

Talking Points

Title IV, Part A, ESSA: Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Grants

- Created by Congress, the SSAE grant program in ESSA encompasses a broad and diverse set of effective programs and interventions, each of which has been demonstrated to positively impact student well-being and academic performance and achievement. These programs include: providing mental health services to students, violence prevention; increasing student access to STEM courses, physical education and college and career counseling; and providing educators with technology professional development opportunities.
- In its first year of funding, Congress provided only 25% of the authorized level for the program and included language allowing the states to distribute the funds competitively instead of formula if they so choose.
- The FY 2017 allocation of only \$400 million is wholly inadequate to provide the flexibility at the local level or to run the program as Congress intended. Funding this program at less than 25% of its authorized level in its first year has already presented serious implementation issues, including the need to allow states to allocate funds to districts competitively, contrary to what is authorized in ESSA. States electing to run a competition will incur significant burdens as they grapple with creating, initiating, and judging a competition. Altering the structure of the program in this manner also negates the Congressional intent of increasing access to SSAE programs for all students and instead is likely to continue to benefit those districts already adept at winning competitive grants.
- As a result of the low funding and the confusion around a competition, we are deeply concerned that many states might ignore the competitive option altogether and choose to allocate the money by formula for the sake of ease and fairness to all districts. While our groups ultimately want these dollars to go to every district, electing to distribute the money by formula at this low funding level has its own potentially negative consequences. For instance, many states or districts might choose to simply transfer the dollars for another purpose, as the amounts received by formula may simply not be enough to make meaningful investments in these areas, thereby leaving districts with no federal funds to support Title IVA's activities.
- Underfunding SSAE also destroys the greater flexibility for districts and schools that Congress intended. Instead, it forces difficult and sometimes unconscionable trade-offs -- eliminating AP/IB programs in order to keep school counseling services, for example -- that negatively rebound on students and educators alike. Districts and schools should receive sufficient SSAE funding to allow them to meaningfully invest in critical areas. That is real flexibility.
- Don't force schools to shortchange investments in each of the three areas that Congress sought to protect and advance in ESSA: student health and safety; a well-rounded education; and effective use of technology. There is ample evidence of the value to education of each and every program supported by SSAE:

- Evidence supports the direct correlation between physical and mental health and learning that is essential to academic success, school completion, and the development of healthy, resilient, and productive citizens.
- A broad-based, comprehensive curriculum, which includes opportunities for students to explore music and the arts, engage in computer science and coding, learn a foreign language, and gain college level credits for advanced work, is necessary for all students to receive a well-rounded, workforce ready education.
- Federal investments in education technology ensure schools have technology-proficient educators, well equipped classrooms, sufficiently supported administrative structures, and a curriculum optimized to take advantage of the benefits technology offers to all students—such as closing the opportunity and learning gaps and providing students with essential modern workforce skills.
- None of these types of programs should have to be selected at the expense of the other.

Given the elimination under ESSA of numerous individual programs that support the overall health and safety of students, the investments in education technology, as well as helping districts ensure access to a well-rounded education, a robust federal investment in support of these programs is absolutely essential. Without a significant investment in Title IV, Part A, districts will be forced into choosing which of the priorities to invest in—even though an ample investment in all three is necessary to providing students with a comprehensive education.