

# Stronger Connections Grant

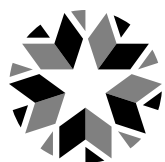
## Guidance Document

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### Building Safe and Healthy Oklahoma School Communities

*Stronger Connections Grant 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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**OKLAHOMA**  
Education

# STRONGER CONNECTIONS GRANT

## SAFE AND HEALTHY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

On Sept. 15, 2022, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) was awarded \$11,776,526 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 OSDE 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.

## GRANT PURPOSE

The Stronger Connections grant aims to provide funding for Oklahoma 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.

## BENEFITS of PARTICIPATING

The Oklahoma Safe and Healthy 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.

## APPLICATION OVERVIEW

### Getting Started

- Review the guidance document for tools and resources to support the writing process.
- 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 application.

### Grant Management

For support or additional information, contact:

- Cindy Swearingen, Office of School Safety and Security, [Cindy.swearingen@sde.ok.gov](mailto:Cindy.swearingen@sde.ok.gov)
- Amanda Sellers, Office of Student Support, [amanda.sellers@sde.ok.gov](mailto:amanda.sellers@sde.ok.gov)

### Application Timeline and Selection Process

- [Stronger Connections Application](#) *Google Doc forced copy*
- [Stronger Connections Application](#) *.pdf -download for fillable*
- **Submit application and budget by 6 p.m. on Dec. 22, 2022 to [sdebsca@sde.ok.gov](mailto:sdebsca@sde.ok.gov)**
- Application should include school profile, narrative features (**5 pages max**), budget and signed letter of commitment.
- Anticipatory notification of award will be **Jan. 4, 2023**.

### Award Amounts

LEA's can receive **up to \$350,000 total** based on identified needs and implementation activities justified and outlined in the budget narrative. Grant timeline is from 2023-2026. Funding must be obligated/encumbered no later than Sept. 30, 2026.

### Grant Narrative Features

Grant applications should include these narrative features and will be scored as such in each area. Districts can score up to **120 maximum** points. Data and research resources must be cited. [Strong Connections Rubric](#)

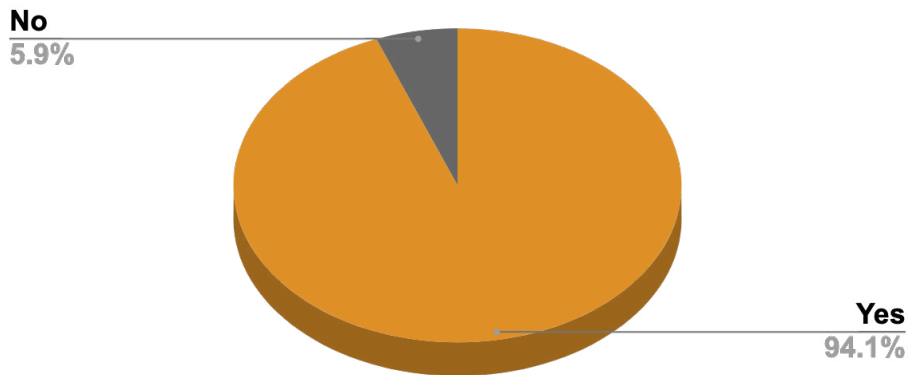
Grant Narrative Feature	Total Possible Points
Demonstration of Need(s)	25 pts.
Implementation Activities	30 pts.
Budget	20 pts.
Evaluation Plan and Sustainability	25 pts.
Additional Points	20 pts.
<b>Total Points Available</b>	<b>120 pts.</b>

## STAKEHOLDER INPUT

School community refers to school personnel, parents, students, administrators, board members and community partners. These members, also referred to as stakeholders, make up the school climate. Statewide stakeholder input was considered when identifying activities that will help LEAs identify areas that will enhance a safe and healthy school system.

### Parents are Saying

Do you believe that school climate has an impact on school safety?



School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, and is based on patterns of students, parents and school personnel school life experiences. School climate is reflective of the norms, goals, values, relationships, teaching and learning practices that actively build a safe and supportive learning environment (National School Climate Center, 2021).

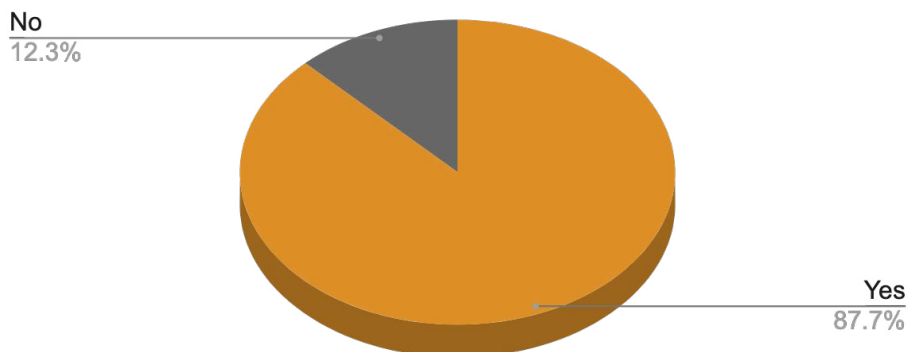
**83.10%** of parents think schools should increase after-school programs and activities, and the access to these programs, to create a more inclusive and safer school climate.

### Top 2 Items Parents Think Are Important

“School Safety action plans and procedures, to include access control and hardening.”

“Mental Health supports, to include access supports and screening for students, staff and families.”

Do you think more mental health supports such as school psychologists and licensed professional counselors, would be an effective way to prevent school security issues?

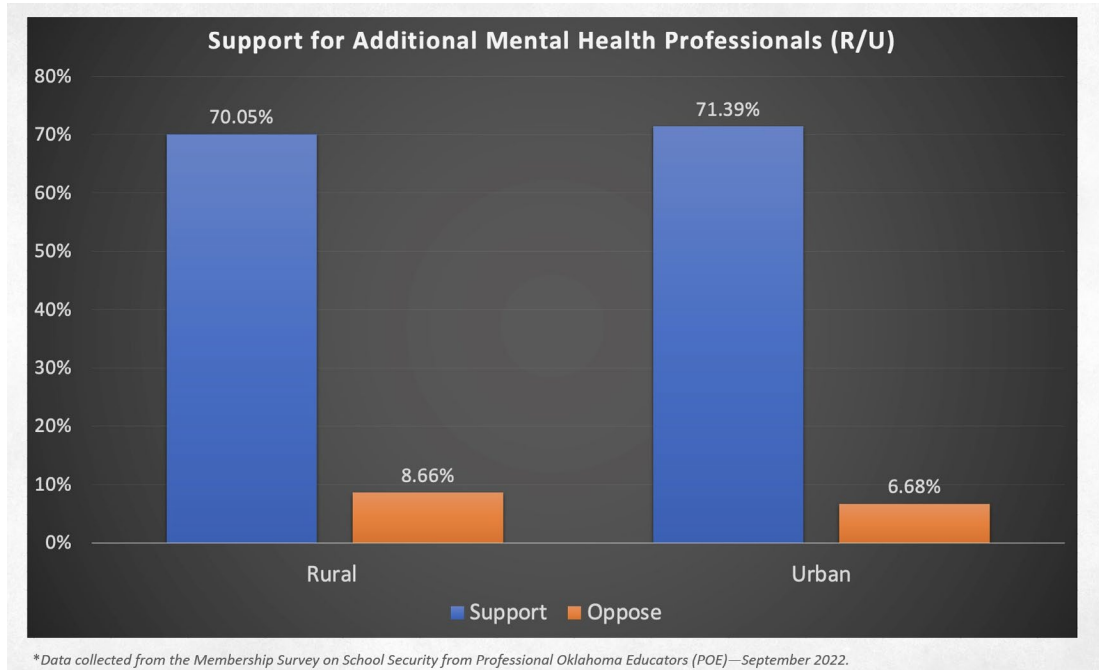


**85.60%** of parents would like your school to have conversations around student engagement.

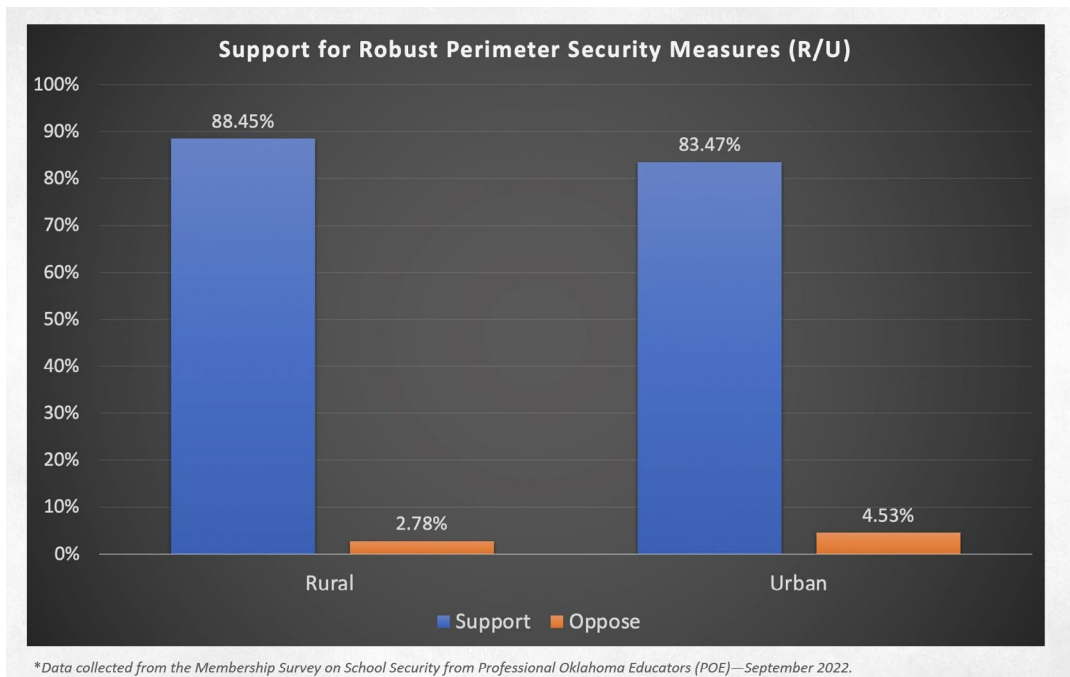
*Data retrieved from 2022 Oklahoma PTA Survey Report as presented to Senate Interim Study Oct 6, 2022.*

## What School Personnel Are Saying

Personnel includes teachers, administrators and SROs.



School employees support employing more mental health professionals, like school psychologists and licensed counselors, as an approach to improving school security at our schools.



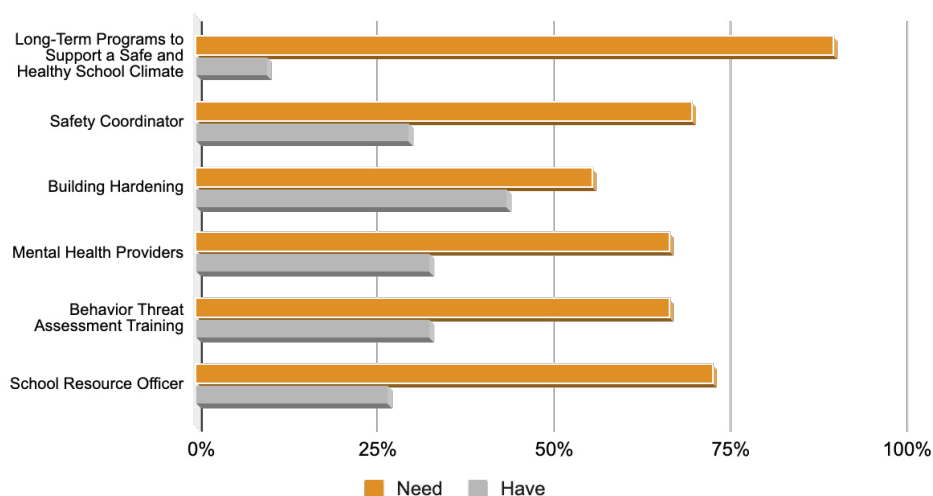
Yes, we support robust perimeter security measures, like external door intercoms, cameras, metal detectors, security checkpoints, etc., for our schools.

*Data collected from Membership Survey on School Security from Professional Oklahoma Educators (September 2022).*

SROs said the greatest need for school safety and security is more manpower, school staff understanding the role of SRO and staff taking ownership of safety habits.

“Our community has sent a very clear message that they want our SROs to stay in place, now it is our job to find ways to support these positions and the services they provide.”

## School Safety and Health Needs



“Yes, we need more long-term programs to support our student’s physical and psychological safety.”

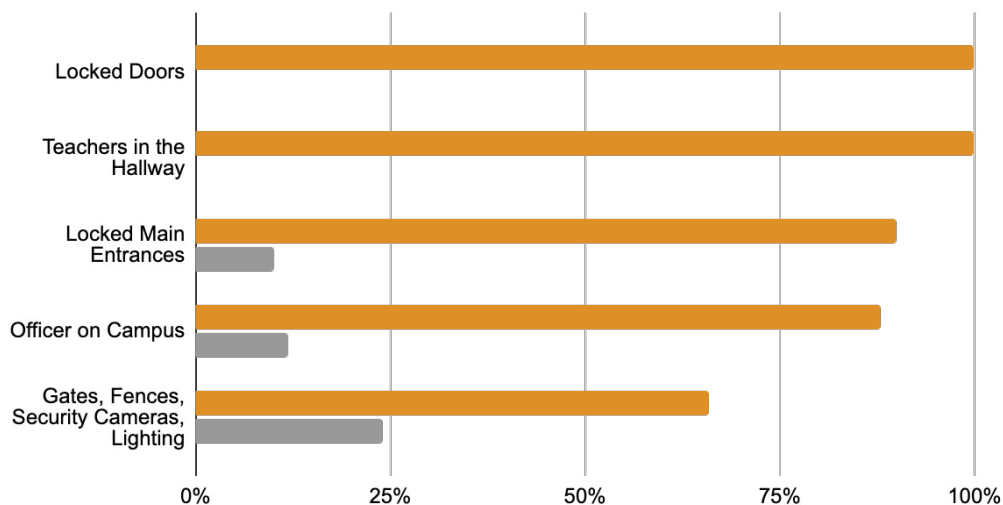
“We need the support of more safety and security staff and mental health professionals to serve the needs of our students.”

*Data collected from the superintendent survey on Safe and Healthy Schools, OSDE (November 2022).*

## What Secondary Students Are Saying

When secondary students were asked what they think would help their school be more physically and emotionally safe and healthy.

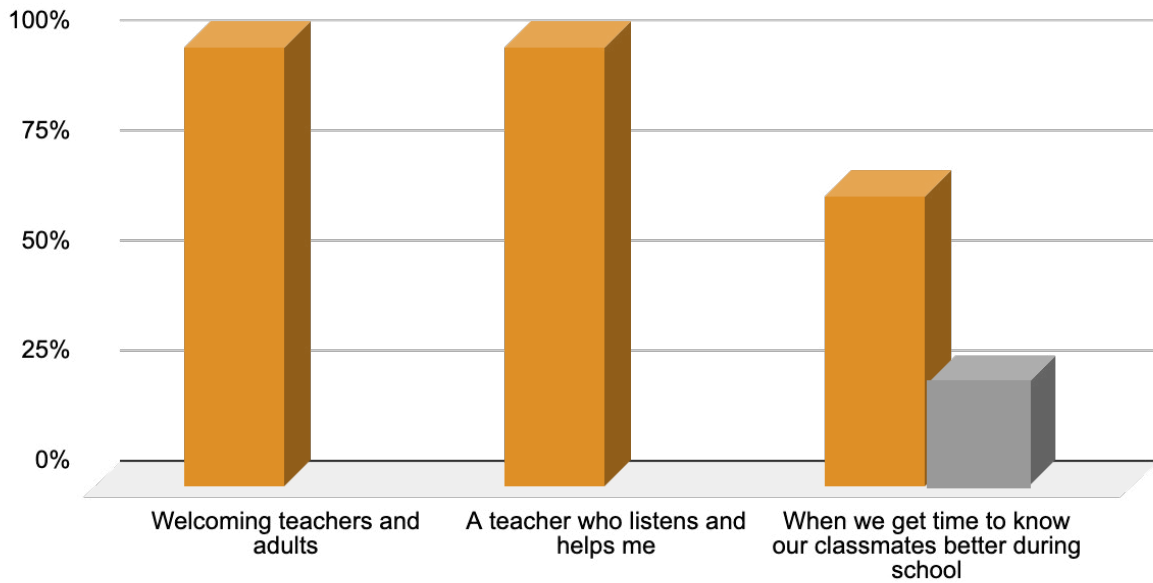
### What physical things do you see at your school that make you feel safe?



**100%** of secondary students told us that the unsafest place in their school is the bathroom.

**88%** of students said stairwells or outside places without cameras are the unsafest.

## What do you hear that helps you feel healthy and safe at school?



“Drills help me know what to do and prepare for an emergency.”

### Qualitative Student Data

“Sessions that are not just academic but teach us how to be mentally healthy.”

“Quiet and calming places to reset. Sometimes we just need a moment to chill. School can be overwhelming sometimes.”

“Having a teacher, counselor or principal follow-up after we report or share something with them.”

“Activities that allow us to get to know one another so we can make new friends and better understand others in our school.”

“Learning how to solve problems without fighting.”

“Basic hygiene items available to all students, and health products available.”

## GRANT NARRATIVE FEATURES

### PART 1: DEMONSTRATION OF NEED (25 points)

Narrative should include local school and community data. Links are embedded to help identify potential data sources.

LEA must identify the need(s) and show data in **one or more** of the following areas:

#### Community and School Violence

“School violence” is youth violence that occurs on school property, on the way to or from school or school-sponsored events or during a school-sponsored event. A young person can be a victim, a perpetrator or a witness of school violence. School violence may also involve or impact adults. Youth violence includes various behaviors. Some violent acts -- such as bullying, pushing and shoving -- can cause more emotional harm than physical harm. Other forms of violence, such as gang violence and assault (with or without weapons), can lead to serious injury or even death.”

[Violence Prevention and Data](#) | [CRDC School Climate and Safety Data](#)

#### Substance Abuse and Bullying/Harassment

“Substance abuse” encompasses a harmful pattern of use of alcohol, tobacco products and illegal drugs; this includes the presence of substance use and trade within school and campus environments and during school-related activities (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environment, 2021).

“Bullying” means any unwanted, aggressive behavior committed in person, or by electronic communication, directed toward a student or group of students that results in -- or is reasonably perceived as being done with -- the intent to cause negative educational or physical results for the targeted individual or group, and is communicated in such a way as to disrupt or interfere with the school’s educational mission or the education of any student, and is repeated or highly likely to be repeated [70 Okl. St. § 24-100.3 \(2022\)](#).

[Oklahoma Prevention and Needs Assessment](#) | [Substance Abuse](#) | [Bullying Prevention](#) | [CRDC Harassment and Bullying Data](#).

Use school specific or local community data (i.e. student information system, office discipline referrals, health department reports, law enforcement).

#### Chronic Absenteeism

“Chronic absenteeism” refers to students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason. Regular attendance is predictive of student and school success. Research indicates that chronic absenteeism may place students at academic risk. Working with stakeholders, schools can affect positive changes in attendance. More information about this indicator can be found at [Chronic Absenteeism](#) | [Chronic Absenteeism Indicator](#).

#### Student-to-Mental Health Professional Ratio

Federal law, according to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Sec. 4102, defines a school-based mental health services provider as “a state-licensed or state-certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker or other state-licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under state law to provide mental health services to children and adolescents.” [Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2021](#) and [School Based Mental Health Professionals](#)



## Juvenile Justice System Referrals

“Referral to juvenile court” means the referral of a child or a child’s case to the office or official, including an intake officer or probation officer, designated by the juvenile board to process children within the juvenile justice system. **Use school-specific or local community data (i.e. exclusionary discipline referrals, law enforcement, department of health and human service reports).**

## Reports of Threatening Behavior

“Threatening behavior” means any verbal threat or threatening behavior, whether or not it is directed at another person, which indicates potential for future harm to students ([Oklahoma Prevention and Needs Assessment](#)).

## Exclusionary Discipline (ISS or OSS)

“Exclusionary discipline” is any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes students from their usual educational setting. Common examples include out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. ([Exclusionary Policy Brief](#)). **Can use office discipline referrals, student information systems, behavior tracking systems, or EDPlan data.**

## Natural Disaster or Traumatic Event

“Trauma” refers to an event, series of events or circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or perceived as life-threatening. It can overwhelm the person’s ability to cope and have lasting adverse effects. Traumatic stress can affect an individual’s mental, physical, behavioral, emotional and spiritual functioning, especially during childhood development. Traumatic stress can result from disaster, abuse, neglect, loss, life-threatening situations, acts of violence or anything that overwhelms a person’s ability to cope (Guarino and Chagnon, 2018; NCTSN, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

[Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) | [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)

## Students Living in Poverty

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 allows for a more accurate reflection of the concentrations of poverty. **Use local student information system .**

## **PART 2: IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES** (25 points)

Implementation plans should define and contain data and research to support the activities and programs of a comprehensive, safe and healthy school community. Funds will be prioritized for LEA applicants that 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.

### **Evidence-Based Practices**

**Implement comprehensive, evidence-based practices to meet students' behavioral, physical and mental wellbeing 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 supports \(MTSS\)](#) 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. Research on child and adolescent development has established that while adverse experiences (particularly in early childhood) can have profound effects, learning environments and conditions designed in trauma-responsive ways allow school communities to become a protective factor to help students overcome and thrive (Osher, et al, 2017).

When selecting evidence-based programs and activities, schools should outline how it 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.

### **Research Clearinghouses and Technical Assistance Center Resources**

*(To use when building implementation activities)*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools</a></li><li>• <a href="#">SAMHSA Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center</a></li><li>• <a href="#">SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center</a></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</a></li><li>• <a href="#">What Works Clearinghouse</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Best Practices Clearinghouse</a></li><li>• <a href="#">OESE Technical Assistance Centers</a></li><li>• <a href="#">School Safety</a></li></ul> |
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## Connecting Students, Families and Communities

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

LEAs should implement strategies for engagement -- and for all voices to be heard -- and 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 application process. 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.

Team Examples	Team Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Safe and Healthy Committee</li><li>• District or Site MTSS Teams</li><li>• Advisory or Leadership Committees</li><li>• Mental Health Teams</li><li>• PLC or Data Teams</li><li>• Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">School-wide Team Roster</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Stakeholder Collaboration and Engagement</a></li><li>• Schools must identify a <a href="#">Safe and Healthy Coordinator</a></li></ul>

Grant activities should outline how the school will build **relationships** and engage families, students and the community. Schools can utilize resources from [OSDE Family and Community Engagement Framework](#) to support plan development in this section.

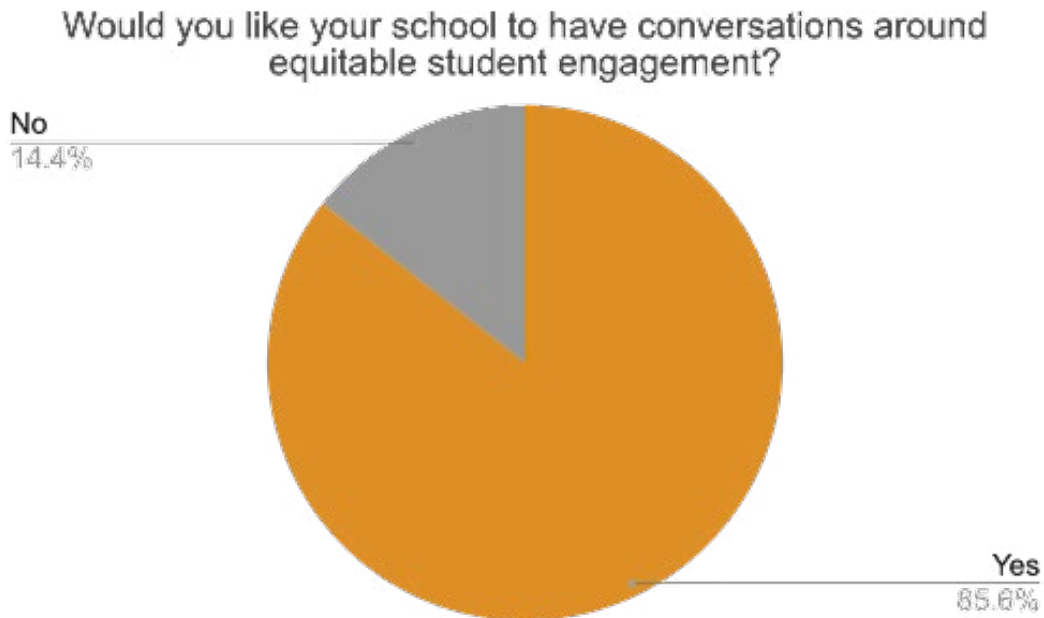
[Collaborating with Families and Partners on Emergency Operation Plan](#)

[Mental Health Provider MOU- Sample](#)

[Sample Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#)

## Comprehensive Policies and Practices

**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.

Parents voice that they would like their school to have conversations around equitable student engagement (*Oklahoma PTA Survey Report, 2022*).

## The core constructs to creating opportunities for all students:

**Access** -- All students have entrance into, involvement with and the full benefits of quality learning opportunities (Paris, 2012).

**Representation** -- Having a presence in decision-making and in content (Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009).

**Meaningful Participation** -- All students have agency and are empowered to contribute ineffectual ways (Fraser, 1998).

**High Outcomes** -- Solutions benefit all students toward self-determination and the ability to act as contributing citizens in a democratic society and global community (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

### PART 3: BUDGET (20 points)

LEA will include the provided [Stronger Connections Budget](#) and narrative that supports the grant activities. All implementation activities, programs and personnel funding must be tied directly to improving district safety and health needs. Use the budget template to itemize expenditures and provide a justification narrative linked to activities.

### PART 4: EVALUATION PLAN (25 points)

LEA provides an evaluation plan for how the district will use team-based problem-solving and data-based decision-making to monitor fidelity and evaluate outcomes that create sustainable implementation practices that continue safe and healthy activities after grant funding.

Evaluation involves examining processes, outcomes and impact of programs. Specifically, evaluation is the collection and analysis of information about activities to reduce uncertainty, improve effectiveness and make decisions.

Identify how the district plans to continuously evaluate interventions, strategies, practices and delivery of services to ensure activities are implemented with fidelity and outcomes yield improvement.

## Types of Evaluations

<b>Formative</b>	<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.</p> <p>Teams can use the <a href="#">problem-solving model</a> worksheet to accurately identify problems using data and develop solutions.</p>	<b>Guiding questions:</b> <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>
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<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 the awareness and provide new and useful knowledge to the school community?</li> </ul>

**PART 5: ADDITIONAL POINTS** (20 points)

LEAs can receive additional points in each of the following areas for a total of up to 20 points. The district must give a written statement or provide documentation showing a lack in these areas in their application.

- District does not currently receive any grant funding from SDE in these areas: School Climate Transformation, DOJ Grants, Nurses Corp, School Counselor Corp, Project AWARE, SSIP, or SPDG (10 points).
- District has no school-employed or contracted mental health professionals, i.e. School Counselor, Licensed Professional Counselor, School Psychologist, Social Worker, Recreational Therapist, Licensed Mental Health, etc. (5 points).
- District has no school-employed or contracted Safety Professionals, i.e. SRO, Security Guards, etc. (5 points).

**LETTER OF COMMITMENT**

LEA will include a signed letter of commitment to assure safe and healthy activities and participation during the duration of the grant.

## **Commitment to Building a Safe and Healthy Oklahoma School Community**

District will sign the Commitment to Safe and Healthy activities to assure participation in the grant from 2023 to 2026.

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- District will Identify a Safe and Healthy Coordinator who will support activities to build capacity and sustain the Safe and Healthy Programs.
- District will designate a team that meets at minimum 1 x monthly to review behavior, and health and safety data, to make decisions for school-wide prevention practices.
- District team will engage in data-based decision making that monitors and assesses safe and healthy activities, and participate in Oklahoma Safe and Healthy Schools training.
- District will participate in the development of high-quality Emergency Operations Plans (EOP).
- District will complete surveys, forms and record-keeping procedures per grant requirement.
- District will attend and schedule professional development pertaining to Safe and Healthy schools each year.
- District will provide time and/or stipends for staff to attend ongoing training and technical assistance.
- District will participate in all aspects of training and technical assistance associated with Stronger Connections starting in 2023 and continuing through the 2026 school years.
- District and/or site members will serve on a team that supports students needing targeted or individual interventions that include but are not limited to: Behavioral Threat Assessment Team with OSDE supports providing resources, time, materials and personnel to support the implementation of new practices/procedures.
- District will comply with the terms outlined in the Reimbursement of Expenditures Agreement for utilizing funds appropriately and receiving reimbursement of expenditure.
- District will ensure activities and practices are delivered with fidelity and data is used to inform decision-making.
- District agrees to follow all federal requirements of the Stronger Connections grant. Funds are to be used in accordance with Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments.

### **Signature**

By signing this commitment, the district is agreeing to the above expectations to work toward the building and implementation of activities of a safe and healthy school community dedicated to the creation of Stronger Connections.

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Superintendent Signature

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Date



## 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 can not 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. Schools must identify a [Safe and Healthy Coordinator](#) to support the facilitation of activities related to the grant. These responsibilities can be included in the activities for new personnel hired through the grant or a stipend for current personnel that will be in addition to their current role and responsibilities.

#### **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.

#### **Can a school district purchase a weapon for the SRO or Security Guard?**

No. The SEA will ensure that LEAs do NOT use funds for the provision to any person of a dangerous weapon or training in the use of a dangerous weapon, which is prohibited under section 13401 of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which amends 8526 of ESEA. You may use funds to send an SRO to a NASRO conference or send designated staff through security guard training.



## How does our school site or district begin implementation and design?

Address the needs in your application and describe how your team will work with grant coaches to build implementation activities. Please reach out to an external coach for support on development and identify available supports through the implementation process.

- Cindy Swearingen, Office of School Safety and Security, [cindy.swearingen@sde.ok.gov](mailto:cindy.swearingen@sde.ok.gov)
- Amanda Sellers, Office of Student Support, [amanda.sellers@sde.ok.gov](mailto:amanda.sellers@sde.ok.gov)

For additional information on frequently asked questions for both SEA and LEA, review the Bipartisan [Safer Communities Act, Stronger Connections Grant FAQ](#).



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