

Funding Innovation

Getting Grants Takes Precision, Patience

Rick Allen

Teacher Diane Cammarano had a great idea to fire up her 5th graders about science in a way no textbook could. The problem was, she didn't have the money to pay for it. So she embarked on the road of grant proposal writing, a route more schools and teachers are taking to finance innovative K-12 learning by tapping into millions of dollars worth of private and public funding.

Cammarano successfully netted \$2,500 from a local company to pay for robotics kits for all her students at Indiana Avenue Elementary School in Iselin, N.J. Using the kits, students create miniature Mars Rovers, which they remotely control by computers. The Rover kits are the core of Cammarano's idea to bridge the topics of space, simple machines, and geology.

The project, says Cammarano, has started a chain reaction of independent research and collaboration among her students, who plan to construct a Martian landscape that they can explore with their miniature vehicles.

As many states face budget shortfalls and the ax falls on education funding, even more schools and teachers like Cammarano may decide to vie for grants to enrich classroom learning.

Finding a Good Match

The secret to writing successful grant proposals is finding a good match between a school's needs and the priorities of the grant giver, whether it's a private foundation or the government. Donna Fernandez, who maintains the award-winning School Grants Web site (<http://www.schoolgrants.org>), also writes grants for a nonprofit organization called Texans Can!, which supports charter schools for at-risk students in five Texas cities. With an accounting degree and 10 years of experience in the Dallas Independent School District, Fernandez has used her grant savvy to get the organization \$6 million in grants over the last two years.

The main reason grant proposals fail, says Fernandez, is that "people don't bother to read the grant guidelines very closely" and therefore don't address the priorities of the foundation or the corporation. Nonetheless, she also cautions against twisting the elements of a school's program just to fit a proposal's guidelines.

"You are likely to end up with a program that just doesn't work well for your situation," warns



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Fernandez. Such moves risk changing the whole focus of a school initiative, she adds.

Instead, educators should go to the sponsor's Web site to find out more about the organization, its goals, and the history of past winners to test the fit for the school or program.

Jane Geever develops workshops and books for the Foundation Center in New York and has used interviews with many U.S. grant makers to write *The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing*. According to Geever, grant sponsors often prefer that grant writers first outline their project in a generic proposal. This allows the grant writers to "think through" a program's main points and focus on its strengths as they talk with potential grant sponsors before making a formal application.

Be Vigilant

To stay a step ahead of the competition, schools or districts can subscribe to newsletters—such as *Grants for K-12* from Quinlan Publishing Group—that report public and private grant deadlines and offer specialized information on regional grants and government agencies, businesses, and foundations that sponsor grants.

If a school waits to find out about a grant from a general mailing or word of mouth, it won't have time to prepare a proposal, says Donald Orlich, author of the ASCD book *Designing Successful Grant Proposals*. "Monitoring is the most important aspect because it helps a school make the match and be aware of the deadline. You don't want to be caught racing to a deadline," warns Orlich.

Potential applicants also don't want a request for proposals (RFP) to get lost in the paperwork shuffle. "I've had principals practically in tears saying that an RFP sat in the superintendent's mailbox for months," while valuable grant writing time was lost, says Orlich. "If you don't have the information, you can't do the preparation." He suggests that the superintendent's secretary, who should know a school or district's key grant monitor, can be helpful in avoiding a last-minute scramble.

Collaboration Is Essential

Selecting the right team is also paramount to grant writing success. South Carolina-based grant consultant Gil Woolard advocates having grant writing teams formed within the schools, where the grant money will be used. At the district level, administrators, however well intentioned, may not have a realistic view of how a grant-backed program can be carried out. "District-level folks have come through the ranks, but situations change in the schools," Woolard says.

Woolard also recommends that a school offer a stipend to teachers on a grant writing team. He recommends using funds from the school or district budget to pay the team an amount equal to 5–10 percent of the grant award.

A team effort for grant research and writing can help smaller districts or schools with limited resources. Woolard, who has worked with school districts in the United States and other countries, advises schools to form grant writing teams of five to seven teachers. The talent of

many individuals can be tapped for Web searching, assessing a school's needs, or clarifying a school's goals for outside evaluators.

Orlich suggests seeking a critique before sending a finished grant proposal to the sponsor. "Have the proposal vetted by five teachers who will be involved in the program," says Orlich. With those teachers, a principal, and a superintendent all scrutinizing the proposal, the quality of the critique will be "outstanding," and the revisions can give that proposal the edge it needs, he adds.

Cultivating a Relationship

Schools often find that grant writing is a long-term learning process, and even rejection can provide an opportunity for self-evaluation. Leon County Schools, which serves 31,000 students in and around Tallahassee, Fla., annually applies for more than \$6 million in competitive grants and wins an average of \$300,000, says grant specialist Ver nita Vaughn. When a grant proposal is unsuccessful, she always asks for the grant committee's feedback, "even for a small grant of \$500." As a guide for the future, Vaughn looks for the parts of a failed proposal that received low ratings. "Then we keep on trying, looking for ways to make it better," she says.

Cultivating a relationship with a grant maker, especially in the private sector, can also increase a school's chances of later success, say experts. "Grant makers want to keep the relationship alive," even if the grant proposal has not been successful, says Geever. It pays to send grant sponsors the news of school achievements such as winning other grants, she advises.

Sustaining the Effort

Private and public grant sponsors are especially keen to see some provisions built into the proposal that will show a school can sustain a program, even after the money runs out. Grant experts agree that if teachers are not involved in some part of the grant writing process, a wind-fall of grant money and an enthusiastic mandate from the central office to carry out an innovation won't bring lasting change. "The worst thing to do is bring in the money and have crop failure," warns Orlich.

Managing the grant usually includes provisions for staff development, filing updates with the grant maker, and collecting data about the program as it continues to evolve. "Collecting data to prove whether or not your program worked is a great thing, but it's time consuming," concedes Fernandez. However, if leaders can document a program's results—whether higher test scores, higher attendance, or lower dropout rate—"a school district would be foolish not to find funds to keep it going," she adds.

"If grant writing is hard, grant management is doubly hard," says Fernandez, "but the benefits to kids make it all worthwhile."

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