

June 15, 2018

Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Grants

Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Grants (also known as the “block grant” program) are authorized under Title IV-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; P.L. 114-95). Prior to the ESSA, several targeted grant programs were authorized under the ESEA that collectively provided support for many of the activities that can now be supported through SSAE Grants.

There has been substantial congressional interest in SSAE Grants as the funds can be used for myriad purposes by state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs), providing SEAs and LEAs with flexibility to meet their priorities. The level of appropriations provided for SSAE Grants has also garnered congressional attention. This In Focus provides an overview of key aspects of the program.

Purpose of the Program (ESEA §4101)

The purpose of SSAE Grants is to improve students’ academic achievement by increasing the capacity of states, LEAs, schools, and local communities to (1) provide all students with access to a well-rounded education, (2) improve school conditions for student learning, and (3) improve the use of technology in order to improve the academic achievement and digital learning of all students.

Allocation of Funds (§§4103 and 4105)

Under the SSAE Grant formula, prior to making grants to states the Secretary of Education is required to reserve 0.5% of the total appropriation for the Bureau of Indian Education, 0.5% of the total appropriation for the outlying areas, and 2.0% of the total appropriation for technical assistance and capacity building. The remaining funds are then allocated by formula to each state in proportion to its share of all ESEA Title I-A state grants allocated during the prior fiscal year with no hold harmless provisions applied. No state may receive less than 0.5% of the funds available for grants to states. Puerto Rico may receive no more than 0.5% of the funds available for grants to states.

After each SEA receives its grant, it may reserve up to 5.0% of the funds for state activities. The remaining funds are allocated by formula to LEAs in proportion to each LEA’s share of ESEA Title I-A grants made to all LEAs in the state during the prior fiscal year with no hold harmless provisions applied. The minimum LEA grant amount is \$10,000, if sufficient funds are available.

Uses of Funds by SEAs (§4104)

Of the funds received by the SEA, not more than 1% may be used for the administrative costs of implementing the program, including reporting on how program funds are being used by LEAs. The SEA must use the remaining funds to meet the purposes of the program. This may

include providing training, technical assistance, and capacity building to LEAs receiving program funds. It may also include identifying and eliminating state barriers affecting the coordination and integration of programs, initiatives, and funding streams that meet the purposes of the SSAE Grant program to enable LEAs to coordinate better with other agencies, schools, services, and programs. Additionally, the SEA may use funds to support LEAs in meeting the purpose of the program.

Uses of Funds by LEAs (§§4105-4110)

After consulting with stakeholders, each LEA must submit an application for funds to its SEA. In its application, the LEA must describe how funds will be used. Of the funds received by an LEA, not more than 2% may be used for direct administrative costs associated with implementing the program. The remainder of the funds must be used for three broad categories of activities: (1) supporting well-rounded educational opportunities, (2) supporting safe and healthy students, and (3) supporting the effective use of technology. If an LEA receives a grant of \$30,000 or more, it must provide assurances that it will use at least 20% of its grant for activities to support a well-rounded education, at least 20% for activities to support safe and healthy students, and some of its funds to support the effective use of technology. If an LEA receives a grant of less than \$30,000, it is only required to provide an assurance regarding the use of funds for one of the three categories.

It is up to the LEA to determine the specific activities in each category that will be implemented. For example, in the safe and healthy students category an LEA might choose to focus on mentoring rather than drug and violence prevention. Regardless of how SEAs and LEAs choose to use their funds, they must be used to supplement, and not supplant, non-federal funds that would otherwise be available for activities authorized under the program. That is, in general, SEAs and LEAs cannot use their SSAE funds to pay for activities that they would have paid for using state or local funds if there were no SSAE Grants.

In reviewing LEA applications, the SEA must determine whether an activity proposed by the LEA is an allowable use of funds under the SSAE program. The LEA must also state the program objectives and intended outcomes for activities and how it will periodically evaluate the effectiveness of such activities in meeting the objectives and outcomes. LEAs must provide an assurance that they will report annually to the state on how funds are being used under each of the three categories.

Any LEA that will receive a grant of \$30,000 or more is required to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to examine the areas in need of improvement that focuses, at a minimum, on the aforementioned three broad categories of

activities. The results of the assessment should be used to select evidence-based activities, if evidence is available, that meet the identified needs. A needs assessment must be conducted once every three years.

The LEA must also provide an assurance that it will prioritize the distribution of funds to schools based on one or more factors, including schools that (1) are among those with the “greatest needs” as determined by the LEA, (2) have the highest percentage or number of formula children (generally children from low-income families) used in the determination of Title I-A grants, (3) are identified for comprehensive support or improvement under Title I-A, (4) are implementing targeted support and improvement under Title I-A, or (5) are identified as persistently dangerous public elementary or secondary schools under ESEA, Section 8532.

Well-Rounded Education (§4107)

LEAs must use funds in this category to develop and implement programs and activities that are coordinated with other schools and community-based services and programs and may be conducted in partnership with another organization (e.g., institution of higher education (IHE), business) that has a demonstrated record of success in implementing relevant activities. Examples of allowable activities include the following:

- college and career guidance and counseling;
- science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs and activities;
- arts and music education programs and activities;
- accelerated learning programs, including reimbursing students for Advanced Placement (AP) exam fees;
- programs to teach American history, civics, economics, geography, or government; and
- programs to promote volunteerism and community involvement.

Safe and Healthy Students (§4108)

The programs and activities the LEA selects to support in this category must be used to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs and activities that are coordinated with other schools and community-based services and programs; foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments that support student academic achievement; promote parent involvement in the activity or program; and may be conducted in partnership with another organization (e.g., IHE, private entity) that has a demonstrated record of successful implementation of relevant activities. Examples of allowable activities include the following:

- drug and violence prevention programs and activities;
- school-based mental health services;
- bullying and harassment prevention programs and activities;

- mentoring and school counseling;
- positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS); and
- programs to support a healthy, active lifestyle.

Technology (§4109)

LEAs must use funds in this category to improve the use of technology to improve the academic achievement, academic growth, and digital literacy of all students. However, no more than 15% of the program funds used for technology purposes may be used for purchasing technology infrastructure (e.g., equipment, software applications). Examples of allowable activities include the following:

- professional learning tools and resources for school staff to personalize learning and promote effective uses of technology in the classroom;
- technological capacity and infrastructure development;
- delivery of specialized or rigorous academic courses through the use of technology;
- blended learning projects;
- professional development in the use of technology to increase student achievement in STEM areas; and
- resources for students in rural, remote, or underserved areas to take advantage of digital learning and online courses.

Appropriations

SSAE Grants are authorized at \$1.65 billion for FY2017 and \$1.6 billion per year for FY2018-FY2020. For FY2017, program appropriations were \$400 million. For FY2018, program appropriations are \$1.1 billion.

Due to congressional concerns regarding the level of program funding that was provided for FY2017, the FY2017 appropriations act (P.L. 115-31) allowed states to provide subgrants to LEAs by formula or to award LEA subgrants of no less than \$10,000 on a competitive basis. Competitive grants to LEAs had to prioritize the LEAs with the greatest need based on their number or percentage of Title I-A formula children, while also ensuring geographic diversity among grantees. States were required to make competitive awards that, in the aggregate, reflected the required distribution of funds among the three categories of activities (e.g., 20% for well-rounded education). LEAs receiving competitive grants of \$30,000 or more were not, however, required to meet the distributional requirements by category. LEAs receiving a competitive grant only for technology could use up to 25% of the funds for purchasing technology infrastructure.

Rebecca R. Skinner, Specialist in Education Policy

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