

Grant Writing 101

Grants could help ease tight school budgets, but they take time, work, and some savvy to be successful in bringing money to your district

Kenneth T. Henson



Three years ago, when President Obama announced his economic stimulus plan, I received a call from National Public Radio asking me how this new plan would affect education grant writing. Around the same time, I started a book for education leaders on how to use grants to stretch their budgets. Everyone was hungry for information that would help educators respond to the economic downturn.

Since then, I have spent hundreds of hours talking to grant writers and grant directors in school districts throughout the country. I was searching for practical tips that would help school leaders pull their schools out of their current budgetary woes.

The following is a tour of the school districts profiled in my book. You will meet grant officers and teachers who have taken up the challenge of boosting district budgets through grant money.

Passion: Charleston, S.C.

Let's start in my hometown, where we will meet a first-grade teacher named Christine File. Christine needed some rather expensive books for her students that her school couldn't afford. She heard about a website named DonorsChoose.org, where potential donors scan the website looking for projects to sponsor.

File's eyes light up when she talks about reading. "Kids who enjoy reading will read more often. They will also be more inclined to do the schoolwork that requires reading, and will enjoy it more. A whole new world will open to them," she says. In my grant-writing workshops, I advise my participants to always choose topics they are passionate about. Successful grant writing is about getting money, and more; it's about making dreams come true.

File says that teachers of all subjects can apply for one

of these grants. "Furthermore," she says, "the directions are clear and simple. I spent 30 minutes writing my first fully funded grant, and I got a much-needed set of materials for my classroom." From File, I witnessed the role that passion always plays in successful grant writing, and I realized that every school district in the U.S. has at least one teacher at each grade level with this level of enthusiasm and drive. Along with creativity, passion is perhaps the most important quality a grant writer can have.

Grant writing can raise the level of a teacher; it also can raise the level of a school and even of an entire school district.

Persistence: Greenville, Pa.

There is a natural connection among grant writers, and I have never felt it more than when I talked to John Ziegler, former principal of Greenville High School and current professor of education at Edinboro University.

Ziegler offered me the example of an excellent technology grant that had successfully raised the academic performance at his school to a new level. He told me about a grant that had been rejected. When he followed up on the rejection (as grant writers always should do), the evaluator explained that she couldn't find a particular budgeted item in the narrative. Ziegler responded to her by saying, "You know. It's like ragu. It's in there."

This story reminded me of how important it is to make everything clear, not just to you but to the evaluators. Writing grant proposals isn't like cooking pasta. Just knowing that all the essential parts are mixed up somewhere in there won't work. Every item must be made crystal clear. You do this by putting every part in its place and in the right order. The visit also reminded me that successful grant writers don't give up because of a rejection. Instead, they use it to improve their proposal for its next submission.

Collaboration: Burlington, Vt.

When I met Julie Cadwallader-Staub, director of grants at the Burlington School District, I knew that her bottom-line concern was the welfare of her students. I was impressed to see that her concern also spilled over to include *all* children, everywhere. Her generosity was matched by her wisdom.

I asked her to give me an important tip that I could pass on to my readers. She responded immediately, “Begin by informing your district offices of your intentions.” This practice, of course, has many advantages. It opens the door for support from these offices. It avoids having multiple requests simultaneously arriving on the desks of the same grantor, which can turn off potential funders. Alerting the central office of your grant activities also can lead to the development of a larger, collaborative proposal—the type needed to make serious, systemic school improvements.

Connections: Tahoe, Calif.

I felt immediate respect for the Tahoe grant office when I learned about Kathy Haven. Haven is not the superintendent, nor is she the district’s grant director. In fact, she is not even an employee of the school system. Haven is a parent whose children attend a Tahoe school. To improve the quality of her children’s education, she writes grants for their school.

Haven’s story is exciting for two reasons. First, I respect any parent who is so dedicated to helping improve the education of her children. Second, we all recognize that each district and each school has parents who, like Haven, are extremely capable and who stand ready to support their schools.

Unfortunately, as you know, many willing parents are not comfortable enough to initiate such a relationship with their school. For this support to happen, the school leaders must bring these parents into the school family, make them full partners, and let them share the school’s successes. It appears that the Tahoe school leaders and grant officers model this practice well.

Excellence: Natrona, Wyo.

The next leg of our trip will take us to Natrona, where Emily King oversees the writing of many grants for her district. I could tell that her grant-writing team runs like a well-oiled machine.

All effective grant-writing programs have certain characteristics: good communications, coordination of activities, common mission statement and goals, and a feeling of shared ownership. In addition to having its mission statement, this district maintains a list of its grant writers’ names and addresses, along with a description of the expertise of each member of the grant-writing team. Your list of experts should include members of the community who are willing to serve on your grant-writing team.

Find a hook: Jonesboro, Ark.

All school leaders who are interested in using grants to make systemic improvements in their schools must learn how to effectively target some of their proposals to foundations. Foundations are the sources that fund some of the largest grants in the country—the type of grants that are perfect for making systemic improvements in school districts. Some of the foundations, such as the Lilly Endowment and the Gates, Rockefeller, and Kellogg foundations, are billion-dollar businesses.

After serving for five years as a former foundation program director at one of the nation’s largest foundations, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, John Beineke has an inside view of foundations. He says most foundations are inundated with many more requests than they can support, making writing for foundations highly competitive. On average, each foundation is able to fund only about one out of every 20 proposals it receives.

Before you can get money from a foundation, you have to know the size of the proposals your targeted foundation funds and its mission. Beineke says that a major quality that determines whether a proposal is funded is its degree of creativity. We must put unique features in each proposal to hook the evaluators. I especially valued Beineke’s advice to all who prepare proposals for foundations: “Read, read, read. Read every journal article you can find on the topics for which you hold some passion. Listen to your communities. Know their needs, but even more important, know their strengths.”

These two features—including unique qualities and emphasizing the district’s strengths and the community’s strengths instead of their needs—were responsible for tipping the scales in the funding of the 30 proposals I wrote for school districts.

Beineke leaves us one additional invaluable tip: When preparing a proposal for submission to a foundation, “Take time to think,” he says. “The readers recognize and demand proposals that have been thoroughly thought out, thoroughly investigated, and thoughtfully written.”

In my study of grant-writing offices, I learned that those districts with the best grant offices have leaders who are not afraid to empower their teachers. On the contrary, like most highly effective leaders everywhere these leaders trust, support, and encourage their teachers to get involved with grant writing, knowing that, in time, there will be failures and successes.

In the end, they celebrate their successes and view their failures as something good—steps to progress. The only failure in grant writing is not trying. ■

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