

K-12 Education: Education’s Priorities in Discretionary Grantmaking

GAO-25-107141
Q&A Report to Congressional Requesters
December 31, 2024

Why This Matters

Education awarded about \$6 billion in discretionary grants during fiscal year 2023, according to officials, with the largest proportion of grant programs administered by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). These grants are awarded competitively to recipients such as states and school districts. Education sometimes establishes priorities to guide its grantmaking. According to Education, priorities are intended to address issues of interest and national need and are developed based on evidence, ideas from the field, or responses to national circumstances. For example, priorities could relate to a specific educational area, such as science, or to the characteristics of an applicant, such as those applying for the first time. Fulfilling a priority may be a required or an optional condition to receive the grant. Priorities can be department-wide—meaning that they are available for use in a wide variety of grant programs as appropriate—or program-specific.

We were asked to examine Education’s priorities for discretionary grants over time. We analyzed priorities and categorized them by themes, which we identified using a content analysis. To do this, we analyzed *Federal Register* announcements for all department-wide priorities published from 2001 (when Education first identified them) to July 2024 (the most recent year available). Education identified additional announcements, which revised its grant regulations, that it considered to be department-wide priorities. We added these to our list of department-wide priorities. We also reviewed all announcements from 2001 to July 2024 for three K-12 programs to identify how those programs used department-wide and program-specific priorities. These programs are the three largest discretionary grant programs within OESE based on total dollars awarded for fiscal year 2023 (the most recent year available). They are School Safety National Activities, Education Innovation and Research (EIR), and the Charter Schools Program. Our review is not generalizable to all of Education’s discretionary grant programs.

Key Takeaways

- Education announced department-wide priorities 15 times between November 2001 and December 2021. Some priorities replace previous ones, so not all department-wide priorities are still in use. Priorities covered topics such as teacher professional development and high school graduation rates.
- Among the three OESE discretionary grant programs, the number of department-wide and program-specific priorities per grant announcement ranged from zero to 10.
 - Across the three programs, the following priority themes were cited most frequently: (1) serving specific populations or geographic areas to improve academic outcomes or access to charter schools; (2) promoting or improving education in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, or computer science; and (3) promoting equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities.

How does Education use priorities in its discretionary grantmaking?

Education uses both department-wide and program-specific priorities in its discretionary grantmaking. To establish department-wide priorities, Education generally publishes a notice in the *Federal Register* for public comment, reviews and considers comments it receives, and publishes a final notice (i.e., priority announcement). Department-wide priorities can be used by Education for discretionary grant programs going forward, unless replaced at a later date. Education establishes program-specific priorities using a similar process or through individual grant announcements.

At the start of a discretionary grant award cycle, Education publishes a grant announcement in the *Federal Register*. These announcements outline application procedures, requirements, and criteria, including any priorities. When Education chooses to use priorities in a grant announcement, it may use (1) previously published department-wide or program-specific priorities, (2) new program-specific priorities established in the announcement, or (3) all three. For each priority, Education may set additional conditions (see text box).

The three conditions Education may place on a priority

- **Absolute:** Applicants must meet one or more of these conditions to be considered for a grant
- **Competitive preference:** Applicants have the option to address these conditions to potentially receive more points
- **Invitational:** Applicants are encouraged, but not required, to address these conditions and no additional points or preference will be awarded

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education documents. | GAO-25-107141

Note: In some grant announcements, Education states that applicants must meet all absolute priorities to be considered for the grant. In other announcements, applicants must meet some, but not all, of the listed absolute priorities.

Figure 1 illustrates how Education used priorities in one example of a grant announcement.

Figure 1: Summary of Priorities Used in a Sample Discretionary Grant Announcement

Applications for New Awards; Investing in Innovation Fund, Scale-Up Grants

Published on 05/03/2013

Applications must address one of the following five absolute priorities:^a

- **Department-wide absolute priority**
 - ▶ Implementing Internationally Benchmarked, College- and Career-Ready Elementary and Secondary Academic Standards
- **Program-specific absolute priorities**
 - ▶ Improving the Effectiveness of Teachers or Principals
 - ▶ Improving Low-Performing Schools
 - ▶ Improving Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education
 - ▶ Serving Rural Communities

Applications may address one or more of the following three competitive priorities:^b

- **Program-specific competitive priorities**
 - ▶ Improving Cost-Effectiveness and Productivity (0 or 3 points)
 - ▶ Enabling Broad Adoption of Effective Practices (0 or 5 points)
 - ▶ Supporting Novice i3 Applicants (0 or 3 points)

Applications may address the following invitational priority, but doing so does not provide an advantage over other applications:^c

- **Invitational priority**
 - ▶ Supporting High-Quality Early Learning

Source: GAO analysis of 78 Fed. Reg. 25,977 (May 3, 2013). | GAO-25-107141

Note: This is a summary of a grant announcement that was published in the *Federal Register* by the Department of Education for its Investing in Innovation program (i3), fiscal year 2013.

^aApplicants must meet one or more absolute priorities to be considered for a grant.

^bApplicants who successfully address competitive preference priorities in their application receive extra points.

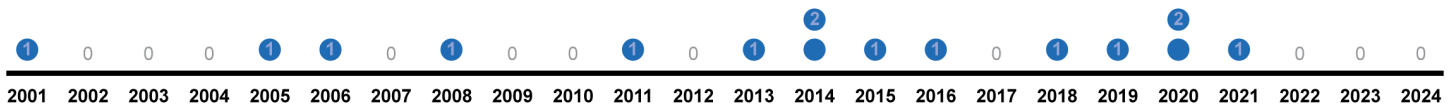
^cApplicants are encouraged, but not required, to address invitational priorities in their application paperwork. No additional points or preference will be awarded.

How often has Education announced department-wide priorities since 2001?

Education has announced department-wide priorities 15 times since 2001 (see fig. 2).¹ The number of priorities per announcement ranged from one to 16. When Education publishes a priority announcement, it sometimes notes that these priorities replace a previously published set of priorities.

Figure 2: Timeline of Education’s Announcements for Department-Wide Priorities

Number of department-wide announcements (per year)



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Register announcements. | GAO-25-107141

Note: The Department of Education published department-wide priorities two times in both 2014 and 2020. In December 2010, Education announced department-wide priorities and then issued a technical correction of those priorities in May 2011. We are only including the May 2011 version of these priorities in our analysis because it contains the technical corrections. Education identified announcements which revised its grant regulations that it considered to be department-wide priorities. We added these to our list of department-wide priorities.

In the first identified priority, published in November 2001, Education amended regulations for discretionary grant programs to improve the quality of the review process and provide more opportunities for inexperienced or “novice” applicants to receive funding. In the most recent department-wide priority announcement published in December 2021, Education included six department-wide priorities that had varying purposes. For example, one focused on “addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, educators, and faculty.” Another focused

on “supporting a diverse educator workforce and professional growth to strengthen student learning.”

What statutory authority has Education cited when establishing department-wide priorities?

Education cited three different statutory authorities when establishing department-wide priorities from 2001 through 2021 (see table 1). Education cited the “General authority of the Secretary” provision over 90 percent of the time.² The second most common provision was the “Rules and regulations” provision (see fig. 3).³

Table 1: Statutory Authorities Cited in Education’s Department-Wide Priorities for Discretionary Programs

Statutory authority	Statutory provision	Number of times cited	Years published
20 U.S.C. § 1221e-3	General authority of the Secretary	14	2001, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021
20 U.S.C. § 3474	Rules and regulations	7	2001, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016
20 U.S.C. §§ 6301 et. seq.	Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended	3	2005, 2006, 2008

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

Note: The 2005 *Federal Register* notice cited “ESEA, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. 107-110, January 8, 2002.” The ESEA, as amended is codified at 20 U.S.C. §§ 6301 et. seq. GAO identified this information from the Department of Education’s published priority announcements in the *Federal Register* as of July 2024. Education published department-wide priorities two times in both 2014 and 2020. In some cases, a statutory provision was cited in more than one priority announcement. In December 2010, Education announced department-wide priorities and then issued a technical correction of those priorities in May 2011. The statutory authorities cited in both announcements were the same and we are only including the May 2011 version in our analysis. Education identified announcements which revised its grant regulations that it considered to be department-wide priorities. We added these to our list of department-wide priorities.

Figure 3: Two Most Common Statutory Authorities the Department of Education Cited for Department-Wide Grant Priorities from 2001-2021

20 United States Code 1221e-3. “General authority of The Secretary” provision: The Secretary, in order to carry out functions otherwise vested in The Secretary by law or by delegation of authority pursuant to law, and subject to limitations as may be otherwise imposed by law, is authorized to make, promulgate, issue, rescind, and amend rules and regulations governing the manner of operation of, and governing the applicable programs administered by, the Department.

20 United States Code 3474 “Rules and Regulations” provision: The Secretary is authorized to prescribe such rules and regulations as The Secretary determines necessary or appropriate to administer and manage the functions of The Secretary or the Department.

Source: 20 U.S.C. §§ 1221e-3, 3474. | GAO-25-107141

How has Education used department-wide priorities over time?

Over time, Education has introduced various department-wide priorities. Two of the newest priorities introduced in 2020 and 2021 involved topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. Education published a total of 78 department-wide priorities from 2001 to 2021 across a total of 15 announcements. Because priorities can be replaced, not all 78 department-wide priorities are currently in use. We grouped together department-wide priorities with similar content to create themes. Education officials noted that priorities with similar content may be refined and evolve over time based on lessons learned. See table 2 for all of the themes that have appeared in department-wide priorities since 2001.

Table 2: Education’s Announcements of Department-Wide Priorities by Theme from 2001-2021

Theme	Federal Register publication year												
	2001	2005	2006	2008	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2020	2021
Targeting applicants based on status as a novice applicant	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Demonstrating programs, practices, or other strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness	○	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Critical-need languages	○	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving high school achievement and graduation rates for at-risk students	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Professional development for secondary school teachers	○	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Promoting science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education	○	○	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
School improvement efforts	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Using data to improve outcomes	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Increasing access to or success regarding postsecondary education and training	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	●
Implementing three types of "Core Reforms" related to college- and career-ready standards, statewide data systems, and teacher access to student growth data	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Implementing internationally benchmarked, college- and career-ready elementary and secondary academic standards	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving early learning outcomes	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving productivity	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving school, family, and community engagement and school safety or behavioral supports	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving the effectiveness and equitable distribution of effective teachers or principals	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Promoting diverse student bodies or educators	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	●
Supporting military families and veterans	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Using technology to improve instruction	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Procedures to use if the Secretary decides to give special consideration to applications supported by evidence of effectiveness	○	○	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
Influencing the development of non-cognitive factors	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Federal Register publication year

Theme	2001	2005	2006	2008	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2020	2021
Improving job-driven training and employment outcomes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promoting personalized learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supporting high-need students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Targeting projects and services to Promise Zones or Opportunity Zones (designated low-income communities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Empowering families and individuals to choose a high-quality education that meets their unique needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fostering flexible and affordable paths to obtaining knowledge and skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fostering knowledge and promoting the development of skills that prepare students to be informed, thoughtful, and productive individuals and citizens	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Meeting the unique needs of students and children with disabilities and/or those with unique gifts and talents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promoting economic opportunity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promoting literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promoting innovation and efficiency, streamlining education with an increased focus on improving student outcomes, and providing increased value to students and taxpayers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Protecting freedom of speech and encouraging respectful interactions in a safe educational environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Demonstrating a rationale for proposed actions based on research	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Building capacity for remote learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Data collection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Targeting applicants based on geography	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Addressing the impact of COVID–19 on students, educators, and faculty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Meeting student social, emotional, and academic needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Promoting equity in students' access to educational resources and opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Federal Register publication year

Theme	2001	2005	2006	2008	2011	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018	2019	2020	2021
Strengthening cross-agency coordination and community engagement to advance systemic change	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●

Legend: ● Included that theme ○ Did not include that theme

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

Notes: Some department-wide priorities replaced previous priorities. Therefore, not all 78 department-wide priorities are currently in use. GAO analyzed all department-wide priorities for discretionary grantmaking published in the *Federal Register* as of July 2024. The Department of Education published its latest department-wide priorities in 2021. We grouped priorities with similar content into themes, generally by analyzing Education’s descriptive titles for priorities. Education announced department-wide priorities two times in both 2014 and 2020. In December 2010, Education announced department-wide priorities and then issued a technical correction of those priorities in May 2011. We are only including the May 2011 version. Education identified announcements, which revised its grant regulations, that it considered to be department-wide priorities. We added these to our list of department-wide priorities.

How did the numbers of grant announcements and priorities compare across selected grant programs?

The three programs varied in how often they published new grant announcements and how many priorities each grant announcement included (see table 3). The number of grant announcements ranged from 42 to 71 between 2001 and 2024, with a total of 165 across the programs. All but four of the 165 grant announcements included at least one priority. The number per grant announcement ranged from zero to 10 and included a variety of program-specific and department-wide priorities.

Table 3: Numbers of Grant Announcements and Priorities for the Three Largest Office of Elementary and Secondary Education Discretionary Grant Programs, Fiscal Years 2001–2024

	School Safety National Activities ^a	Charter Schools Program	Education Innovation and Research ^b
Number of grant announcements	52	71	42
Average number of priorities per announcement	2	4	6
Lowest number of priorities per announcement	1	0	2
Highest number of priorities per announcement	7	8	10

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe School Safety National Activities program’s predecessor was called Safe and Drug-free Schools and Communities National Activities.

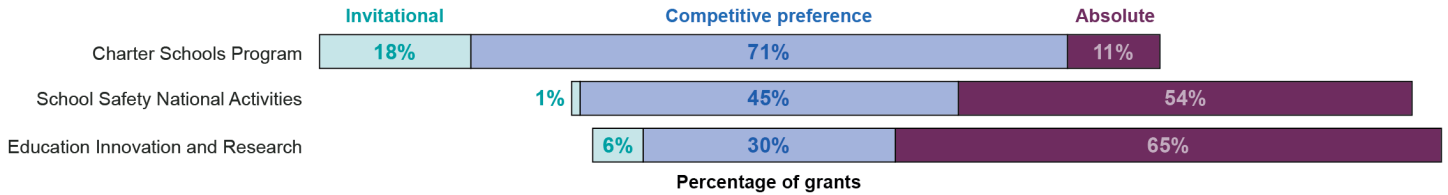
^bThe Education Innovation and Research program’s predecessor was called Investing in Innovation and its first grant announcement was published in 2010. For the other two programs in this table, the program or its predecessor began publishing grant announcements in 2001.

Education officials told us that priorities can be particularly helpful in programs that have broad authorizing statutes and stated that the School Safety National Activities and EIR programs fall into this category. Education officials also told us that the agency sometimes uses existing department-wide priorities or establishes program-specific priorities to meet requirements in laws, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education of 1965, as amended, or appropriations acts. For example, Education officials noted that, for several years, the Department used priorities to respond to Congressional directives regarding the EIR program. The grant announcements we reviewed also sometimes referenced additional laws, such as the General Education Provisions Act or department grant regulations, to support establishing program-specific priorities.

How often did Education use various types of priorities in selected programs?

Regarding absolute, competitive preference, and invitational priorities among the three programs, Education used absolute priorities most frequently in both the EIR and School Safety National Activities programs and their predecessor programs. It used competitive preference priorities most frequently in the Charter Schools Program. It used invitational priorities relatively rarely (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Proportion of Priority Types in 165 Grant Announcements for Selected Discretionary Grant Programs, Fiscal Years 2001–2024



Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

Note: School Safety National Activities program data include data from its predecessor, Safe and Drug-free Schools and Communities National Activities. Education Innovation and Research program data include data from its predecessor, Investing in Innovation. Applicants must meet at least one absolute priority to be considered for a grant. Applicants have the option to address competitive preference priorities to potentially receive more points. Applicants are encouraged, but not required to address invitational priorities and no additional points or preference are awarded.

How and when has Education used priorities in the School Safety National Activities program?

Education used priorities 114 times in 52 grant announcements for the School Safety National Activities program and its predecessor, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities program. The purpose of these grants was to improve students' safety and well-being, according to Education. Education administered grant announcements under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities program, which was focused on drug and violence prevention, between 2001 and 2016. Grant announcements between 2018 and 2024 fell under the School Safety National Activities program, which was more broadly designed to address school safety and well-being.

We grouped common priorities into themes. Table 4 lists the most common themes in the earlier Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities program. These were: (1) preventing drug abuse and violence; (2) applying as a new potential grantee; and (3) emergency response and crisis management planning.

Table 4: The Most Frequently Used Themes in Priorities for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities Program, Fiscal Years 2001–2016

Theme	Grant announcements for fiscal years																
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	
Implementing an integrated, comprehensive community-wide plan	NP	SH	○	SH	SH	SH	SH	SH	SH	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Preventing drug abuse and violence	○	○	DT	DV	DT DV CN	DT	DT YV	DT	○	SUV	○	○	○	PP	○	○	
Emergency response and crisis management plans	○	○	EM	EM	EM	EM	EM	EM	EM	EM	○	○	○	SEM	○	○	
Applying as a new potential grantee	○	○	○	○	○	EM	SH EM	SH EM	SH EM	EM	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Building capacity for school infrastructure	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	FC	○	○	○	
Serving specific geographic areas ^a	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	PP CT	○	○	

Theme	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Collaboration, coordination, or partnerships with other organizations	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SR

Legend: Cells with abbreviations included that theme (abbreviations for specific grants listed below) ○ Did not include that theme

CN: The Challenge Newsletter Grant Competition

CT: School Climate Transformation Grant Program

DT: School-Based Student Drug-Testing Programs and Demonstration Grants for Student Drug Testing Program

DV: Grants to States to Improve Management of Drug and Violence Prevention Programs

EM: Emergency Response and Crisis Management Grant Program and Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Grant Program

FC: Education Facilities Clearinghouse Program

NP: Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Program

PP: Project Prevent Grant Program

SEM: Grants to States for School Emergency Management Program

SH: Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program

SR: Promoting Student Resilience

SUV: Building State Capacity for Preventing Youth Substance Use and Violence

YV: Grants to Address Youth Violence and Related Issues in Persistently Dangerous Schools

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe specific areas include Promise Zones and high-poverty schools.

Note: This table includes themes that were present in at least five Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities grant competitions from 2001 through 2016. We grouped priorities with similar content into themes, generally by analyzing Education’s descriptive titles for priorities. In some years the grant competitions used the same theme more than once. Consequently, the references to specific grants sometimes reflect multiple uses of a theme. We did not include priorities for grants that were specific to higher education settings because this report focuses on K-12 education.

Table 5 lists the most common themes in the more recent School Safety National Activities program. These were: (1) serving specific populations or geographic areas; (2) collaboration, coordination, or partnerships with other organizations; and (3) building capacity for school infrastructure.

Table 5: The Most Frequently Used Themes in Priorities for the School Safety National Activities Program, Fiscal Years 2018–2024

Grant announcements for fiscal years

Theme	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Preventing drug abuse and violence	CT	PP CT	○	○	○	○	○
Emergency response and crisis management plans	SEM						
Applying as a new potential grantee	SEM	○	○	○	○	○	SMH MHD
Serving specific populations or geographic areas ^a	○	CT	SMH	○	PP	○	○
Increasing the number of school-based mental health services providers	○	MHD	SMH	○	SMH MHD	MHD MHT	SMH MHD
Collaboration, coordination, or partnerships with other organizations	○	PP	○	○	PP MHD	MHD	MHD
Building capacity for school infrastructure	○	○	○	○	○	NC SI	○

Legend: Cells with abbreviations included that theme (abbreviations for specific grant listed below) ○ Did not include that theme

CT: School Climate Transformation Grant Program

MHD: Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program

MHT: Mental Health Personnel Technical Assistance Center

NC: National Center on School Infrastructure Program
PP: Project Prevent Grant Program
SEM: Grants to States for School Emergency Management Program
SI: Supporting America's School Infrastructure Grant Program
SMH: School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe specific populations include American Indian/Alaska Native students and children from low-income backgrounds. The specific areas include rural local educational agencies or applicants, local education agencies that serve a federally recognized Tribe, and Qualified Opportunity Zones.

Note: This table includes themes that were present in at least five Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Activities and School Safety National Activities grant competitions from 2001 through 2024. We grouped priorities with similar content into themes, generally by analyzing Education's descriptive titles for priorities. In some years the grant competitions used the same theme more than once. Consequently, the references to specific grants sometimes reflect multiple uses of a theme. We did not include priorities for grants that were specific to higher education settings because this report focuses on K-12 education.

How and when has Education used priorities in the Education Innovation and Research program?

Education used priorities 271 times in 42 grant announcements for EIR and its predecessor, the Investing in Innovation program (i3). These include 19 grant announcements for the i3 program from 2010 through 2016 and 23 grant announcements for the EIR program from 2017 through 2024. According to Education, the purpose of the EIR program is to create, develop, implement, replicate, or scale entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students and to rigorously evaluate such innovations. The EIR program is designed to generate and validate solutions to persistent education challenges and to support the expansion of those solutions to serve substantially larger numbers of students over time. For most years, Education published three grant announcements: early phase, mid-phase, or expansion grants in the EIR program and development, scale-up, and validation grants in the i3 program.

We grouped common priorities for the EIR and i3 programs into themes. Table 6 lists the most common themes. These were: (1) promoting or improving education in science, technology, engineering, mathematics; or computer science; (2) promoting equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities; and (3) serving rural local educational agencies.

Table 6: The Most Frequently Used Themes in Priorities for the Investing in Innovation and Education Innovation and Research Programs, Fiscal Years 2010–2023

Theme	Grant announcements for fiscal years														
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Increasing postsecondary preparedness	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Implementing college- and career-ready academic standards and assessments	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Serving rural local educational agencies	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Serving specific populations and geographic areas to improve academic outcomes ^a	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving the effectiveness and equitable distribution of effective teachers or principals	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving low-performing schools	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving early learning outcomes	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Improving cost-effectiveness and productivity	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Using technology to improve instruction	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Grant announcements for fiscal years

Theme	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Promoting or improving education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); or computer science	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
Supporting novice applicants	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Enabling broad adoption of effective practices	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Using evidence-driven practices and moderate or strong evidence	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Supporting field-initiated innovations to improve outcomes for high-need students	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
Demonstrating a rationale for proposed actions based on research	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Addressing the impact of COVID-19	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	○	●
Promoting equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities, including STEM, educators, and partners	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
Meeting student social, emotional, and academic needs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●

Legend: ● Included that theme ○ Did not include that theme

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe specific populations include students with disabilities, English learners, high-need students, students who are living in poverty, students who are members of federally recognized Indian tribes, disconnected youth, and migrant youth. The specific areas are rural local educational agencies, lowest-performing schools, and high-poverty schools.

Note: This table includes themes that were present in at least five Investing in Innovation and Education Innovation and Research programs grant competitions from 2010 through 2024. We grouped priorities with similar content into themes, generally by analyzing Education’s descriptive titles for priorities. In some years the grant competitions used the same theme more than once. Consequently, the number of dark circles sometimes reflects multiple uses of a theme.

How and when has Education used priorities in the Charter Schools Program?

Education used priorities 274 times in 71 grant announcements for the Charter Schools Program from 2001 through 2024. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are governed by independent organizations. The purpose of the Charter Schools Program is to provide funds to create promising new public charter schools, replicate high-quality public charter schools, and disseminate information about effective practices within charter schools, according to Education. Education awards several types of Charter Schools Program grants such as those that aim to help open or expand schools and find or maintain suitable facilities.

We grouped common priorities into themes. Table 7 lists the most common themes. These were: (1) serving specific populations or geographic areas to improve academic outcomes and access to charter schools; (2) providing for at least one authorized public chartering agency other than a local educational agency, or an appeals process; (3) providing for periodic review and evaluation; and (4) promoting diverse student bodies.

Table 7: The Most Frequently Used Themes in Priorities for the Charter Schools Program, Fiscal Years 2001–2024

Theme	Grant announcements for fiscal years																								
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	
Providing for at least one authorized public chartering agency other than a local educational agency, or an appeals process	○	PC	PC	CS FI	CS	CS	CS	CS	CS FI	CS	SE	○	○	FI	SE	SE	SE	SE	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE	
Providing for periodic review and evaluation	○	PC	PC	CS FI	CS	CS	CS	CS	CS FI	CS	SE	○	○	FI	SE	SE	SE	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Ensuring that each charter school has a high degree of autonomy	○	PC	PC	CS FI	CS	CS	CS	CS	CS FI	CS	SE	○	○	FI	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Demonstrating progress in increasing the number of high-quality charter schools	○	PC	PC	CS FI	CS	CS	CS	CS	CS FI	CS	SE	○	○	FI	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Increasing the capacity of charter schools to offer public school choice in communities with the greatest need	○	○	PC CE	FI	CE	○	CE	○	CE FI	○	CE	○	○	CE FI	○	○	CE	CE	CE	○	○	○	○	○	
Planning, designing, and implementing new charter schools to address specific goals	○	○	○	CS	CS	CS	CS	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Improving high school achievement and graduation rates for at-risk students	○	○	○	○	○	○	CS	CS NS	CS NS	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE	SE	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE	
Selecting applicants that have not previously received a grant	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	FI	○	○	RE	○	FI RE	SE RE	RE	CM	○	CM FI DV	DV	○	○	○	FI	
Selecting applicants with experience operating or managing high-quality charter schools	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	RE	RE	RE	○	RE	RE	RE	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
Serving specific populations or geographic areas to improve academic outcomes and access to charter schools ^a	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	RE	SE RE NS	RE NS	NS	RE NS	RE NL	RE NS	CM	DV	CM DV	CM DV	○	○	○	○	
School improvement efforts in areas with low-performing public schools	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	RE NS	SE RE NS	RE NS EC	○	RE	RE	RE	CM	○	CM	CM	○	○	○	○	
Targeting projects and services to Promise Zones or Opportunity Zones (designated low-income communities)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	RE	RE	RE	○	○	DV CE FI	SE CM DV	○	○	○	○	
Promoting diverse student bodies	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE RE NS	RE NS	NS	RE NS	RE	RE NS	CM	○	CM	○	○	○	○	CM	CM

Grant announcements for fiscal years

Theme	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Provide funding, assistance, or other supports for charter school facilities	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE	SE ND	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE
Financing approaches	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	CE	○	CE	○	○	○	○	○	SE CE	SE CE	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE
Charter school oversight	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE	SE	SE	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Implementing best practices for charter school authorizing	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE	SE	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE
Demonstrating state use of charter school best practices to improve struggling schools and local educational agencies	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE	SE	SE	SE	○	SE	SE	SE
Preparing high school students for higher education	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	DV	CM	CM	○	○	CM	CM
Engaging educators and community members in developing charter schools	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	DV	CM DV	CM DV
Collaborating between charter schools and traditional public schools	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	SE DV	SE CM DV	SE CM DV

Legend: Cells with abbreviations included that theme (abbreviations for specific grant listed below) ○ Did not include that theme

CE: Grants for Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities

CM: Grants to Charter Management Organizations for the Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools

CS: Charter Schools Program

DV: Grants to Charter School Developers for the Opening of New Charter Schools and for the Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools

EC: Charter School Exemplary Collaboration Awards

FI: State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants Program

ND: National Dissemination Grants

NL: Grants for National Leadership Activities

NS: Grants to Non-State Educational Agencies for Planning, Program Design, and Implementation and for Dissemination

PC: Public Charter Schools Program

RE: Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools

SE: Grants for State Educational Agencies and Grants to State Entities

Source: GAO analysis of *Federal Register* announcements. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe specific populations include students with disabilities, English learners, Native American students, students who are members of federally recognized Indian tribes, students from low-income families, who are living in poverty or who attend high-poverty schools, and students in rural communities.

Note: This table includes themes that were present in at least five Charter Schools Program grant competitions from 2001 through 2024. We limited acronyms to two letters in this table for formatting purposes. We grouped priorities with similar content into themes, generally by analyzing Education’s descriptive titles for priorities. In some years the grant competitions used the same theme more than once. Consequently, the references to specific grants sometimes reflect multiple uses of a theme.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Education for review and comment. Education provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

How GAO Did This Study

We analyzed *Federal Register* announcements related to Education's department-wide and selected K-12 program-specific discretionary grantmaking priorities since it began establishing them in 2001. We searched for announcements published between January 2001 and July 2024 (the most recent year available) and confirmed with Education that our lists were accurate and complete. Education reviewed our list of announcements for both department-wide and program-specific priorities. Education identified additional announcements, which revised its grant regulations, that it considered to be department-wide priorities. We added these to our list of department-wide priorities.⁴ The department-wide priorities we found were published between November 2001 and December 2021.

We also analyzed all department-wide and program-specific priorities included in grant announcements for the three largest discretionary grant programs administered by OESE (in total dollars awarded during fiscal year 2023) and their predecessor programs. These grant announcements were published between May 2001 and May 2024 (see table 8). We selected OESE because it oversees the largest share of discretionary grant programs.

Table 8: Selected Discretionary Grant Programs GAO Studied Regarding How Education Used Priorities in Grant Announcements, Fiscal Years 2001-2024

Program	2023 appropriation (in thousands of dollars)	Grant announcement publication dates ^c
School Safety National Activities ^a	216,000	May 2001–March 2024
Education Innovation and Research ^b	284,000	March 2010–May 2024
Charter Schools Program	440,000	May 2001–May 2024

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education budget documents. | GAO-25-107141

^aThe School Safety National Activities program's predecessor, Safe and Drug-free Schools and Communities National Activities, first awarded grants in 2001.

^bThe Education Innovation and Research program's predecessor, Investing in Innovation, first awarded grants in 2010.

^cEach grant announcement designated a fiscal year when the grant would be awarded. These dates did not always coincide with the calendar year when the announcement was published.

For both the department-wide priority announcements and the individual program announcements, we grouped priorities with similar content into themes to present information about the priorities and identify similarities over time. For this analysis, we generally focused on Education's descriptive titles for priorities. Since priorities listed in the *Federal Register* often include detailed descriptions, this analysis focused on providing summary information about priorities' areas of focus. Many of the priorities did not have content similar to other priorities, and they remained as standalone themes. To conduct the content analysis, two analysts independently reviewed the grant priorities and grouped them. If the analysts disagreed about the categorization, a third analyst reviewed the priority. This analysis did not include an independent legal review. When reviewing the department-wide priority announcements, we also compiled information about the laws that Education cited regarding its program authority. When reviewing program-specific grant announcements, we also collected some information about the laws and regulations that Education referenced regarding priorities.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2023 to December 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
Committee on Education and the Workforce
House of Representatives

Representative Gregory F. Murphy
House of Representatives

Representative Burgess Owens
House of Representatives

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Education, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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Endnotes

¹In this report, we use calendar year dates, except when reporting on dates directly related to fiscal year award cycles.

²20 U.S.C. § 1221e-3.

³20 U.S.C. § 3474.

⁴Education also identified 14 announcements for the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities National Activities program related specifically to post-secondary education. We excluded these programs from our analysis because this report is focused on K-12 education.