A Few Tips on Grantwriting
by Jennifer Miller

Cautionary Tales first…
I worked for a federal agency and reviewed competitive grants. By far, the most common reason for not getting awarded a grant was not following directions. If the application was late (even by a minute), it was tossed out. If an application was unreadable (unclear copy), it was tossed out. If an application did not follow the format in the guidelines, it was tossed out. If the application was missing forms or key pieces, it was tossed out. You get the point! This may sound harsh but when you look at the sheer volume of applications that come in for any grant competition, it's understandable that, for reviewers, it's important to immediately eliminate those who have not attended to the basic guidelines. Then, time can be spent reviewing those that did follow the guidelines.

Another common mistake of those applying for funds is to create a "template" or standard application that is sent to multiple funders. After all, foundation grant guidelines can be very similar. Government guidelines tend to be a bit more detailed but also can resemble one another from one agency to another. The winning application that always rises to the top is one that must first have a strong, research-based idea with a reasonable plan to create social change. But in addition, funders want to see an obvious and explicit connection and match to their own mission, vision, priorities, and plan for their funds.

Success with Grants Top Ten List…

1. **Read and follow the guidelines carefully.** They may ask for four copies plus the original of the grant (we did at the federal level). They may want numbers in the top right hand corner. Do whatever is required. If any of the guidelines are truly unclear to you and you've sought out and read all of the information they provide, then make a call to the potential funder and ask for clarification.

2. **Communicating with the potential funder** – Understandably, funders don't like to answer basic questions that you can find out from their literature or website. However, if you do have a question that is clearly outside of those parameters (and an important question related to your application), make the phone call. It can begin to build your relationship with that funder.

3. **Attend any informational sessions or workshops**. This provides another opportunity to seek clarification on the guidelines, hear other questions and proposals (size up the competition!), and begin to build a relationship with the potential funder. It could be too that you find someone else in your community that is planning to apply. In that case, often it makes sense to work out

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collaboration if it can be managed reasonably to strengthen one application versus competing with a neighbor. Even if funders don't explicitly express this, typically funders are looking for diversity amongst their awardees which includes location diversity.

4. **Make explicit the alignment of your initiative with funder's priorities.** When we reviewed federal grants, we had a checklist of our priorities and had to rate each application on its level of alignment with our priorities. **Use the language the funder uses from the guidelines, request for proposals (RFP), notification of funds available (NOFA), and/or website.** You may call what you do "positive youth development" but your funder tends to refer to similar initiatives as "prevention." Use "prevention!" Even if you decide to go the template route, take the time to go through and match the language with that of the funder's. It will make a difference! Try to write as clearly and succinctly as possible (in the appropriate section of course) how your priorities are the same (or close to) the funder's priorities (and if that isn't the case, don't waste your time applying. This isn't the right funder match for you.)

5. **Be brief, clear, and understandable in your writing.** Often competitive grants will be reviewed by a wide range of diverse individuals with varying levels of education, experience and expertise. Keep in mind that reviewers may not know the first thing about what it means to create a positive school climate (really). Be sure to provide definitions, clear explanations and use examples if it will be helpful to a reader. Go the extra step and use a reliable editor or proofreader to not only attend to grammatical errors and typos, but also read for understandability.

6. **Use strong, compelling data**. Potential funders want to be moved by the heart of your project, but also must get the sense that what you're proposing is well researched. You need to demonstrate that you've done your homework. You clearly understand the needs of your school/district/community and can directly relate those needs to your proposed response and your intended outcomes. Tailor the type of data you use according to the interests of the funder. A community foundation will likely be much more interested in community – either county, township, neighborhood, or city - statistics (violence rates, discipline, suspension, graduation rates) than state or federal statistics.

7. **Ensure all is reasonable and practical.** Additional readers and editors can help you in this department as well. Be certain that the outcomes you are proposing are backed by research (and be sure to cite that research). Be certain that your timeframes for outcomes are reasonable. Recall the research that says it takes 3-5 years to implement any one school change initiative (Hall, & Hord, 2001). Also, ensure that the budget with requested funds is reasonable. Research expenses well

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before developing the budget to be able to provide back up support and documentation if any of the requested expenses are called into question.

8. **Show all partners in your application.** Conduct an inventory of your partners for this initiative. You may be surprised how many entities will hold a stake in the effort. These partners – parent groups, community organizations, local businesses, school board, etc. – demonstrate the level of commitment to the initiative and bolster the chances of success and sustainability. Be sure to include any in-kind or monetary resources committed by the partners in the budget (if allowed in the guidelines). This will demonstrate that you are leveraging resources to contribute to sustainability. In-kind resources could include a reassigned staff person or change in job description to dedicate some time to the initiative. It could mean district leadership dedicating monthly meetings to discussing implementation. Also, many applications ask for letters of support from partners. Provide up-front guidance to partners before letters are written to ensure that they cover the many issues you want them to. I've also written the letters myself for the partners and asked for their approval, edits and signature.

9. **Address sustainability.** Funders know all too well aware that their funding is temporary. Funders want to see that their money has made changes in the school/community that would not have been there without their contribution. If there's an appropriate place (and guidelines allow it), write briefly about your plan for sustainability. You will likely not have a fully formed and fool–proof plan for sustainability at the point of applying for funds. But you can give the funders the sense that you realize it is critical to begin now planning for sustainability, that you've already begun thinking through some of those key elements of change – and that the plan will be an important focus.

10. **Continually cultivate the relationship.** Be the grantee that all funders treasure. If you are fortunate enough to be awarded funds, be sure to do all you can to cultivate the relationship with the funder. They may only want progress reports at designated times but some will appreciate regular updates. Ask what would be most helpful to them. Make sure you meet their deadlines throughout the life of the grant with progress and financial reporting. Stick to the plan you proposed in your grant application unless there is good reason not change it. If there are major changes to the project, be sure to keep your funder well informed. If appropriate, invite them on-site to see the initiative in action. This can be a particularly powerful experience for funders. Also, funders often participate in a community amongst themselves. You are likely to have success with future grants with this funder and others if you do all that you can to create a trusting relationship with your current funder.

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