mt.gov
- **Michelle Cusey**, michelle.cusey@mt.gov
- **Jamey Petersen**, jamey.Petersen@mt.gov

Application Timeline and Selection Process

- Application opens March 27, 2023
- Submit application **by 4 p.m. on May 1, 2023**
- Anticipatory notification of award will be July 1, 2023

Award Amounts

LEAs can receive **up to \$350,000** total (\$175,000 per year) based on identified needs and implementation activities justified and outlined in the budget narrative. Grant timeline is from 2023-2025. Funding must be obligated/encumbered no later than Sept. 30, 2025.

Consortiums

The consortium model will not be allowed for this grant. All school districts must submit their own application.

OTHER RESOURCES

- [Stronger Connections Grant Program Non-Regulatory Guidance](#)
- [Stronger Connections Grant Program Dear Colleague Letter](#)
- [MT OPI Title IV Part A, \(SCG\) Information](#)

School Climate Survey

The purpose of a school climate survey is to provide educators with necessary data to identify school needs, set goals, and track progress toward improvement. Schools will be expected to conduct a school climate survey using a reliable survey from the approved [school climate survey list](#) the OPI has put together. If a school already uses a school climate survey, they may continue to use that tool. The school climate survey must be administered at the beginning and end of 23/24 SY. Based on the findings of the survey, schools must complete an action plan using a district team to identify and track progress towards improvement of their school climate. In the 24/25 SY schools will administer the same survey to track progress on the goals they had set in the previous year.

Program Report

District will complete an End of Year Program Report (uploaded into Egrants) at the end of the 23/24 and 24/25 SY including a detailed description of how the project goals were met, as well as any challenges that were encountered. The final evaluation must include:

- Impactful deliverables – data to support planning, implementation, and outcomes by the school – that align directly to the grant's identified need(s).

- An explanation of sustainable practices – how partnerships functions including strengths and challenges, if applicable.
- Updated goals and objectives for the SY.

Fiscal Requirements

Fiscal agents are responsible for administering the Federal funds awarded and ensuring the allowability of approved expenditures. Once awarded, the applicant must identify the fiscal contact for the grant. Even if the fiscal contact serves another role in the grant (i.e. Program Director), they must be identified in the grant process.

Budget Creation

The SCG Budget will be submitted within the E-grants application system. When completing the budget detail and breakdown must include all components (Description, Cost Each, Quantity, etc.) for the budget to be approved. Enter quantities of items as necessary to explain the cost items. Further description may be added to provide justification for items deemed necessary.

Allowable and Unallowable Expenditures

Project funds must be used for activities that directly support the accomplishment of the project purpose, priorities, and expected outcomes. All expenditures must be consistent with applicable state and federal laws, regulations, and guidance. Applicants must bear in mind that SCG funds can be used only to supplement and not supplant any Federal or non-Federal funds used to support current programs.

Application Scoring

Eligibility Review

All applications will receive an initial eligibility review by OPI staff to ensure that the application:

- Is eligible for the grant,
- Was received on time and in the proper format,
- Contains all required sections, file uploads, signatures, and
- Is responsive to the purpose and requirements of this Request for Proposals.

If an application does not meet these basic requirements, it will be deemed non-responsive at this stage of the review process and will not be scored or funded.

In-Depth Review

Following the eligibility review, each proposal will be assigned to a team of readers, each of whom will have attested that they do not have a conflict of interest with the proposal. Each reader will score each proposal independently on its own merits, according to the criteria provided within the Reviewer Scoring Rubric.

The review panel will then convene to consider the proposals. Each proposal will be evaluated and scored section by section by the assigned team of reviewers. The team will note the strengths and weaknesses for each section. Team scores for each section will then be totaled to create an overall team score for the application. The team will also provide a summative assessment of whether the proposal is recommended for funding, recommended for partial funding, recommended for funding with conditions, or not recommended for funding.

Ranking, Verification, and Adjustments to Budget/Scope of Work

In general, proposals will be recommended for funding in rank order, depending on the amount of funding available. If there is a tie score, the process for selecting an awardee will be based on the following protocol:

- The application with the highest poverty level of the school(s) served shall be awarded.
- If the applications have the same poverty level, the target school(s) with the lower state accountability classification shall be awarded.
- If the applications have the same accountability classification, the application from the city or town that has fewer awards relative to its public-school enrollment shall be awarded.

In cases where proposals are recommended for funding at a reduced amount and/or for funding with conditions, applicants may be asked to submit additional documentation which could include – but is not limited to – additional or revised program narrative, additional assurances, a revised budget and budget narrative, and/or a revised scope of work. If OPI and the applicant are unable to negotiate an agreed upon scope of work and budget or if OPI is unable to verify assertions essential to the successful implementation of the proposal, the proposal will not be funded. At this point, the next highest-ranking proposal will be moved into consideration and negotiations may be conducted in the same manner.

Final Selection

The review panel will provide recommendations for awards to the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Final award notification is subject to the Superintendent’s approval. Allocation of funds is contingent upon successful negotiation of a final budget and/or scope of work, as well as the continued availability of funds. Applicants selected for a subgrant agree to be bound by the terms and conditions of the Grant Award Notification and all fiscal procedures, as defined by RIDE and by the [Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards](#) (Uniform Guidance).

Due Process Appeals

Applicants have the right to appeal the funding decision, as outlined in section [76.401](#) of the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR). If a grantee, individual, or organization feels the OPI or another organization has violated a specific law or regulation, they must follow this [complaint process](#).