

Ten Strategies to Boost Your Education Funding

With budgets stretched thin and no relief in sight, many education leaders are looking for additional sources of funding to support the purchase of classroom furniture, equipment, and other items. Here are 10 key strategies to help you leverage grants and other resources for this purpose.

1. KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR NEW GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

To learn about new grant opportunities as they are announced, you should be monitoring websites with grants information on a regular basis. Here are some basic websites to start with:

- www.grants.gov
- <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/grants-apply.html>
- www.nsf.gov/funding/
- www.getedfunding.com
- www.foundationcenter.org/



2. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Learn everything you can about a potential grant opportunity before you apply, Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) Deborah Ward recommends. This will help you tailor your application to the funder's needs and expectations, says Ward, who is executive director of the Rochester Community and Technical College Foundation in Rochester, Minnesota.

How can you do this?

Attend pre-grant workshops and informational meetings, if the funder offers these. Also, read through successful grant proposals from prior funding years to get a sense of what the funder is looking for. This helps you understand not only what kinds of projects and activities have captured the funder's attention before, but also what reviewers are looking for in terms of writing style: formal versus informal, scholarly vs. down-to-earth, and so on.

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3. BE STRATEGIC IN HOW YOU APPLY

You shouldn't apply for any and all grant opportunities you see, Ward says. Instead, you must be deliberate and selective about which opportunities to pursue. Your proposals must closely align with the mission, goals, and objectives of the programs for which you are applying, she explains—or else you are wasting your own time and that of the grant reviewers.

4. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

With that said, you shouldn't limit your thinking when exploring potential grant sources, Ward advises: Instead, be creative in your approach. As an example, she described how one school district was looking to help pay for a new track it was installing. The district was able to secure an environmental grant for this project, because it used fully recycled materials for its track.

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When considering possible grant programs to help support a classroom makeover, think of the kinds of students who will benefit from the project. If the furniture will support instruction for students from low-income families, you can use Title I funding. If it will support instruction for students with disabilities, you can use IDEA funding. Keep an open mind about the sources of funding you can pursue.



5. FOCUS ON THE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Funders ultimately want to support high-quality teaching and learning experiences, Ward notes. They only care about the classroom furniture you are intending to buy with grant funds to the extent that it can help create these high-quality learning experiences for students. Therefore, your grant proposals should lead with the learning outcomes you hope to achieve—such as classroom environments that lead to more active, engaging, and collaborative learning—and then explain how the furniture you intend to buy will help you attain those outcomes.

6. BRUSH UP ON YOUR GRANT WRITING SKILLS

Obviously, if you don't have a compelling project or idea to propose, the chances are good that you won't receive a grant to implement it, Ward says. However, just as important to the grant-writing process is your ability to "sell" your project to reviewers—that is, to craft a winning proposal through strong writing skills. Here are some tips to guide you...

- Never make assumptions about the reviewers. They might, or might not, be experts in the field—so don't use educational jargon or technical terms without defining these the first time they appear in your proposal. The same applies to acronyms: These should always be spelled out the first time you use them.

- Use active verbs and sentence constructions, rather than passive ones. And don't use equivocal language, such as, "We hope that if we receive funding, we might be able to meet our goals." Write with authority and conviction.
- Keep it simple. Use everyday words unless you are writing a technical proposal. Keep your sentences short and concise. Reviewers can lose interest quickly when reading long, rambling sentences.
- Above all, make sure you convey your passion and enthusiasm for the project, so that reviewers become excited as they read your proposal.

7. BE PROACTIVE AS WELL AS REACTIVE

While part of your time can be spent in "reactive mode" by applying for new grant opportunities as they are announced, you also should be proactive by seeking out additional opportunities and preparing for the future, Ward says.

For example, most people who see an impending deadline will become discouraged and let this opportunity pass. But even if you don't have time to apply for the current funding cycle, you can use the information in a new grant announcement to prepare for future competitions under the same program.

Note when the competition was announced and whether a new one is expected next year. Get in touch with the funder, or check the website right away, to learn more about the program and what is required—and then file this intelligence away for future reference. Ask if there is a mailing list you can join to receive more information. Make a list of all the items you'll need to apply, and start collecting them now. Create a database of potential funders for easy reference. Keep copies of funders' RFPs and guidelines on hand, so you can get a jump on the competition for next year.



8. USE YOUR NETWORK OF CONTACTS

Explore what resources might exist within your own network of contacts, Ward recommends—including parents, the companies your schools do business with, and other stakeholders.

Receiving in-kind donations from those in your network can help you free up the budget dollars necessary to buy new products and services. For instance, if a parent has expertise with fiber optic cabling, maybe they wouldn't mind coming in and helping to pull wire during a vacation week. Then, you could put the money you save in wiring costs toward new classroom furniture.

You can use your network of contacts for information as well as donations, Ward says. When you talk with colleagues from other schools at meetings and conferences, ask them where they got the funding to support their instructional programs.

9. EXPLORE POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

Don't be afraid to reach out to local businesses and nonprofit organizations to explore how you might partner with them, Ward says—even if you have no prior relationship with them.

Growing your list of partners accomplishes two things: (1) It gives you more options for leveraging outside resources, in-kind donations, or expertise; and (2) it expands the universe of potential grants you might qualify for. If you have teamed up with a local museum on a project, for instance, then you can apply for grants that target museums as well as schools.

When you contact organizations to explore potential partnerships, "the worst thing they can do is say no," Ward notes. "If they say something like, 'That doesn't align with our priorities,' or 'We don't have the time or the resources to support a project like that right now,' then after thanking them for their time, ask if they know of any other organizations that would be interested in this type of initiative. They might lead you to other possible funding sources."

10. COLLECT EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

Above all, funders and partners want to support projects that are making a difference: They want to be associated with success. If you can show how the use of flexible furniture has transformed the learning culture in some of your classrooms or buildings, you are likely to receive funding to scale up this success by spreading the initiative to other schools or classrooms.

