

# The Practical Leader

*Improving the Schools of Today*

*Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

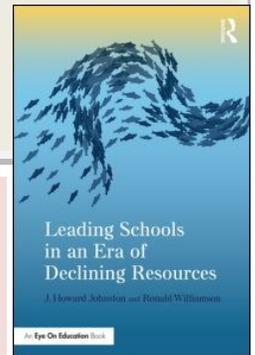
## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Writing Grants for School Programs

#### In a Nutshell

One of the new responsibilities faced by school leaders is the need to generate resources to support school programs and innovations. Many have turned to grant competition to provide funds for improvement and growth, and the most successful schools have actually prospered through the strategic use of grant funds. Increasingly, school leaders are building grant-seeking procedures into their leadership routines and creating systematic approaches for identifying and securing grant funds. The keys to success are being prepared to compete effectively, matching school needs with grantors' priorities and goals, and being scrupulous about following the grantors' standards and guidelines for submitting proposals. This *Research into Practice* brief provides practical guidance for identifying potential funders, writing effective proposals, and creating a grant-competition infrastructure.

This *Research into Practice Brief* is adapted from a new book, *Leading Schools in an Era of Declining Resources* by Howard Johnston and Ron Williamson, coming from Routledge Publishing in May, 2014. For more information, visit [http://www.routledge.com/catalogs/new\\_books\\_in\\_education1/1/7/](http://www.routledge.com/catalogs/new_books_in_education1/1/7/)



Many school leaders have sought to sustain programs or even grow new ones with grants. Grants are funds given to a school to pay for a special project or initiative. Grant recipients are usually not expected to repay the funds UNLESS they do something that violates the terms of the grant agreement, so most grants require some level of compliance and reporting.

The most important thing to know about grants is that they require the recipients to do what they promised to do in their proposal. A school cannot decide to use the money awarded for new computer equipment to fund the athletic program. Usually, there are no legal consequences for failing to deliver what is promised, but in many cases a clause in the grant will require the school to repay money used in unapproved ways.

Despite their apparent flexibility, grants are not simply large gifts of money that can be used in any way the recipient sees fit. Some key conditions apply to almost all grants:

**They do not replace general funds.** In most cases, a grant is to do something more than the school is currently doing, not just replace lost funds to keep doing the same things.

**They restrict how money can be used.** Many grantors will not support capital expenditures, personnel costs (outside of the specific project they are funding), and a lot of other items. Be sure to ask for the things the grantor can, in fact, provide.

**Money must be used for what you AND they want to do.** You may have the best idea in the world for an after school program, but if it does not fit the grantor's mission, they won't support it. Learn what kinds of things the grantor funds and look for ways to use their objectives to support your own school program. It's usually not hard. If you want to start an after school program, and the grantor is looking for ways to support technology use in the school, figure out how to use technology to promote student engagement when classes end.

**Think small.** The competition for large grants is ferocious. Many districts, nonprofit organizations and universities have whole departments devoted to securing grant funds. At the same time, literally millions of dollars go unclaimed every year because grant-seekers neglect smaller, local sources of funds.

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### Steps in Getting Grants

- 1. Assess your needs and assets.** What areas of your school need enrichment or rejuvenation? Or, what areas have a record of accomplishment that a grantor would find attractive enough to support?
- 2. Look for grantors.** Search for grant-makers who might support your initiatives. Spend enough time to find a good match.
- 3. Write an inquiry letter.** Most grantors want a brief letter (one page or so) explaining your ideas, how you will implement them, and how much it will cost. If it's allowed, call the program officer to talk about your ideas and get their input. Many grantors now require that all communication be electronic through their website, so be sure to match their requirements exactly.
- 4. Be flexible and creative.** Be willing to modify your initial ideas to fit the grantor's goals and agenda.
- 5. Think evaluation first.** Evaluation is critical, so be sure it covers what you promised to do and uses the metrics they understand and value. That usually means numbers, not just anecdotes.
- 6. Write a clear, succinct convincing proposal *that follows their guidelines*.** You may think, "Oh, they'll read a few more pages than their maximum." No, they won't. Get help from a grant-writer and an English teacher. No mistakes allowed!
- 7. Don't argue.** If they turn you down, ask if they will give you feedback to improve your next application. Never argue; you'll lose, and you may ruin your chances for another application. If you get the grant, but they want some minor changes, don't argue. If necessary, explain why you proposed what you did, but be willing to adjust to their needs.
- 8. Do what you promised to do.** This is what they agreed to pay for, so make sure you do what you committed to do. If things change, contact the grantor immediately; they are usually pretty understanding and flexible.
- 9. Follow the rules.** Make sure you meet all reporting requirements and deadlines. Make yourself a good recipient so that you are favored in the future.

### Looking for Grantors

The first step in looking for grant funds is to look both inside the school and at potential grantors. Look for broad areas of need that you can easily document: achievement, parent involvement, attendance, enrichment, and other clear needs. At the same time, consider potential grantors' goals. Because grant guidelines tend to be pretty broad, it's easier to adapt your program to their goals than it is to try to convince them that they should adapt their goals to your program. The bottom line: they won't.

Thanks to the internet, looking for grants has become much easier than it was even a decade ago. In fact, there are several websites that actually compile information about education grants and give great advice on how to secure them. They even provide sample inquiry letters, grant proposals, reporting forms, and evaluation instruments. Reliable sources and their contact information can be found in the Resources section of this brief.

### Sources

In addition to large foundations such as Gates, Carnegie or Ford, many **state and local governments** award grants to schools as well. State grants tend to focus on state standards, priorities, and initiatives, so they are usually aligned very well with the schools' agenda and are not likely to disrupt normal programs. Check out your state department of education website for details and current grants, or visit [schoolgrants.org](http://www.k12grants.org) (<http://www.k12grants.org/Grants/state.htm>) for links to all state DOE websites.

**Local businesses and large corporations** with a local presence are a good source of grants for schools as well. Usually, large companies establish foundations that distribute grant funds to local communities or



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major national projects. A good place to start is by looking at the businesses that are in the school's community, then visiting their website for information about their giving programs. Typically, these are listed under "community affairs," "donations" or "corporate social responsibility" on the company's website. Target stores, a major education donor, showcases their projects under the heading of "corporate responsibility," [https://corporate.target.com/corporate-responsibility#!?lnk=fnav\\_t\\_spc\\_1\\_10](https://corporate.target.com/corporate-responsibility#!?lnk=fnav_t_spc_1_10). If you can't find their grant information on a company's home page, go to the "About" section of the website; it's usually available there.

In addition to individual websites, the **Foundation Center** (2013ba) can help schools locate potential funders in their states and communities with the Foundation Directory (<http://fconline.foundationcenter.org/>). This powerful tool allows grant-seekers to search thousands of foundations and corporate donors by topic, geographic location, amount of funding needed, and a number of other variables. A paid subscription, which can be shared within a school district, provides vast amounts of information about each foundation, but a free version is very helpful in locating potential funders for further investigation.

### The Proposal

Every major foundation or grantor requires some kind of proposal. Some, especially for small businesses or small family foundations, may be quite informal -- nothing more than a letter or email describing the project and how the money will be used. However, because of the volume of proposals they receive, most grantors require a proposal that adheres to very strict guidelines, including the maximum number of pages and the presentation format. Rule #1 is NEVER deviate from the prescribed format. That will get your proposal excluded before it's even read. The FAQs and guidelines from Shell Energy are pretty typical and will give a good idea about how to interact with a big company's foundation. (<http://www.shell.us/environment-society/grant/faq.html>).

The key to successful proposal writing is to align your request with their goals, priorities and procedures. If Shell says, "the organization, event or program must benefit persons or communities served by Shell locations," that's what they mean. Don't waste your time by trying to convince them that your community is deserving of their support if you do not meet that basic requirement.

The proposal itself is absolutely critical. Consider the fact that yours may be one of thousands they receive. The trick is to make it engaging and interesting without making it look or sound artificial, insincere, or downright silly.

### Help is Just a Click Away

Fortunately, there are dozens of resources on the internet that can help novice grant-writers craft professional, effective proposals. One of the best is from the Foundation Center (2013b) which offers both free and low-cost resources, including very high quality instructional videos, on how to write winning proposals. Writing for the NEA, Cynthia McCabe (November, 2007) suggests some basic principles for all proposals.

1. **Be Brave!** Don't doubt yourself or your ability to pull off a major project. In other words, don't take yourself out of the running because of self-doubt or fear of failure.
2. **Keep the Writing Simple.** You aren't showing off all that you know, you are asking for help to do something exciting. Don't kill that excitement with inflated, academic language. Grantors love a two or three sentence summary followed by bullet points of the major elements of the project. Strive for clarity, not page count.
3. **Think Like the Funder.** Consider who is reading the proposal, and stick to their format. Use headings that match the categories of information they are looking for so that the reader can find your key points easily and match them up with their evaluation criteria.
4. **Junk the Jargon.** Let's face it: educationese is pretty awful and doesn't communicate much to most readers. McCabe gives a great example of how to kill a proposal with language. 'Nowhere in your grant should the following sentence appear: "Using a group of school-age learners, we will endeavor to capitalize on NCLB-specific requirements and shift the paradigm for meeting tangible literary and technological benchmarks." Reviewers will be much happier to read: "We want to provide one class of third-graders the equipment needed to produce a book report podcast."'
5. **Identify Measurable Points and Objectives.** Identify measurable outcomes. "Students will produce a five-minute documentary film on turtles" is better than "students will be exposed to strategies for documentary film making." Be concrete, specific, and, to the extent possible, include quantitative data and evidence.

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6. **Bring in Other Disciplines and Technology.** Grantors like to see interdisciplinary projects because most believe that is the key to lasting learning and because involving more people increases the bang for their grant bucks. For example, history projects can include science and math (How much feed did it take for Hannibal to get his elephants over the Alps?), and most grantors want to see the innovative use of appropriate technologies to increase student engagement.

7. **Get Help; Build Networks and Partnerships.** Use online resources, local college and university faculty, and district office people to help flesh out the idea and craft a good proposal. Grantors respect the ability to collaborate with others.

### Ready...Set...Go!

Although school leaders may not be outstanding grant writers themselves, there are several important strategies they can use to make their school “grant competition ready.”

**Create Boilerplate.** “Boilerplate” is the material that most grantors ask for, so schools can save a lot of time by having it ready to go in order to meet a short deadline. Boilerplate usually includes basic information about the school, its community, the staff, the student body, and any special features of the school (Title 1, magnet, alternative, academy model) that may be relevant to the grant request.

**Build a Team.** Create a grant-writing team that is willing to help conceptualize projects and draft proposals. Include at least one excellent writer, a technology wiz, a representative from the leadership team, and perhaps a parent or community member. You can add subject specialists as needed for specific grant applications, and don’t overlook community members who might have grant writing experience.

**Maintain and Idea File.** Ask teachers, students, parents, and community members to give you ideas that might be turned into grant applications. You might even create an online form that asks for a description of the idea, who would be involved, how it would work in the school, and how much money is needed. Stored electronically, these not only become a good resource for grant applications, but they get people thinking about grants as a normal part of the school’s operations.

**Think Sustainability.** No matter how great your idea is, funders always have one question in mind: “how will this program or project be continued once our funding ends?” When thinking about potential projects, consider the changes that will have to be made in the school in order to sustain the program or major portions of it when the grant funding cycle ends. Better yet, plan for how the program can be “scaled up” across your district, community or state.

**Create Grant Finding Routines.** Put together a list of websites or other resources that you scan on a weekly basis for new grant announcements and opportunities. Use some of the sites in the Resources section of this chapter or locate and compile your own. A Colorado high school has students scan identified sites for grant opportunities as part of their service requirement. Beyond the sites selected by the administration, students will actually search for and fill “custom orders” for teachers who are looking for support for specific programs or content areas.

### The Bottom Line

Grants are big business and there is a lot of competition. However, good projects that are clearly stated and carefully planned are very attractive to funders – especially in local communities. Even the big foundations are impressed by “grass roots” applications from real teachers and administrators working in real schools. It may be helpful to have an experienced partner, but most funders would rather support the honest and sincere application that comes from a school or district than one that comes from a “grant factory.” Take a chance. The initial time investment may be pretty high, but the potential payoff is high as well. Besides, every grant gets easier to write as leaders build capacity and routines to support grant competition.

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### References and Resources

#### Grant Information

- National Education Association Foundation  
<https://www.neafoundation.org/pages/grants-to-educators/>
- Grantsalert.com  
<http://www.grantsalert.com/>
- GetEdFunding.com  
<http://www.getedfunding.com>
- About School Grants  
<http://www.k12grants.org/about.htm>

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McCabe, C. (November, 2007). Writing grants. *NEA Today*. Retrieved from:  
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Foundation Center (2013a). *The Foundation Directory*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from: <http://fconline.foundationcenter.org/>

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#### ***The Practical Leader, Prepared for Oregon GEAR UP School Leaders***

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Practical Leadership, LLC is a consulting firm specializing in leadership development, training and professional development, research and evaluation, student achievement and school success, and positive community relations.

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