Helpful Articles: Seven Steps to Winning Grant Money

There are no secrets to getting grant money for your school. You can get your share of grants provided you follow the proper steps persistently and consistently. Most of the schools that don't win grant money either don't apply for grants or do so in a haphazard way. Below I offer a list of seven critical steps that I believe you need to follow and apply in order to secure grant money for your school. I will break down each of these steps in more detail in this series of articles.

The First Step: Understanding Your Needs

If you aim to secure grant money for your school, your very first step must be understanding -- in detail -- the needs your school faces. To understand the true depth of those needs, you must consistently perform needs assessments. A good needs assessment measures the difference between what you expect of students in your classroom, school, or district, and what actually happens. The wider the gap between expectations and actual outcomes, the larger the need you have.

The easiest way to do a quick needs assessment is to look at the goals you set for the year and see if you met them. The end of the school year is the ideal time to assess your progress. By that time you should have state tests, nationally-normed tests, and locally developed tests to help you determine the actual growth of your students. If you do not currently have assessment tools in place, proper assessment should definitely be your first goal for next year.

As you begin to fill out grant applications, you will need to include details gathered from your needs assessments. Remember, a needs assessment is any instrument that measures the difference in current conditions and desired conditions. Typically, most of the information you need for grant applications can be gleaned from testing instruments, but you might also need to use student, teacher, or parent surveys.

In addition, your disciplinary and attendance records might be used you as needs-assessment instruments. For example, I often talk of schools where students perform 1.5 to 2 years behind in math or reading. You might determine from your attendance records that the at-risk students who score low in reading and math are the ones who have the poorest attendance. Maybe the problem is not class size or the instructional programs you currently use. Maybe the problem is that students are not learning what you're teaching because they don't attend school regularly enough to master the skills they need to perform on grade level.

Good needs-assessment instruments help you to examine a wide range of problems and programs from many different angles and to determine exactly what problems you face. Failure to review those assessment tools at the end of each school year, simply put, is a mistake. In fact, your grant program should be built around those needs assessments. You should perform your needs assessments, use them to determine the largest problems you face, and then determine if you have local money to fix them. If you do not have enough money locally, then you should use a grants database to explore the many opportunities for grant money that can be used to address -- and solve -- those problems.

From time to time, new needs surface in a district, school, or classroom -- needs that have not been part of your regular needs assessments. You may be seeing gang activity in your school for the first time, a larger percentage of dropouts than you have experienced before, or an influx into your community of a sizeable number of students who cannot speak English. Those issues are excellent candidates for grant writing because you have not experienced them before, so it is unlikely you have built money into your budget to address them.

As you are surely aware, the end of the school year does not mean that you lock up the doors and head off on vacation. If you write grants for your school, this is the time to study the results provided by your needs-assessment tools to discover the problems that need to be addressed through your grant-writing program. If you didn't get that done during the summer, you need to do it now. Needs assessments are the starting point of any good school grant program. Be sure you use them to your advantage.

The Second Step: Developing a Solution

If you want to secure grant money for your school, the first step is to understand in detail the problems your school faces. Once you have clearly identified those hurdles to student achievement or schoolwide success, the second step is to develop a plan/solution that has the greatest likelihood of achieving your goals.

When I first became a middle school principal, our test scores indicated that we had a reading problem. Overall, our students read about 1.5 grade levels below the national average. We already had a Title I reading program, but we weren't getting very good results. We did our research and found that:

1. Although we had a serious school-wide reading problem, only our very poorest readers attended reading classes.
2. Although we knew that reading was a skill, we did not provide enough time durng the school day for our students to practice that skill.
3. Monitoring large amounts of independent reading is difficult without enough computers and specialized software.

With that knowledge, we were able to put together a comprehensive plan in which:

- all students, regardless of their reading levels, would attend a reading class.
- each student would spend one hour each day in reading practice on appropriate-level materials.

- we would use the STAR reading test to determine the beginning reading levels of students and to measure growth.
- we would use Accelerated Reader software to monitor students' daily reading.

In addition, we would initiate "structural" changes in order to meet the needs of our new program:

1. In order to make time in the school day for students to receive an hour of reading practice, we had to change from a 7-period to an 8-period schedule.
2. All of our teachers would become reading teachers in order to monitor 30 minutes of reading practice time. The regular reading teachers monitored the other 30 minutes and taught mini-lessons on skills.
3. We had to purchase STAR and Accelerated Reader.
4. We had to purchase thousands of library books to match the reading levels, interests, and reading volume of our students.
5. We had to purchase dozens of computers to monitor the program.

We developed a special budget in order to put our plan into place. While our solution was relatively expensive, we did not consider costs when we developed the plan. We only considered the results we would likely achieve. To get the money we needed to fund our plan, we tapped into the regular budget, Title I, and special education funds. But that wasn't enough. We wrote grants, and we entered into a partnership with the software company to do detailed research as we measured our students' reading growth.

When your school faces a hurdle to student achievement, the key is to build a plan that directly addresses the problem and has the greatest likelihood of success. When you are developing your plan, don't worry about costs. That will come later. If you can, find schools with similar demographics that have faced similar problems and made major improvements. Duplicate the best parts of their plans if it's feasible for you to do so -- without consideration to money.

When your plan is complete -- and you're sure it is comprehensive and has an excellent chance of success -- then comes the time to start worrying about the budget and finding the money to fund your program. Which brings us to the topic we will cover in my next blog: finding grant money to fund your program.

The Third Step: Finding Possible Grants

If you want to secure grant money for your school, the first step is to understand in detail the main problems/needs your school faces. The second step -- the subject of the last blog -- is to develop a solution that has the greatest chance to solve that problem. And the third step is to locate all possible grants that might help fund your solution.

Grants available to schools fall into three basic categories: federal grants, state grants, and foundation or corporate grants. Federal and state grants are generally larger, and their applications are longer and more difficult to complete. Foundation and corporate grants typically yield schools less money, but their applications are less complex. That means you can usually fill out several foundation applications in the time it takes to complete one federal or state application.

Many educators attempt to locate grants on the Internet by using search engines or by subscribing to grant newsletters. Those methods tend to be inefficient and end up costing both time and money. The best way to locate potential grants is to use a grant database. The more comprehensive and up-to-date the database, the better it will serve your needs.

By far the most comprehensive grant database available to educators is the School Funding Center Grant Database. It contains virtually all federal, state, foundation, and corporate grants available to schools in the United States. Old grants are removed and new grants are posted on a daily basis. The one drawback to using this database is the cost -- $397.00 per year. While relatively expensive, it still saves educators both time and money because of its comprehensive nature.

If you are looking specifically for federal grants, another good database to use is ED.gov Grants. This resource comes directly from the federal government, and it is free. It lists every federal education grant available to schools in the United States. It does not list state, foundation, or corporate grants. If you use this grant resource, you will still want to track down discretionary grants for schools.

If you are specifically looking for state grants, your best bet is to go to your state education agency's website. Some of those sites include good grant databases that will help you locate current state grants. Others are not so good -- or worse than that -- and will take a little more work on your part. Go to ED.gov's Education Resource Organizations Directory page to find your state education agency's website. If your state's site does not have "grants" or "funding" listed in its menu bar, type "grants" into the search box on the site to see if you can find listings that way.

If you are specifically looking for foundation grants, your best bet is to go to the Foundation Center. This organization lists thousands and thousands of foundations in its database. Many of those foundations offer grants to schools. The database is good for finding foundation grants, but the subscription cost ranges from $595.00 - $995.00 per year depending on the number of foundations you want listed in your searches. The more comprehensive the database you wish to search, the more your subscription will cost.

While you can find grant listings in many places, if you want to find all of the grants available to you quickly and easily, you will want to use one or more of the grant databases listed above. Remember, grant writers should use their time to write grants, not look for them. Save both time and money by using a good, established school grant database to locate the funding solutions you need in order to improve student achievement.

The Fourth Step: Finding Likely Grants & Making the Call

If you want to secure grant money for your school, the first step is to understand in detail the main issues your school faces. The second step is to develop a solution that has the greatest likelihood of solving one of those problems. The third step is to find all possible grants that might fund your solution. And the fourth step -- the subject of this issue's article -- is to narrow down the list of grants to those whose criteria match your needs and then call a contact person to verify that match.

Over the course of a year, hundreds of grants will become available to your school. The tricky part, however, is finding among all those grants the few that might fund your plan and support your goals. That's why it is so important to employ a comprehensive grant database. A grant database allows you to search quickly and easily for grants that match your needs. Yes, you could use your favorite Internet search engine to locate grants, but you will need to wade through thousands of search results -- many of which won't apply to your type of school, won't match up with your specific needs, or have deadlines that have already passed. A good grant database allows you to tailor your searches and find likely matches in minutes rather than hours, days, or weeks.

Even when you use a good grant database, you still have additional work to do. In just a few minutes, a database can provide 30 reading grants for private schools in your state or 50 math grants for public schools. Once you've narrowed down and identified those grants, then your real work begins: you must search through those grants to find the ones for which you qualify. You will be able to eliminate some that don't tie in with your goals. You will eliminate others for which you might not qualify because your school doesn't meet one or more of the grant's criteria.

TWO INVALUABLE RESOURCES

Fortunately, good databases provide two essential resources to support your grant research.

The first resource is a live link to the grant's website. Use that link to find every bit of information you can about the grantor and the specific grant. Typically, the website will list more grant restrictions than a short database entry can list. If you find anything that clearly disqualifies your school from receiving a particular grant, simply go on to the next grant on your list. Almost anything you would want to know about grantors or the grants they offer can be found on their websites. Those websites are invaluable tools that will help you determine if you and that grant/grantor are a good match.

The second resource is a phone number or email address so you can communicate directly with the grant's contact person. Once you are quite sure that a grant matches the needs of your school, call or email the contact person. (I prefer calling that person myself.) I never start completing a grant application without first getting in touch with the contact. While that contact person cannot tell you that you will get the grant money you seek, he or she can certainly confirm that you are eligible to apply. You might also pick up from the person's voice a tone that is either encouraging or discouraging. If that tone is particularly negative, I would recommend moving on to the next grant on your list. I would definitely make this call -- even if it is hard for you to do -- because it can save you hours and hours of needless work.

If you don't make use of those two resources, you are wasting valuable time.

IN SUMMARY...

The fourth key to finding lots of grant money for your school is matching your school's specific needs with grants that meet those needs. To find those matches...

1. Use a good, comprehensive database to narrow down the list of grants for which you might qualify.
2. Once you find possible matches, use the live links provided in the database to do research on the grantor's Web site.
3. After you determine that your school is eligible for a particular grant, call the grant's contact person to verify your eligibility and elicit any tips for applying for that grant.

The Fifth Step: Obtaining the Grant Application & Collecting Info

Over the past several weeks I have shared steps one through four to follow as you attempt to secure grant money for your school. Those first four steps include: 1. Understanding the hurdle(s)/issue(s) your school faces. 2. Developing a solution to address those issues. 3. Finding all possible grants to fund your solution. 4. Matching your needs with likely grant sources. If you missed the information on any of those four steps, you can access past blogs on the right-hand side of this page.

Step five is obtaining the actual grant applications for your top one or two grant matches and gathering all the information you need to complete those applications.

First and foremost, you need to understand a grantor's application process and obtain an application form far enough in advance of the deadline so you are not rushed when it comes time to fill it out. If you plan ahead, you are much more likely to submit a competitive grant application.

You should be aware that different organizations use different types of grant applications. Quite a few foundations require no more than a letter that details your school's problem, your planned solution, and a budget that details the money you need. That letter takes the place of a formal application. In other cases, some groups of foundations use common grant applications. But most foundations, states, and federal agencies use unique, detailed applications for each grant they sponsor. Grant seekers must obtain the specific application(s) required to apply for each grant.

The type of application required for each grant you seek is typically listed on the grantor's website. In many cases, you will find, complete, and submit your application without ever leaving the grantor's site. More often, however, grantors provide applications you can download to your computer and print out at your convenience.

Finally, some grantors require you to submit a request for an application in writing. If the grantor has a website, an email usually meets this requirement, and the application will be mailed or emailed to you. If the grantor does not have a website, both the request for an application and the return of the application will be accomplished using regular mail.

It's important to know all the details of the application process up front so you can plan your time well and not be rushed.

Once you obtain the application, read it thoroughly -- several times. Concentrate on the different kinds of information you will need in order to complete the application. Although quite a bit of the application will require you to supply information in narrative form, you will likely need statistics from several

sources to verify your need for help. You will also have to develop a budget for your project.

Before you actually begin completing an application, gather all the reference materials and statistical information you will likely need and find a quiet place to work. Make time so you can complete the application without interruption. You don't want to interrupt your writing every 15 minutes to look for some vital piece of information that you should have at your fingertips. Your writing should flow, and it will only do so if you've gathered all the tools and information before you sit down to write.

You will be two steps ahead of your competition if you have carefully read the application and gathered all the materials you will need to complete it without interruption. Good planning is a vital part of the grant application process.

The Sixth Step: Completing Your Grant Application the Right Way

Once you've completed the first five steps in the grant process, you are ready to start filling out the grant application. You have already done a tremendous amount of work. You've identified a problem in your school that needs correcting, developed a solution, found a grant that fits your situation, confirmed that you are eligible for that grant, and gathered the application and all the data you will need to complete your grant application.

Completing an application is not all that difficult if you've done your homework -- but it's almost impossible if you haven't. Your primary concern as you begin the application process is to carefully follow all instructions. You don't want to be disqualified for something as simple as using the wrong type font or font size in your application. And, yes, some grantors are that particular.

Be sure to include four major components in any application regardless of how the application is laid out.

1. Describe the problem you have at your school with sufficient statistics to prove that you truly have a problem.
2. Give a detailed summary of your solution to this problem and give statistics or other information to show why you believe your solution will produce positive results.
3. Include an evaluation component to show how you will track progress throughout the program and exactly how you will determine the gains that were made at the end of the program.
4. Include a budget that shows where every dollar of the requested grant money will be spent.

Regardless of the way an application is organized, be sure you carefully complete every section. Some applications may have sections that don't seem to apply to your situation. You have to remember, however, that competitive grants are generally scored on a point system. Every section of the application is worth a certain number of points. If you don't complete a section, you get no points for that part of the application. Many applications are so competitive that a score of "zero" on one section will likely eliminate you from the competition.

As you complete the application, you might come to a section that asks you to describe the community involvement aspect of your plan. But what if you hadn't planned on having a community involvement

component? You must realize that if community involvement was not important to the grantor, it would not be a part of the application. If the section is there, it behooves you to go back to the solution you've developed and add a community involvement component. If you leave that section blank, you are not likely to be among the final competitors for the grant money.

Each section of a grant application is so important that you need to complete it as if it were the only section you were submitting. Why? Because you need to earn every point possible to stay competitive in your hunt for grant money.

As you complete your application, avoid using "cut and paste" information provided by vendors. Yes, they have great writers who prepare those descriptions, but you are doomed if the same descriptions show up on several applications for the same grant. The scorers see it as evidence that you are relying on a canned solution to your problem rather than personalizing your solution to fit your school's needs. Similarly, you need to be careful about centering your whole grant request around a single commercial product. Grant money is typically awarded to those schools that seek money to establish well-rounded programs with multiple components -- not to schools that just want money to buy a single product.

Also, be sure you complete the application with language that is clear and concise. Don't try to sound fancy or more educated than you are. You're not trying to convince the grant readers how smart you are. You are trying to show them that you understand the problems at your school, and that you've come up with what you believe to be the right solution. To begin to put that solution into place, you need their grant money. It's also always a good idea to let the grant readers know how much district money and other resources will be applied to the problem. Again, be straightforward, clear, and concise.

Completing a grant application is not all that difficult if you've done the necessary preliminary work. It's exciting to know that you are in competition with other grant writers to get money for your school. If you closely follow the directions that accompany the application, lay out your problem clearly, describe your solution in detail, include an effective evaluation component, and develop a budget that is realistic and all-inclusive, then you will win grant money most of the time.

You will also get better with practice. As soon as you finish one application, start looking for your next grant. If you follow the steps that I've laid out over the past few posts, when it comes time to sit at your desk to complete a grant application, you'll find that applying for most grants is really not that difficult.

The Seventh Step: Beating the Grant Deadline

Over the past several articles we have discussed in detail how to find appropriate grants for your school and how to complete applications that help ensure your school receives the grant money it needs.

The final step in this process is to complete your application and get it in the mail at least one week prior to the deadline. If you don't meet a grantor's deadline, the granting entity will not consider your application. What a waste -- and what a disappointment -- to do all that work and not even have your application considered!

While getting your grant application in on time may not seem like a big deal, you might be surprised how many grant writers wait until the very last minute to mail their applications. One grant-writer friend of mine is a famous procrastinator. She often pulls all-nighters to finish grant applications on time. She lives in East Texas, and there have been times when she has sent her husband on the 300-mile mad dash to Austin because it was the only way she could beat the deadline for a grant sponsored by the Texas Education Agency. I have to say that she is a great grant writer. She wins a very high percentage of the grants she writes. But why go through all that stress and torment when you could simply do a better job of planning?

It takes a lot of preparation and hard work to write and submit a good grant application. The last thing you need is to be stressed at the end of the process because of a looming deadline. Before you ever begin to fill out a grant application, you must create a plan -- a timeline -- that leaves time to fine-tune the application before mailing it. A plan with a little padding leaves room for emergencies, too. You can never fully predict emergencies that might come up at your school or in your life that could take precedence over completing a grant application. So creating a plan -- and sticking to that plan as much as possible -- will help ensure that your grant application arrives safely and on time.

With the potential for emergencies in mind, you should always set a deadline for completing your grant application a minimum of one week before it is due. Even a week will not guarantee that a mailed application will arrive on time. You also need to be absolutely certain whether the deadline the grantor established refers to the postmark on the application or the date when the application must reach the grantor's office. If you do not know that information, call or email the grant's contact person to make certain.

One more word of warning: be careful about trusting guaranteed delivery times. Those guarantees usually mean you will get your shipping fee back if your package does not arrive on time. That's great for what it's worth, but getting your $20 mailing fee refunded while missing your chance at a $250,000 grant won't help your students. Just remember that "Overnight" does not necessarily mean overnight. And "Guaranteed Delivery" does not mean that your shipper can absolutely guarantee that your package will arrive on time.

The responsibility for ensuring that your application arrives on time sits squarely on your shoulders. You must create a schedule for writing your grant, and you have to keep to that schedule. As you create and follow that schedule, be sure to allow plenty of time for your grant application to reach the grantor several days before the published deadline.

The Seven Steps

Over the last few articles, we have discussed the seven steps needed to find, research, and write successful grant applications. Those steps include:

1. finding a problem in your school that needs correcting,
2. developing a solution to the problem,
3. finding a grant that fits your situation,

4. confirming that you are eligible for that grant,
5. gathering the application and all the data you will need to complete your grant application,
6. actually completing the application, and
7. getting your application to the grantor by the grant's deadline.

If you consistently follow those seven steps, you will consistently win grant money for your school. Whether you write one grant or 20 grants this year, follow this process. It will make you more successful as a grant writer than you ever imagined.

About The School Funding Center (SFC):
The School Funding Center can supply you with every grant available to your district, your campuses, and your teachers. SFC monitors over 4,000 grant sources and our database contains over 110,000 school grants worth more than 10 billion dollars.   For more information, visit
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