

financial support for mental health and student well-being from the [Bipartisan Safer Communities Act](#), passed in response to mass shootings like that at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, earlier this year.

The money is allocated through Title IV-A of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The department has titled the new grant funding the “Stronger Connections” grant program. The program provides the grants to state education agencies, which administer the funds to local districts.

California received the largest portion of funds with \$119.8 million, followed by Texas with \$93.9 million. Districts that receive the funds will have until the end of 2026 to spend them.

While the money can be used for limited facilities improvements, [such as repairing locks on doors](#), the Education Department is urging districts to instead invest in inclusive and equitable practices that meet the social, mental, and physical needs of students.

“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,” U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in the letter. “Accordingly, students who experience a sense of belonging in school are also more likely to exhibit positive behaviors.”

State education departments will have the ability to set criteria for which districts receive the funding and how much. In the letter, Cardona encouraged state agencies to give the money to schools with high rates of poverty and one of the following characteristics: a high student-to-mental health professional ratio; high rates of chronic absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, referrals to the juvenile justice system, bullying, harassment, community and school violence, or substance abuse; or schools that recently experienced a natural disaster or traumatic event.

In addition to the criteria, the Education Department recommended that state agencies prioritize grants for schools that do the following:

1. Use evidence-based strategies to meet students’ social, emotional, and physical needs

The department’s first recommendation would have state education agencies prioritize grants for school districts that have shown a commitment to “implementing comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that meet each student’s social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being

needs; create positive, inclusive, supportive school environments; and increase access to place-based interventions and services.”

Federal law classifies evidence-based strategies into different tiers. State agencies should prioritize school districts with the strongest types of evidence—Tier 1 “strong” evidence and Tier 2 “moderate” evidence, the letter said.

The Education Department also urged schools to “continuously evaluate interventions, strategies, and practices so that they can ensure efforts are leading to improvement and success.” Schools can use the department’s online tools, the [“What Works Clearinghouse”](#) and [“Best Practices Clearinghouse,”](#) and technical assistance centers to help select evidence-based strategies, the letter said.

2. Engage the community when selecting and implementing new strategies for safe schools

Schools should include students, families, educators, staff, and community organizations in developing and implementing strategies for safe and supportive learning environments, the letter said. That includes “paying close attention to the communities that face systemic barriers,” the letter said.

Engagement with families should happen early in the decisionmaking process and “be ongoing and collaborative,” the department said.

3. Use school safety policies and practices that advance equity and recognize trauma

The department recommends that schools use the funding “to design and implement student-centered policies and practices that increase student belonging and provide safe, nurturing, and welcoming environments,” the letter said.

While improvements like replacing locks on doors and evaluating building entrances are covered under the grant, they “may have detrimental effects” if schools aren’t also working to promote student learning, growth, and positive learning environments, the letter said.

Specifically, the department encouraged state agencies and local districts to use the money to pay for professional development, comprehensive emergency management planning, and behavioral and trauma- or grief-informed mental health supports for students. Schools should recognize that students of color, English-learners, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities might all experience safety and discipline policies in different ways, the letter said.

Education associations expressed support for the priorities outlined in the letter.

“State education leaders are committed to providing all students an equitable education in a safe and supportive environment, and the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act will help bolster those efforts across the country,” said Melissa McGrath, chief of staff the Council of Chief State School Officers. “We appreciate the U.S. Department of Education creating an allocation process that ensures transparency while allowing the funding to get to schools as soon as possible.”



Libby Stanford

Reporter, Education Week

Libby Stanford is a reporter for Education Week.

Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content or email reprints@educationweek.org and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.



Copyright © 2022 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.