

# The Economic Pit

## Finding a Way Out Through Grants

The author of a new book on grant writing in schools illustrates the successful route taken by three districts

BY KENNETH T. HENSON

**T**he economy has school districts in a stranglehold. But there is a way out. Despite beliefs to the contrary, the grant money pot has not dried up.

When President Obama launched his federal Stimulus Plan in 2009, my publisher asked me to help school leaders enrich their grant programs. My book *Successful Grant Writing for School Leaders: 10 Easy Steps* shares strategies and success stories from some of my own 30 school grants and from school districts small and large, rural and urban.

The goal is to build a steady flow of significant income as a result of well-written

grants for the school system. As the following three scenarios suggest, successful pursuit of outside funds often involves partnering with local businesses, social institutions and other school districts.

### Grant 1: Community Center Partnership

As the principal of Ashland Park Elementary School in Omaha, Neb., Karen Hayes recognized that any project that helped her students also was a benefit to the community. She acted on that belief when writing grant proposals, typically doing so with local agencies.

Ashland Park serves a blue-collar, urban population. Many of the school's parents hold two jobs, so their children attend the local community center's after-school program. The center has a dual mission — to help children and parents reach their potential and to enable older adults to maintain their independence. "My school had a similar mission — to have a team of staff, students and parents work together to help students become high achievers, lifelong learners, and responsible citizens," Hayes says.

Seeing an opportunity for her school and the community center to form a natural partnership, Hayes went about introducing herself to local businesses. She joined the community center's board and soon became chair of the program committee. She would use that post to support both the community's goals and the school's goals.

Hayes' dream was to have a place where children and senior citizens could share talents, resources and

support and where grandparents could read to students, help them with their homework or just listen to them read. She found a funder in Omaha's United Way of the Midlands.

"I found it inspiring to see my students curled up reading a book with a surrogate grandparent, watching other seniors overseeing homework, helping students with their letters or numbers or just listening to children sharing their day," Hayes says.

Soon other local businesses joined Ashland Park's Adopt-a-School program. One partner was an outdoor advertising/billboard agency.

"We eventually began showing student artwork on the billboards. Talk about your ego boosters," she says. "Students whose artwork was shown blossomed in all aspects of school. Families became increasingly involved. Enthusiasm is contagious!"

### Grant 2: Student Safety

A wonderful thing about grants is their ability to meet even the most serious school needs. In one rural Appalachian school district, that meant addressing security.

Cullman County, Ala., is known for its beautiful Victorian architecture, Garden River Walk, nature trails and its Ave Maria Grotto, a three-acre site with a Benedictine Abbey and 125 miniature reproductions of some of the world's most famous churches, shrines and other buildings. Those attractions make the Cullman County School District's 28 campuses vulnerable to unwanted visitors.

## Grant Sources for K-12 Education

Author Kenneth Henson points to these comprehensive grant websites where educators can find funding opportunities. Some of these sites feature smaller grant opportunities more suitable for individual teachers or school leaders rather than school districts.

- ▶ **Adopt-A-Classroom.** An online service that matches classrooms with supplies of resources. [www.adoptaclassroom.org](http://www.adoptaclassroom.org)
- ▶ **DonorsChoose.org.** An online charity that attempts to fulfill public school teachers' requests.
- ▶ **Foundation Center.** A comprehensive database on U.S. grant-makers and their grants. [www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org)
- ▶ **Gates Foundation.** The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation currently accepts unsolicited proposals only from Pacific Northwest organizations. [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)
- ▶ **GrantsAlert.**® Provides grant alerts for teachers, schools and classrooms in various subject areas plus professional grant writing services to schools. [www.grantsalert.com](http://www.grantsalert.com).
- ▶ **Grants.gov.** A unified site for grant applicants to interact with federal agencies that manage grant funds. [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov)
- ▶ **Grant Wrangler.** An online listing for teachers. [www.GrantWrangler.com](http://www.GrantWrangler.com)
- ▶ **Home Depot Foundation.** Provides community impact grants of up to \$5,000 to public schools using volunteers to improve the physical health of individuals. [www.homedepot.com](http://www.homedepot.com)
- ▶ **Kappa Delta Pi.** An international honor society in education that provides \$125 grants to classroom teachers. [www.kdp.org](http://www.kdp.org)
- ▶ **Lowe's Toolbox for Education.** The grant program has spring and fall cycles with a maximum gift of \$5,000. [www.toolboxforeducation.com/hta.html](http://www.toolboxforeducation.com/hta.html)
- ▶ **National Science Foundation.** Funding to K-12 public schools on STEM-related initiatives. [www.nsf.gov/funding](http://www.nsf.gov/funding)
- ▶ **Phi Delta Kappa International.** Provides short-term supplemental financial support (roughly \$1,000) to projects. [www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org)
- ▶ **W.K. Kellogg Foundation.** A new focus on education and learning with an active pursuit of racial equity. [www.wkcf.org](http://www.wkcf.org)

The Cullman County School District also is subject to the perils of severe weather. Ice storms can make the transporting of students hazardous. And Cullman County is located in one of the country's major tornado belts. Student safety is a significant concern, so Superintendent Nancy Horton asked the district's full-time grant writer Heidi Walker to seek a block Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Walker first conducted a survey to justify the need. Because her survey resulted in statistics establishing a need (rather than long, verbose descriptions), the \$200,000 request was approved.

The request for proposals from the federal agency required a table of contents. This gave the grant readers a quick, birds-eye view of the overall proposal and enabled them to immediately locate any section. For lengthy proposals (those running 10 or more pages), I advise my grant-writing workshop participants to include a one-page table of contents, even if none is requested in the RFP, unless this is precluded by page limitations .

The RFP also required an abstract. In crafting the abstract, you want to ensure every word counts as you do not want to exceed the abstract's word limit by one word. Even when not required, a short abstract serves a useful purpose. Because grant seekers are selling their dream to others, the program abstract is an excellent vehicle for sharing that. Because reviewers often receive far too many grant proposals to read closely in the available time, the abstract may be your first and only chance to convince the reviewers that your proposal is worthy of funding.

Walker used an application checklist to ensure she didn't accidentally omit one or more required parts in her application. Overlooking a single requirement in the RFP is a leading cause of rejection.

Walker's grant, which Cullman County received in the fall of 2003, has provided Palm Pilots for each building principal, the use of visitor badges at each campus and the installation of new surveillance cameras inside and outside the schools. It also provided security equipment for all the district's school buses.

The federal grant also led to well-planned and clearly articulated procedures to be followed in the event of different types of emergencies in the school district. The grant was re-funded in 2006 for \$184,599.

### Grant 3: Classrooms for the Future

John Ziegler, principal of Greenville High School in southwestern Pennsylvania, learned from skimming his state department of education website that the governor had proposed a three-year initiative called



**Ken Henson, author of *Successful Grant Writing for School Leaders: 10 Easy Steps*, presented at a workshop.**

Classrooms for the Future. An educator for 36 years, Ziegler was determined to give his students, located in a rural setting, access to state-of-the-art technology to change their lives.

The program he had in mind would couple interactive and wireless technologies with training that would transform teaching and learning across the curriculum.

In crafting his proposal, Ziegler kept one important point in mind. "Something I had to learn ... is that grants or requests for funding need to be written so the reader ... can quickly understand what the author is proposing and can easily score the proposal against predetermined selection criteria," he says.

After a significant grant proposal earlier in his career had been rejected by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Ziegler had a chance subsequently to ask the reviewers to explain why the proposal, which was accompanied by a report he had written, was turned down. After an hour of trying to explain that the information the funders requested was in both documents, he recalls telling them: "Look. It's like Ragu. It's in there!"

Ziegler says the reviewers understood the analogy "but they still wanted me to break down the information into bite-size pieces and answer their questions in the order they were asked in the RFP, providing the exact level of specificity requested." By the end of the conversation, the reviewers agreed to an extension for resubmitting the compliance report,

but the grant remained unfunded.

The principal learned from his earlier failure. He made a point of providing the requested information in an easy-to-read, numbered format that addressed the particular questions asked. He researched the topic, collectively generated a vision for the future and aligned the school's academic and technology standards to the goals, objectives, activities and evaluative criteria used throughout the proposal. An action-packed timeline and a budget sensitive to realistic needs rounded out the format.

"After getting all the groundwork done, I met with many people to discuss the action plan and seek their support," Ziegler says. The project wasn't his alone, but he took responsibility for writing the grant proposal and, for that reason, gathered information from the relevant groups. "In so doing, I witnessed again the power of collaborative energies that flow within a diverse team of people with a common goal — the willingness to serve others," Ziegler says.

From these sharing activities, he compiled the details for each section to demonstrate a well-thought-out project, eventually weaving the wishes

of the Classrooms for the Future Leadership Team into the final proposal.

Many funding entities expect a proposal to state clearly one's plans for evaluating the results of the project before making further decisions. Some funders expect a formal outcome-based evaluation to be conducted at the end of the project.

This time Ziegler's proposal was funded for three years in the amount of \$439,000 with a fourth year bringing in an additional \$100,000. It reversed everybody's roles. Teachers became students, learning how to adapt laptops to instruction, and the students became teachers of technology use. (Ziegler's application for the Classrooms for the Future grant can be found at: [www.edportal.ed.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/grant\\_information/691](http://www.edportal.ed.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/grant_information/691)). ■

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**PAGE 32**

**1/2 PAGE AD**

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