

# 2026 Grants Guidelines

**November 2025**

***Subject to changes***



# About American Student Assistance® (ASA)

American Student Assistance® (ASA) is a national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through access to career readiness information and experiences for all. ASA helps middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. ASA fulfills its mission—in schools and beyond the classroom—by providing free digital experiences, including Futurescape® and EvolveMe®, directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, research, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. ASA fosters a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. To learn more about ASA, visit [www.asa.org/about-asa](http://www.asa.org/about-asa).

## About our grantmaking:

We collaborate with mission-driven organizations to expand access to impactful programs, identify effective practices for student success, advance the field with new solutions to persistent challenges, and use these insights to influence policy change. We offer grants (up to three years) to nonprofit and community-based organizations that are leading innovative initiatives for middle school and high school aged-youth.

This document outlines our grantmaking priorities and processes for organizations interested in applying.

*Please note - as of November 2025, we are undergoing organizational changes, so priorities and timelines outlined are subject to change as our planning evolves.*

For more information about our grantmaking, visit [www.asa.org/csr](http://www.asa.org/csr).

# Grantmaking Strategy & Focus Areas

## Who We Serve

Middle and high school-aged learners and the education-to-career ecosystem in all U.S. communities, with an emphasis on historically underserved communities who lack access to career-connected learning (CCL), including rural youth, systems-involved youth, youth of color, Indigenous youth, immigrant youth, LGBTQ+ youth, English language learners and youth with disabilities.

## What We Fund

### Explore

Opportunities for youth to **explore careers, their interests, and aptitudes**, so that they have the knowledge and confidence to make informed, empowered decisions about the next step in their educational and career journey.

### Experiment

Opportunities for youth to **experiment with careers through hands-ons career connected learning (CCL)**, so that they are more equipped to make informed, empowered decisions throughout their educational and career journey.

### Navigate

Opportunities to **foster enabling conditions that support young people** so that they are more equipped to make informed, confident decisions about their postsecondary educational and career pathways immediately after high school.

## What We Hope to Achieve

- Increase number of youth who demonstrate career readiness across our three focus areas
- Scale capacity of organizations to serve additional students or innovate new programs and policies
- Catalyze engagement of supportive adults and organizations in the ecosystem

# Eligibility Criteria & Funding Types

**In order to be eligible for grants funding, organizations must:**

- ✓ Align with ASA’s mission and vision
- ✓ Have valid 501(c)(3) nonprofit certification, fiscal sponsorship, or infrastructure for managing philanthropic grants
- ✓ Propose an initiative that benefits middle school and high school-aged youth and young adults
- ✓ Consider removing barriers for all youth to participate in career connected learning (CCL), with emphasis on historically underserved or underrepresented populations

**We do not fund:**

- × Programs that only address academic outcomes, with limited ties to CCL
- × Individual pursuits such as tuition/scholarships or travel costs
- × Political activities or direct lobbying efforts
- × Religious activities
- × Fundraising events or capital campaigns
- × Episodic activities or one-time trainings or events
- × Organizations already engaged in strategic partnerships or financial relationships with ASA
- × Costs of sustaining existing programs, with limited plans to expand or scale
- × New development of AI tools or digital platforms

**Funding Types:**

**Systems Change (Up to \$1,500,000 total, allocated over 3 years)**

- Strategies or initiatives informing practices for education-to-career ecosystem at a national level or the field at large
- Campaigns changing public opinions, understanding or awareness of an issue related to CCL
- Initiatives changing how local, regional or state systems operate or providing large scale opportunity for CCL, in particular within the following states: Arizona, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington.

**Direct Service (Up to \$300,000 total, allocated over 3 years)**

- High touch digital or in-person experiences directly impacting youth or supportive adults.
- Programing **must** occur within the following states: Arizona, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington.
- Program **must** be available to students experiencing any barriers to access CCL opportunities.

# Review Criteria

Proposal Alignment to ASA’s Mission	Organization provides or promotes career connected learning (CCL) through exploration, experimentation, or navigation (see slide 3)
Innovation	Organization will implement new practices (digitally or in-person) or demonstrates significant potential for advancing the field. Organization can clearly articulate its strengths or capacity for advancing the field, as well as what sets it apart in the regions they operate within.
Evidence of Community-centric Approach	Organization demonstrates a strong commitment to removing barriers for participation in CCL, which is clearly reflected in its mission, vision, and values. This commitment is further evident through representation of the lived experiences of those served by the organization at the executive and board levels, and elements of authentic youth engagement in program development, design and/or implementation.
Thought Leadership	Ability to impact or engage key audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Students</li><li>● Educators</li><li>● Employers</li><li>● Parents/guardians</li><li>● Researchers</li><li>● Community Partners</li><li>● Program/Product Partners</li><li>● Policy Makers</li></ul>
Impact: Potential for Scale	Implementation plan can easily be expanded beyond initial audience and/or replicated in other contexts. Funding would be used to expand on existing programming by adding a new component, population served OR widening program scope by location or content area.
Impact: Likelihood to be Effective	Programming has clearly defined implementation plan, goals and outcomes for key audiences and processes in place to measure success. Intended program is strongly supported by appropriate research and by prior track record of success.

# 2026 Strategic Priorities

In addition to our review criteria, we will also consider portfolio fit, anticipated trends for 2026, and learnings from our prior grantmaking.

We will explore **emerging trends** that are broader in scope or will influence the field at large, such as:

- Strategies or initiatives that engage **supportive adults** who are helping youth in their education and career journeys:
  - *Educators/Practitioners*: Technical assistance for adults implementing scalable career exploration models that prioritize personalized and hands-on experiences and align with what middle school students find most helpful, or guidance models that incorporate awareness of diverse post-secondary pathways (short-term credentials and non-degree pathways).
  - *Employers*: Models that remove barriers for employers to offer work-based learning, or promote inclusive hiring and onboarding practices.
  - *Parents/Guardians*: Narrative change campaigns, tools and resources for parents/guardians to increase understanding of diverse post-secondary pathway options and capacity to support youth in post-secondary planning.
- Advance understanding of **AI's impact on the future of work, AI literacy skills and the responsible use of AI tools**. This may include programs that can increase youths' critical thinking skills and other durable skills or professional development, support educators in understanding AI and its use in classrooms to prepare students for future careers, or resources for practitioners to see how AI can be used at work.
- Align the field on definitions and frameworks of **quality indicators for career exploration, work-based learning, post-secondary programming, and credentials**.

In addition, we will expand on **community-centric grantmaking**, working with state education leaders and youth leaders to drive grantmaking, with a particular focus on: **Arizona, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington**.

- **State-wide strategies** to expand access to career connected learning (CCL) for all. Priorities will be set in partnership with local leaders.
- **Relevant, innovative models in local communities** to expand direct access to career connected learning. Priorities and decisions will be set by youth leaders.
- *Decisions may be deferred to our cohort 2 timeline (July-October) to ensure alignment with local priorities and needs.*

# Timeline & How to Apply



## Instructions:

1. Interested nonprofit organizations submit an [eligibility form](#) through our website with initial ideas. To support ideation, we will host a series of [virtual open houses](#) leading up to each application cycle to share live briefings of our priorities and provide opportunity for Q&A.
2. We will review eligibility form submissions and respond within **2 weeks**. Our team may reach out for additional information to assess alignment.
3. Eligible organizations will be **invited to submit** a full application for consideration.
4. Funding decisions will be made according to the timeline provided above.

*\* We highly encourage community-centric project ideas serving these states to apply during the Cohort 2 timeline:  
Arizona, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington*



# Grant Application Questions

## Systems Change

**\*\*Recommended** word limit: Up to 500 words per long form question

- Estimated annual #of individuals (ex. youth, parents/guardians, educators, employers, community members) directly served through ASA funding **and** across the organization.
  - If the work does not involve youth: Provide estimated # of youth indirectly served through ASA funding **and** across the organization.
- Brief background information on your organization including:
  - mission
  - existing programs provided
  - time in operation
  - examples of prior success in projects of this kind
  - and your organization's capacity and experience in (1) driving system change efforts or (2) thought leadership campaigns, as applicable.
- Provide a project overview or description of what your organization is trying to accomplish through this funding. Specify anticipated milestones for each year if applying for a multi-year grant.
- What specific systems (ie - school/district operations, workforce development ecosystems, policy barriers, etc.) is your organization looking to change through this project?
- Why is this project a necessary and relevant solution for the field or the community your organization serves?
- What are the key outcomes for this project and how will your organization measure success? Include context on data collection methods.
- Describe the strength of your organization's current networks and partnerships that will support these efforts.
- How will this project remove barriers for participation in career-connected learning?
- What is your organization doing to center youth perspectives in programming and decision-making? Please provide specific examples.

## Direct Service

**\*\*Recommended** word limit: Up to 500 words per long form question

- Estimated annual #of individuals (ex. youth, parents/guardians, educators, employers, community members) directly served through ASA funding **and** across the organization.
  - If the work does not involve youth: Provide estimated # of youth indirectly served through ASA funding **and** across the organization.
- Brief background information on the organization including:
  - mission
  - existing programs provided
  - time in operation
  - and examples of prior success with programs serving youth
- Share a success story that your organization is proud of.
- Provide a project overview or description of what your organization is trying to accomplish through this funding. Specify anticipated milestones for each year if applying for a multi-year grant.
- Why is this project a necessary and relevant solution for the field or the community your organization serves?
- What are the key outcomes for this project and how will your organization measure success? Include context on data collection methods.
- How will this project remove barriers for participation in career-connected learning?
- Describe the scalability plan for this initiative. Where does your organization see this program in 3-5 years?
- What is this organization doing to center youth perspectives in programming and decision-making? Please provide specific examples.



# Frequently Asked Questions

**More Questions?**  
philanthropy@asa.org

## **Can I submit an idea that is outside of the key states identified for community-centric grantmaking?**

Yes, but grant application invitations will be highly competitive. Special consideration would be given to ideas that are national in scope or advances the field at large.

## **Can we submit a single applications that covers both funding types?**

We encourage comprehensive proposals that address elements of both systems change and direct service. For reporting purposes, please select the primary funding type that best aligns with the project's outcomes or key deliverables.

## **Can I submit multiple applications?**

Yes, you can submit multiple applications for different funding types, as long as each proposal is unique and focuses on distinct objectives.

## **What is the maximum amount of funding I can apply for?**

See Slide 4.

## **Do you provide support for general operating expenses?**

Project budgets may dedicate up to 20% of the requested amount towards general operating costs.

## **What if we serve everyone and don't have a specific target population for our programs?**

If your program or initiative doesn't focus on a specific population, we recommend clarifying how you ensure equitable access to career-connected learning for all participants. For more details, please refer to Slide 3 under "Who We Serve."

## **What are your reporting requirements?**

Once approved, we work with each grantee to establish metrics that are mutually relevant, aligning with both your organization's priorities and our strategic objectives. Organizations can expect to submit one written annual report, tailored to the size of the organization, the scope of the project, and the type of grant. These reports are straightforward and focus on the agreed-upon measures of success and impact, combining both qualitative insights and quantitative results.

## **Can I schedule a 1:1 meeting to discuss funding opportunities?**

To respect your time, we ask that you first submit an [eligibility form with initial ideas on our website](#). If there is alignment, we will reach out directly for further conversations. We will also offer [virtual open house hours](#), where we review our guidelines and priorities and offer opportunity for Q&A.

## **I'm a current grantee. How can I apply for renewal?**

If you are a current grantee, we will schedule a meeting after your final report to review your existing grant and discuss potential opportunities for continued collaboration.

