Grant Writing Made Easy

Tech grants are widely available, so get to a keyboard and start applying

With the scarcity of money and schools reorganizing for efficiency, school boards may be forced to slash more jobs and resources, including badly needed technology funding.

What's a school librarian to do? If you're willing to commit the time and effort, start applying for grants—and do it now. Getting that money for your library is a lot easier than you expect, thanks to Congress's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA now contains some very good news for school libraries, especially for those in need of tech upgrades. Under the provisions of the new act, individual schools, school districts, and state departments of education are eligible to compete for as much as $1 billion annually through fiscal year 2007.

School media specialists need to take action now to guarantee a piece of this funding pie. The first step is finding out if your school has a technology plan, then checking when it was last updated. Your school's plan will need an overhaul if it's several years old. Be sure to collaborate with your district technology department, since your plan should be compatible with the district's overall vision and tech strategy. The National Center for Technology Planning (www.nctp.com) is an excellent resource with many ideas and tips on technology assessment and planning.

Once your tech plan is up-to-date, it will serve as a guide as you prepare your grant application. Identify the appropriate grants to fund your ideas, and then be prepared to let the real work begin. Remember that you're competing against hundreds of other applicants, so your proposal must stand out. Organizations fund projects that demonstrate they can improve student learning with the requested funds. Following the grant organization's guidelines exactly is the first step to getting those hard to find dollars. Your letter of intent—an introduction to your proposal, explaining what you'll accomplish with the grant money—should not exceed one page. Hunting for funds is the perfect opportunity for librarians to reach out and collaborate with colleagues. Look for colleagues who understand your school's educational problems and needs, who can help write the grant proposal, and who will benefit from the funding.

This is not the time to be meek or mild. The grant proposal is an opportunity to sell your ideas, so make a compelling argument for your funding requirements. Your writing should be convincing, assertive, and concise. Discard words such as "may," "might," and "can." Instead, show your potential for success by using phrases like "we will." Always use specific examples and avoid generalities. Never assume that the grant selection committee knows your needs or the reasons why your school would be the best grant recipient. Provide concrete ideas on how the grant will improve learning in your school or district with more or new technologies.

A little known secret is that a phone call can go a long way. Many program officers are happy to clarify details of the grant over the phone. Take that opportunity to get the person's feedback on your ideas, and then get his name so you can address the application to a specific person. When listing your objectives, avoid the common mistake of using too much educational jargon. Don't try to fix all the school's problems at once. Stick to an achievable objective and create a realistic roadmap that uses the grant money to reach that goal. My school district, the Calcasieu Parish Public Schools in Lake Charles, LA, has received over $1 million from the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund over the last three years to purchase new technologies and to provide professional development for teachers and principals. Our grant proposal focused on schools that were economically disadvantaged and had low test scores. The result? With an infusion of technology and more than 80 hours of technology training for our teachers and principals, we've seen growth in student achievement and new learning strategies introduced into classrooms districtwide.

Politeness never hurts. Send the potential grantor a thank-you note for the opportunity to apply and ask when the next round of funding begins. This puts your name in front of the grantor one more time. Another tip: once you receive the grant, send the organization all newspaper clippings, newsletters, announcements of presentations about your project, or any bit of PR. That way, if you're applying for additional money from the same source, you
can bet they’ll remember you, your school, and more importantly, the success of your project.

It’s a good idea to get in touch with the tech division of your state department of education to inquire about regulations concerning funding. You can ask to be placed on your state’s listserve to keep updated on how these funds will be disbursed. Keep an eye on the U.S. Department of Education’s funding forecast page, which will keep you informed about funding opportunities, as well as when state competitions are taking place. The funding forecast for discretionary programs is found at: www.ed.gov/offices/OCFO/grants/forecast.html.

If your initial application is turned down; just try, try again. A rejection letter is quite common the first time to resolve the problem or there are not enough personnel to implement your program. Remember that grants aren’t the only source of money. Take advantage of your job’s access to students and their parents. Many moms or dads are involved in community organizations that are potential funding sources. Talk to students about where their parents work or which organizations they belong to. Write a proposal about the school and its needs and send it to local businesses that might be interested in funding your project. Following up with a phone call might give them that extra nudge to commit as your “partner in success for students.” Explore the potential for “in-kind” support if you need matching funds for a larger grant. Many local businesses are willing to help around, so don’t get discouraged. Call the organization and ask if the selection committee’s comments are available. This can serve as valuable feedback before resubmitting your application. You may have missed the mark the first time, but keep revising and ask your colleagues for help. An outsider may provide more insight; so ask those beyond the education profession for their comments. That input might very well be the essential ingredient to help you get the funding.

How to avoid getting rejected? Apart from not mailing the grant application before its deadline, some grant-giving organizations say the number one reason a grant is not awarded is because the applicant’s methods, procedures, and evaluations were not related to its educational goals and objectives. Other important reasons are:

- Needs statement is not of sufficient importance or may not produce any increase in achievement;
- Not enough evidence to support the need;
- The problem is much bigger than the author realizes;
- The problem is of local concern and does not affect enough people in the community;
- The idea is too ambitious and its goals and objectives are unreachable;
- The writing is too vague to the reviewers;
- Description is not clear;
- Overall project design is sloppy;
- Materials posed are not suited to the problem;
- Staff does not have adequate experience or training your school in some way, but they’ve never been asked.

Use the Internet’s resources to find the perfect funding match for your library. Visit your district’s Web site (www.cpsb.org/abshire/grant_resources.htm) for links to sites that will help your funding dreams come true.

A comprehensive site that’s a must-see is Foundations Online (www.foundations.org/grantmakers.html), a directory of hundreds of foundations and grantmakers.

Another great site is Foundation Finder (www.fdncenter.org/finders), a free search tool that provides basic facts on more than 61,000 private and community foundations in the U.S.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology (www.ed.gov/Technology/edgrants.html) offers a great site that lists a variety of grants.

The Helping.org site (www.helping.org/nonprofit/grants.adp) has a collection of grant programs for nonprofit organizations—this means schools! Its nationwide scope will help your school get the technology resources it needs.

You must register at eFunding Solutions (www.efundingsolutions.com), but don’t worry, it won’t release the information. It’s worth it since the site, dedicated to helping educators locate every funding source available in the U.S., provides comprehensive information.

Sheryl Abshire is director of technology for the Calcasieu Parish Public Schools in Lake Charles, LA.