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Q&A: Smart Schools Bond Act

New York's Smart Schools Bond Act was approved by voters in November 2014. The \$2 billion bond act is intended to provide school districts with funding for new educational technology and infrastructure improvements to enhance learning opportunities for all students across the state.

According to the New York Smart Schools Commission Report, released in October 2014, the bond act's primary focus is to meet the demand for expanded online learning and help even the technological playing field by leveraging technology resources for 21st-century students and teachers.

Like its name implies, the Smart Schools Bond Act requires schools to make strategic decisions regarding upgrades. To be eligible for funding, each school district is required to:

- Draft a Smart Schools Improvement Plan linked to a long-range educational technology plan;
- Involve the community in its planning; and
- Have the Smart Schools plan approved by the New York State Education Department as part of a detailed review process.

School districts can also choose to use Smart Schools funding to install high-tech security upgrades, to expand pre-kindergarten programs by building additional classroom space or to replace temporary classrooms with permanent instructional space.

How much money can my district receive?

The amount of money a school district can receive is determined proportionally in a formula created by the State Education Department. To find the amount of money your school district is eligible to receive, visit: <http://programs.governor.ny.gov/smart-schools-ny>.

When will my district receive its Smart Schools funding?

Smart Schools projects in each school district will develop at an individual pace. The State Education Department, which is charged with administering the program, has created a detailed, multi-step application process for districts that want to access funds. This includes capital planning at the local level for any infrastructure upgrades, review of a district's Instructional Technology Plan for districts planning to purchase devices or equipment for classroom use, and creation and approval of the Smart Schools Investment Plan, which must be in place before any project is initiated. How long approval will take for individual projects is unknown; however, Smart Schools bond funds never expire and remain available until a district has used its entire allocation.



Districts will have to purchase upgraded equipment first before being reimbursed later with bond act funds. Funding is only intended for one-time equipment or hardware purchases—not for software, ongoing support, professional development, staffing, or prior purchases.

What are some examples of eligible Smart Schools projects?

Smart Schools projects generally fall into one of four categories:

- **Projects to increase connectivity**, such as construction and wiring costs for expanding wired/wireless access in and around school buildings.
- **Projects to provide learning technology equipment**, such as interactive whiteboards, computer servers, tablets, and desktop/laptop computers.

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- **Projects to facilitate pre-K upgrades and/or replace temporary classrooms**, such as building new pre-K classrooms, modernizing existing facilities used for pre-K, and building new space to replace temporary classrooms.
- **Projects to install high-tech security**, such as cameras, main entrance intercoms and locking systems, and the installation of other security features.



Q What items are not eligible for Smart Schools funding?

Like other bond-financed capital projects, the Smart Schools Bond Act, by law, cannot finance employee salaries or operating costs. Staff training, support, curriculum materials, and professional development costs are not covered, nor can the money be used to hire additional technology staff. In other words, with Smart Schools, you can use the funds to “buy it or build it” but not staff it or service it. Other items not covered by Smart Schools funding include:

- Recurring costs associated with use and maintenance of new equipment
- Leased equipment
- Internet services, web hosting, and web casting
- Prior expenditures

As part of their Smart Schools Investment Plans, districts are required to demonstrate a long-term plan to physically maintain technology equipment purchases made under the Smart Schools Bond Act in a useful condition, despite the fact that this maintenance is not covered by Smart Schools funds.

Q Will Smart Schools projects affect the overall school district budget or the taxes I pay?

Districts are required to purchase equipment first before being reimbursed under Smart Schools. As such, the expenditures for purchases must be included in a district’s annual budget—increasing spending in the year that the purchases are made and potentially affecting school tax rates. The speed with which the State Education Department processes a claim for reimbursement is a factor in determining whether that claim is paid in the same fiscal year or in a future year. If a district does not receive reimbursement in the same fiscal year, the district must plan to use other revenue to balance the costs of Smart Schools purchases. There will also be budget and tax implications associated with the costs of professional development, training and technical support or other expenses associated with maximizing integration of new technology.

Q Can Smart Schools funding be used for Capital projects?

Yes. If Smart Schools funds are used as part of a larger capital project, local voter approval would be required in advance. However, it is important to note that Smart Schools funds may not be used for project costs that have already been funded by local bond financing.

Q If my district does not have or plan to expand pre-K, will it lose a portion of Smart Schools funding?

No. Using Smart Schools funds to build or upgrade pre-K facilities is just one eligible use for the money, but districts have other options, as outlined above.

Q Are private schools entitled to a share of Smart Schools money?

Yes. Districts must loan, upon request, classroom technology obtained through the bond act to children attending non-public schools located within their boundaries. This requirement is similar to existing textbook and computer loans made by districts to non-public schools. The Smart Schools equipment loans would be capped at a value of \$250 per student enrolled in any non-public school.

Q Will parents and community members be involved with Smart Schools plans?

Before a school district can apply for any funding under the bond act, the district must submit a comprehensive Smart Schools Investment Plan. The plan must be tied to a district’s long-term educational technology plan and be written in consultation with parents, teachers, students, community members, any non-public schools located in the district and other stakeholders. In addition, a draft of the plan must be made available for public comment before it is submitted to the New York State Education Department for approval.

For more information on the Smart Schools Bond Act, please visit: www.pl2.nysed.gov/mgtserv/smart_schools.