EYE ON THE PRIZE

A plan using these grant-seeking strategies will help principals acquire funds for their schools.

BY DAVID BAUER

STUDIES HAVE demonstrated the dramatic impact small discretionary funding can have on a school. Grant funding allows school leaders to think creatively by developing unique solutions to today’s educational challenges. By following these strategies, you, your faculty, parents, and advisory groups can attract grant funding that will make your school a dynamic learning environment.

Understanding the Marketplace
Before embarking on the grant-seeking process, you must understand the grants marketplace. Knowing the facts will help you direct your school’s grant-seeking efforts in the right direction, especially with respect to foundation and corporate grant support.

Many people overestimate giving by foundations because they only hear about large grants such as those awarded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. And most people think that corporations are the big grantors even though they are not; they just have excellent public relations. Wal-Mart’s total giving might be impressive, but when you look at the grants wall in your local store, you will see that the store’s grant
amount to each local school is relatively small. While every dollar helps, knowing this sort of information reminds you to take your school’s investment of time into consideration when selecting which marketplace to pursue.

According to Giving USA’s executive summary of its 2011 Annual Report on Philanthropy, corporations only gave 5 percent of the $290.9 billion in total charitable giving in 2010 and foundations granted 14 percent. However, giving to education rose 5.2 percent in 2010 and it received the second-highest share of charitable dollars that year, with an estimated 14 percent of the total. In 2009, the total foundation grants awarded to education were divided into nine subcategories, with higher education receiving the greatest percentage, followed by elementary/secondary education. Being aware of facts like these can be instrumental in developing your school’s grants strategy. For example, you might consider developing a consortium grant with a college or university to increase your chances of receiving foundation funding.

The sector of the grants marketplace with the greatest amount of funds is the government. Unfortunately, federal grantors often fund projects and research that require considerable time into consideration when selecting which marketplace to pursue.

The No. 1 key to successful grant-seeking is still the development of a proactive grants approach. The utmost factor in grant-seeking success is to start the process early and to avoid last-minute, chaotic attempts to meet deadlines. Most federal and state grant proposal deadlines change very little from year to year; therefore, there is no reason to wait until the latest guidelines are available to start the process. Proactive grant-seeking results in high success rates that encourage grant proposal activity. Reactive grant-seeking, or grant-seeking that occurs only as deadlines approach, produces inferior proposals that often end up rejected. Last-minute attempts poison the well for everyone because they have high failure rates, run everyone involved amuck with fatigue, and reduce faculty interest in developing future proposals.

Principal ONLINE
Access the following web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: www.naesp.org/NovDec11

The Foundation Center maintains a comprehensive database on grantors and their grants. Among the many resources on its website is a list of cooperating collections, which are free funding information centers throughout the U.S., as well as private foundations’ tax returns.

Grants.gov is a central storehouse for information on more than 1,000 federal grant programs and provides access to approximately $500 billion in annual awards.

The Internet has changed the way we search for grantors and how we submit proposals, the basics of successful grant-seeking are relatively the same.

One reason that chaos reigns in some schools’ approaches is that there are no grant-seeking priorities. The staff respond to any and all external grant opportunities—an activity that just fuels the reactive deadline game.

Proactive Grants System
Now that you have a better understanding of the grants marketplace, let me give you the good news. The keys to successful grant-seeking have not changed significantly in the past decade. While the Internet has changed the way we search for grantors and how we submit proposals, the basics of successful grant-seeking are relatively the same.

Since it is the principal’s responsibility to endorses and sign off on all submitted proposals, it is to your advantage to initiate the grant-seeking process early. By developing and supporting a proactive grants system, you can fend off the last-minute, reactive grant-seeker who wants you to invest in a poorly constructed “14-day miracle” that is likely to be rejected and cast a negative impression of your school.

One reason that chaos reigns in some schools’ approaches is that there are no grant-seeking priorities. The staff respond to any and all external grant opportunities—an activity that just fuels the reactive deadline game.

Steps to Grant Success
Form a school grants team. The number of individuals on a grants team can vary, but the core group should consist of six to eight members.
comprising students, faculty, parents, and staff who want to impact problem areas. Others can be added based on their areas of expertise.

In addition, more than one team can be created to focus on different problem areas. Focusing on the problems your grant-seeking efforts will address allows the grants team to collect data and ideas that will impact these issues.

The team will be the focal point for all grant ideas and will be responsible for researching federal and private potential grantors who fund innovative projects in the identified problem areas.

The group should use www.grants.gov to search for federal grants addressing the focused problem areas and go to the Foundation Center website (www.foundationcenter.org/collections) to locate the funding information center closest to them to help in the search for potential private grantors.

The team should also set up a calendar that indicates when grant deadlines are approaching. This way, a team member can contact proposal writers periodically to make sure they are on schedule.

You should inform all staff that the school has a grants process that starts with the grants team’s endorsement and that all proposals must be consistent with the priorities set by you and the team. Each grant idea will be critiqued by the team for how well it fits with the school’s priorities and the existing and proposed pedagogy, technology, curriculum, and facility usage.

The school grants team also will be responsible for providing prospective grant writers with instruction on the steps involved in proactive grant-seeking. This information could be provided on your school website or in a brochure and should include how the school articulates and coordinates its grants activities with the district’s central administration.

Procure a list of recent grantees and request copies of funded proposals. By knowing who a grantor funds, what the school grants team also will be responsible for providing prospective grant writers with instruction on the steps involved in proactive grant-seeking. This information could be provided on your school website or in a brochure and should include how the school articulates and coordinates its grants activities with the district’s central administration.

Procure a list of recent grantees and request copies of funded proposals. By knowing who a grantor funds, what grantees on their websites. If there is no list available on the web, then an email or phone call to the program officer is appropriate. In some cases, grant seekers can also find out the number of proposals received versus the number funded. This can help to calculate the odds for success and the likely return for the investment of the grants team’s scarce time.

If the prospective grantor is a private foundation, review the foundation’s IRS tax return, form 990-PF, which provides a host of information such as a list of grants paid and committed for future payment. This will enable the grants team to determine who the foundation funds and what type of projects it likes.

Once the grantee list has been procured and analyzed, the grants team should select several successful grantees from the list and contact the schools’ principals to inquire about their projects and to ask them to share a copy of their proposals. Reviewing copies of proposals the grantor has funded in the past will give the grant writer an idea of the types of objectives, methods, and format the funder prefers.

Promote a brainstorming session to develop solutions to the problem. Bring together the groups in your school that will have to work jointly to develop a unique approach to solving the problem. Grantors fund projects that provide innovative solutions to carefully identified problems. Thus, the solutions must be well developed and based on measurable outcomes that can account for the changes that are to occur as a result of the completion of the project’s methods and activities.

Use resources outside of your school. Most grants that are funded use a consortium of schools and take advantage of the expertise provided by local colleges and universities. All grantors look for strong evaluation components, scientifically valid methods, and the latest in statistical evaluation. Contact your local college or university’s school of education to help with your project’s statistical
design and to use its technology and computer resources. It is advisable to subcontract with a local college or university to do all the data collection. Not only do they usually work for a reasonable price, but they also act as a third-party, independent evaluator. From their standpoint, your project might provide the basis for a thesis or dissertation, or work study jobs for graduate students.

Be sure to include all of the components asked for by the grantor when writing the proposal. Also, always start with a clear definition of the problem you seek to correct in your school rather than the solution so that it is obvious to the prospective grantor that the proposal is based on a clearly defined need. If the problem is not well documented, it will be impossible to demonstrate down the line how the proposal’s solution impacts the problem in a measurable way. This is the most common criticism of education grant proposals. The principal is instrumental in keeping the grants team focused on clearly describing the problem before moving on to the solution.

Organize a mock review of the proposal. The mock review is a method to improve the proposals your school submits and should occur approximately two weeks before the submission deadline. This pre-submittal review should closely resemble the official review. This is possible if the grants team has done its homework and has developed insight into how the granting agency selects reviewers, the reviewers’ background, and what type of scoring system they follow. By obtaining comments and suggestions from peers prior to submission, the grants team can improve the proposal, which increases its chances of success. The principal’s role in this process cannot be overstated. By instituting and supporting mock reviews, you give your school’s grant-seeking effort the attention and credibility it deserves, which will help to dramatically increase your grant success rate and total funding.

As principal, you have a wonderful opportunity to empower your school through grant-seeking. By encouraging and supporting a proactive grant system that is based on clearly defined priorities and following the steps outlined in this article, the grants marketplace can be a tremendous resource for your school. Meet the challenge, take the lead, and start promoting a positive, productive grant-seeking venture today.

David Bauer is author of numerous books about grant-seeking, including The Principal’s Guide to Winning Grants and The “How To” Grants Manual.

Find Your Solutions in Mathematics Education with NCTM’s PreK–8 School Membership

No matter what challenges you and your teachers face, NCTM school membership can ease your way by offering the best in mathematics teaching solutions. Here are some top resources:

- **5 Free Individual e-Memberships**. That’s right, five of your math teachers will receive the benefits of an e-member: lessons, activities, discounts, and more.
- **Additional e-Memberships** available for a very low price.
- A copy of one of our award-winning journals, and more.

Sign up your school by 12/31/11 and receive $15 off; mention PR12.