Grant Writing 101

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When money is tight, principals may receive funding by writing a grant proposal. But it’s not an easy process.

No one knows a school’s weaknesses and needs like its principal, who is often called upon to come up with ideas for programs, products, and services to address them.

The problem is that most ideas, whether they involve personnel, equipment, software, or materials, require money. Because most schools operate with limited resources and fixed budgets, it is difficult to allocate funds to support many potentially promising ideas. But it doesn’t have to be this way if principals are willing to look for grants to fund their ideas.

Preparing a grant application is an involved, detail-oriented process that can be time-consuming and often frustrating. But undertaking the task reflects well on the quality and initiative of the principal, and validates the importance of the purpose for which the grant is proposed. This article offers suggestions to consider as you go through the grant-writing process.

Begin with an Idea

Everything begins with an idea that could solve a problem, reverse a trend, close an achievement gap, or improve instruction. Perhaps you have just finished reviewing annual test results and found some areas you feel could be improved. As you translate the need into the idea that will become the subject for your grant proposal, consider the following questions:

- Is the idea unique? Has it been proposed or studied before?
- What sets the idea apart from other ideas on the subject?
- Is the idea simple to understand?
- Do you have any data or evidence to suggest that the idea would be effective and successful?
- Is the idea something that can be easily implemented, or are there additional resources required that might make it prohibitive?
Seek Appropriate Funding Sources

For grant seekers, there are thousands of funding sources that address virtually any problem area or need. Places to find different types of grants are listed in the Web Resources box at the end of the article. Although you are free to apply for any grant, your time would be best spent whittling down prospective funding sources in order to focus on those best suited to your idea, situation, time frame, and commitment. For example, if your idea centers on a dropout prevention strategy, you don’t want to waste your time on a funding source focused on curriculum and instruction.

Although the amount of available funding increases as you move from district and local grants to state, national, and federal grants, the complexity of the application, the timeline, and the competition increases as well. If you need immediate funding or are in need of small-scale resources, you should look to district, community, or philanthropist foundations rather than the state or federal government.

As you search for funding sources, consider these questions:

- Am I looking in the right areas and using the right tools to identify funding sources?
- Is this particular grant appropriate for my idea or need?
- Will the grant provide adequate funding?

Plan Ahead

Writing a grant proposal is hard work. Once you’ve found an appropriate funding source, set up a general timeline with self-imposed dates for completion of the proposal components, with the final deadline several months in advance of the grant deadline.

In establishing your own schedule, consider these questions about the grant’s timeline:

- Is there an open deadline or are there several deadlines that must be adhered to?
- Does the deadline refer to receipt of the application or to the application’s postmark?
- Is there enough time to prepare and submit your proposal prior to the deadline?

Follow Instructions

When you apply for a grant, you are competing with hundreds to thousands of other applicants in pursuit of the same funds. Grant reviewers, burdened with the task of reviewing a large number of proposals, can reduce their workload by eliminating those proposals that have failed to follow instructions.

So read the instructions carefully. If necessary, consult the funding agency for clarification before proceeding. Note any specific requirements, such as page numbering, margins, fonts, page limits, and word count.

Prepare the Proposal

Most grants, especially the larger ones, have a structured format that
usually includes the following components: abstract, background, methods, and preliminary results.

Abstract. This is a concise, paragraph-long summary of your idea and how you plan to implement and test it. Because this is the first page the reviewers read, a well-written abstract is your chance to capture the reviewers’ attention and give them a reason to want to read more.

Background. This describes the general area your idea will address, research that has been done in the area, and how your idea will strengthen or provide a logical extension to current knowledge.

Methods. Here, you describe how you will test and prove your idea. You also should submit an alternative approach to ensure your idea will be adequately tested. This shows the reviewer you have thought through the process and have a contingency plan in place.

Preliminary results. These show the reviewer you have tested the methods you propose to use if the grant is approved.

You also need to be clear about how you will spend the funding agency’s money if your grant is approved. As you prepare the budget for a grant, consider the following:

- Is the total of your requested funds within the limits imposed by the funding agency?
- Is the budget flexible? What happens if a proposed item doesn’t yield the results you expected, or a better alternative arises after you submit the proposal?
- Is the budget comprehensive? For instance, if salaries are allowed, are benefits included?
- Have you adequately justified your budget expenditures?
- Are the numbers accurate? Calculate them several times and have colleagues recheck them for you. It’s far better to find discrepancies now than to have the grant reviewers find them later.

Give It a Proper Sendoff

After all this work, it’s a relief to finally write the last page. But before you send the grant off, do these four things:

Check for proper grammar and spelling. Perhaps the most important thing to avoid is misspelled words. These can call into question not only the basis of your proposal but your own competency. Make use of the spell-check capability of most word processing software. Also make sure to use proper syntax and avoid run-on sentences.

Avoid excessive use of acronyms and technical terms. Grant reviewers don’t like to waste time looking for definitions of acronyms and technical terms that may be perfectly obvious to you. Write the grant proposal as though you were explaining its purpose to a non-educator.

Have a colleague review it. Ask a colleague who is knowledgeable about the subject matter to proofread your proposal and consider proposed changes.

Meet the deadline. Don’t wait until just before the deadline to send your proposal to the funding agency. Failure to abide by the deadline is grounds for rejection before the proposal is even reviewed. Consider using express mail, which can provide proof that your proposal arrived on time.

Don’t Take No for an Answer

Rejected! Sometimes the proposal you worked so hard to assemble, and that you hoped would result in funding for your idea, is turned down. If that happens, give yourself 10 minutes behind closed doors to shout out loud, pound your fist on your desk, and possibly shed a few tears. After that, begin to strategize about what, if any, changes need to be made to the proposal to make it more effective. Before you try again, consider these questions:

- Did the agency that rejected your proposal send you the reviewer’s comments?
- Do you agree with the substance of the comments?
- Does the agency accept revised proposals?
- Where else can you submit the grant proposal?

Grants provide principals with opportunities to fund initiatives that would otherwise not be possible. Though writing grants is an involved process that requires time and commitment extending beyond the responsibilities and demands of the typical work day, it is increasingly becoming part of a principal’s role. I hope these suggestions are helpful to those planning to apply for grants.

Good luck!

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WEB RESOURCES


National grants: National Education Association www.nfie.org/grants.htm

American Association of School Administrators www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/funding/

National Association of Elementary School Principals www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=917

National curricular organizations: National Council of Teachers of English www.ncte.org/about/grants

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics www.nctm.org/about/grants.htm

National Science Teachers Association http://webwatchers.nsta.org/resources/grants.asp

National Council for the Social Studies www.socialstudies.org/awards/

State grants: State departments of education www.aasa.org/state_associations/education_departments.htm