

**A SCHOOL GRANTWRITER'S GUIDE  
TO PLANNING COMPETITIVE PROPOSALS**

Chicago Board of Education

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## **WHAT ARE PROPOSALS ALL ABOUT?**

## WHAT ARE PROPOSALS ALL ABOUT?

Proposal writing presents an excellent opportunity for schools to fund supplementary programs that may solve some of their most pressing problems and lead to increased student achievement. Numerous sources of financial support go untapped because local schools are unfamiliar with the process of developing grant proposals. In reality, successful proposal writing is challenging but not very difficult once you understand the process.

Much of the information needed to put a proposal together is already available at every school. For instance, needs, objectives, and standards of achievement have already been developed as part of the **School Improvement Plan for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA)**. In most cases, this information simply needs to be converted to a different format. Many funding agencies have special requirements regarding the focus of a program and the students to be served, and they demand specific information related to those requirements.

There is also the issue of how long the funding will be available. Proposal developers must be aware of this and other special requirements since those requirements will direct the development of the proposal and be used by funding agencies when they select schools and programs for funding.

To begin, the selection of an appropriate funding agency is a critical decision which must be made early in the proposal development process. In considering grant funding, there are two general sources: government agencies and private agencies, often foundations. Given a school's specific needs, one type of funding source may be more appropriate than another. A major consideration in selecting a potential funding source ought to be matching the school's needs with an appropriate funding agency.

**GOVERNMENT SOURCES:** In general, there are three types of government grants: (1) municipal grants; (2) state grants; and (3) federal grants. Government grant programs tend to be designed for specific purposes. Since legislation authorizes government funds, the legislation also defines the intent of the program and regulates the use of the funds. Usually, government grants are for larger amounts of money than nongovernment grants and tend to be available for more than one year. If you are looking for funding for costly full-time staff positions, you should probably be thinking in terms of government grants. Chances are good that your school already receives considerable funding from such grants.

It may also be to your advantage to consider governmental funding agencies beyond those that focus only on education. The **Catalog of Federal and Domestic Assistance** and the **Index to Federal Programs** list hundreds of government grant sources.

**PRIVATE SOURCES:** Private funding is available either through corporate or individual grants or through foundations. Private sources tend to give program developers more flexibility than governmental sources in the use of funds. Corporate

sponsors are often receptive to specific school needs and may provide funding to solve very specific individual school programs. For example, private donors may provide funds to purchase new uniforms for the marching band or camera equipment for the photography club. In general, private sources tend to provide limited funds focusing on specific, one-time needs. This is not to imply that only small grants are available through private foundations. Private sources usually make contributions within their own geographic regions. Thus, they can help to meet local needs and, at the same time, enhance their image within their community. Take time to survey the wide diversity of private funding sources available to local schools, especially those in your community. It will be time well spent.

Funding agencies usually publish their own specific guidelines and requirements in a document called a “request for proposals” or RFP. However, in general, all proposals must address basically the same issues. The core components that can be found in almost any funding agency guidelines can be discussed within the context of the following five questions:

1. What do you need to fix?

RFP guidelines might require a section called “Needs Assessment,” or “Need for the Project,” or Problem Identification.” As a first step in approaching this requirement, proposal developers should review their students’ present and desired achievement levels, identify why there is a discrepancy between the two, and clarify the problems that need to be addressed to reduce the gap.

2. Where do you want to be?

RFPs might refer to “Program Objectives,” “Identification of Education Goals,” or “Standards of Achievement.” In this second step, proposal developers must determine appropriate and reasonable goals for meeting the needs.

3. How do you intend to reach your goal?

Each RFP has a section that might be termed “Plan of Operation,” “Narrative Description,” or “Scope of Project.” For this step, proposal developers must design a promising plan of action or an instructional approach to be used in meeting student needs and, thereby, reaching the goal.

4. How will you know when you’ve reached your goal?

In RFP terminology, this might be called the “Evaluation Plan,” “Evaluation Design,” or “Criteria for Success.” Any successful proposal will contain specific methods that will be used to obtain quantifiable, objective data that describe the results of the program. In other words, each proposal must include a plan to provide data to show how the funding has helped to improve student achievement.

5. How much will it cost?

The RFP you are working with may ask for a “Budget Plan,” a “Proposed Budget,” or an indication of “Cost Effectiveness.” To complete this portion, proposal developers must determine how much it will cost to implement the entire program. Throughout the process of proposal development, schools can obtain assistance from various Central Office departments. Since the start of school reform in Chicago, Central Office units have assumed primary responsibility for supporting schools. Staff in Grants Administration and Development (GAD) serves as the primary resource for proposal planners and writers. GAD can answer preliminary questions, provide workshops on proposal development, and refer proposal writers to appropriate Central Office departments. However, editing, photocopying, and distribution of the final draft are responsibilities of the proposal developer.

The following pages of this handbook discuss the five primary questions in greater detail to guide proposal developers and writers as they translate ideas into an action plan and as they shape the action plan into a successful proposal.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT TO FIX?**



## WHAT DO YOU WANT TO FIX?

The first task in developing an actual proposal is to determine “What’s wrong?” What is the problem? What are the specific needs of the school? This involves not only determining what problems exist at the school, but also which are most critical.

Traditionally, the section of a proposal that confronts this issue is referred to as a “needs assessment.” A needs assessment can serve several purposes. It can clarify current student achievement levels and identify community factors which influence that achievement. It can describe teacher proficiency and provide a means for determining parent and community concerns regarding the educational program. It can also provide information for making decisions about the allocation of resources, the areas of greatest need, and the kind of program needed.

A determination of needs may best be accomplished by conducting a comprehensive review or assessment of the total educational environment of the school. The assessment should be based upon input from school administrators, regular classroom teachers, special classroom teachers, support services personnel, the local school council, parents, paraprofessionals, representatives of interested community groups and business organizations, and, if possible, students.

The process for determining “what’s wrong” generally involves four steps:

1. Establishing the school’s long-range educational goals and standards of achievement, i.e., what expectations does the school have for student performance?
2. Assessing current levels of student achievement.
3. Determining why there are disparities between current and desired levels of achievement and identifying the areas that need to be fixed.
4. Ranking the problem areas to determine which are most critical.

Much of the work involved in conducting a thorough needs assessment at each local school has already been accomplished by the completion of the individual **SIPAAA**, which is required by the Chicago Board of Education for all Chicago Public Schools. Generally, these documents provide objective data regarding student performance and include standardized test scores, results of demographic studies, and attendance reports. Additional subjective data can be found in the **SIPAAA**, including the comments, opinions, and suggestions for school improvement as expressed by parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.

Therefore, most of the information necessary for developing a needs assessment is already available. A comparison of a school’s overall goals for student achievement with

current student achievement levels will highlight problem areas. Disparities in performance may result from one or a combination of several factors, including social, economic, environmental, educational, cultural, or motivational issues. Once problem areas have been identified, they should be ranked according to importance.

After the needs have been stated and ranked, program developers can decide what type of program would best serve the school's needs and whether or not outside support is required. It may be possible to meet the school's needs by reallocating the present staff, materials, and financial resources to fit a new or modified program. Alternatively, the Chicago Public Schools may already have a special program that would adequately address the needs. However, if neither solution is possible, the answer may be to develop a proposal for a competitive grant and to seek assistance from an outside funding agency.

**WHERE DO YOU WANT TO BE?**

## **WHERE DO YOU WANT TO BE?**

**SETTING PROGRAM GOALS:** After you have clearly identified the problem and know what has to be fixed, you are ready to tackle the next question, “Where do you want to be?” In considering the answer to this question, you need to consider the difference between where you are now and where you ought to be. If the average reading score of the incoming fifth-grade class in your school is 3.2 (third year, second month), and it should be 5.0., then it seems that the entering fifth-grade students are, as a class, one year and eight months behind expected reading norms. Where do you want them to be after participating in your special activity? At the end of the year, do you want them to be on grade level? One year behind grade expectations? Six months behind grade expectations?

In determining the answer to this question, you are setting a goal for your program. You may wish to establish long-term goals. An example of a long-term goal would be, “After three years, 50% of the students participating in the program will be reading at or above the expected grade level.” Or, you may wish to establish intermediate or short-term goals, for example: “For each month that students participate in the program, they will demonstrate a gain of 1.5 months in reading achievement.” This means that the students entering fifth grade now will be at grade level when they complete eighth grade.

In confronting the question of where you want to be, there must be a clear relationship between your goals and the problem you are trying to solve. If the problem is low student achievement, it is unlikely that you will be able to solve it by boosting the student daily attendance rates from 92% to 95%. In the same way, increasing the circulation of library books will, by itself, have little direct impact on reading scores of participating pupils unless there are other aspects of the program which actually ensure that circulated books are being read.

**SETTING PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:** To get to where you want to be, it is helpful to break that journey down into measurable steps. The process of establishing mileposts on the road to your goal is the process of setting objectives. As you achieve each objective, you move closer to your goal in the project. There are several possible types of objectives that can be developed, depending on the nature of the program itself. Sometimes objectives are stated in terms of a performance standard, by which success is measured by the ability of the learner to perform in a particular way. For example, “After participating in a special instructional activity, students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts involved by successfully matching names of prominent individuals with their fields of endeavor and their achievements.”

Other objectives are stated in terms of a product standard by which learners are expected to demonstrate their understanding by producing something concrete and measurable. An example would be, “After participating in a plant biology class, the participants will be able to produce science fair projects that focus on botany experiments.” Objectives may also be stated in management terms or process terms. Management objectives define what is to be done; process objectives define how certain things are to be done. A

management objective for the biology example would be, “After participating in the program, the participant will be able to establish a procedure for conducting a plant experiment.”

A process objective for the same example would read: “After participating in the program, the participant will be able to indicate clearly the discrete steps required for conducting a botany experiment.”

**DEFINING PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:** In all cases, there are certain common elements that must be included if you are to have well-developed, clearly written, concise objectives.

The first element should be specific identification of the students or other participants. Merely citing “student” is not adequate. Who are the students? Are they entering fourth-grade students? First-semester freshmen in World Culture classes? Seventh-grade students with reading scores in the sixth stanine or above? Be very specific when you identify the students or other participants who will be served.

In addition to clearly identifying the participants of your proposed program, you must also describe the anticipated outcome. Once again, outcomes may also be stated in performance, product, management, or process terms. In whatever terms they are stated, it is important that the outcomes be clearly and concisely framed so that the proposal developer, the reviewer, the participants, and the program implementer all share the same understanding of just what result is anticipated.

Another important element common to all objectives is the measurement standard that will be used to determine the program’s success. Again, the measurement standard must be understood by everyone involved. Will success be determined by students scoring at or above a specified level on a sixth-grade standardized test in reading achievement? By counting the number of volunteer hours that parents spend in the preschool center? By reducing the number of student absences by 50% for students with 10 or more absences for each marking period? Or, by some other quantifiable criterion?

The final element necessary in each objective statement is a timeframe within which the objective will be achieved. The timeframe for the program must include a beginning point and an ending point, i.e., “After 16 weeks of participating in the program, from January 1 through April 28.” The actual time may be stated in hours, days, years, or any timeframe that is appropriate for the particular program.

**WRITING PROGRAM GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:** Before writing program goals and objectives, a proposal developer must first carefully review the request for proposals (RFP), the guidelines, and any other information provided by the funding agency. This will clarify the funding agency’s purpose and intent. It will also help the grant writer articulate goals and objectives in a way that will incorporate the purposes of the funding agency and increase the chances that the proposal will result in much-needed funding.

**HOW DO YOU INTEND TO REACH YOUR GOAL?**

## **HOW DO YOU INTEND TO REACH YOUR GOAL?**

**IDENTIFYING PROGRAM OPTIONS:** Once a problem has been clearly identified, it is time to focus on developing alternative ways to solve it. In most situations there are a number of ways a problem can be resolved depending on a wide variety of factors, including the school's educational philosophy, student characteristics, administrative policies, and the cost of the solution. Examining alternative ways of reaching your goal will help you select the best possible approach given the specific characteristics and needs of your students. In addition, the better you convince the funding agency that the approach you have selected is best, the more secure it will feel investing its limited resources in your program.

As a first step, identify as many viable solutions or program options as possible. Discuss the problem situation with teachers or staff members who face the problem each day—they are most aware of the situation and should be most interested in resolving it. In addition, they may have insights into the causes of the situation and may be able to suggest techniques for addressing it. Also, they will probably be asked to implement the program and, except for their students, will benefit most if it succeeds.

Information on alternative solutions may also be found in professional publications that describe innovative strategies being tried in other schools and districts. Some of the approaches you will read about may suggest some potential for success in your situation. Consider as many alternative solutions as possible to ensure that the one you select will be the best.

Finally, in considering program options, remember the priorities and guidelines of the funding agencies. All funding agencies have specific priorities. A program developer needs to be aware of those priorities and must clearly address them in developing a successful proposal.

**DETERMINING PROGRAM SCOPE:** Decisions need to be made concerning the magnitude of the program selected. For example, will the program serve one classroom or one or more grade levels? Will it target students from a number of classrooms across grade levels or serve the entire student population? In determining the program scope, consider such factors as the needs of the target population and whether or not subgroups within the population have greater needs than others. Will there be a continuing need to serve similar students in the future? In some cases, once the target group is served, no further assistance will be needed.

Another important factor in determining program scope is cost. Normally, the more participants you serve, the greater the cost of the project. In addition to overall cost, the issue of cost-effectiveness is also extremely important. If the cost of the program is the same regardless of the number of participants—for example, a computerized homework bulletin board—the cost per participant is probably minimal and the program extremely cost-efficient.

A final consideration in determining your program's scope is the "sellability" of the proposal. Is the proposed project within the funding agency's specified area of interest and intent? Will it offer significant promise of success when compared to programs proposed by other applicants? Will the program, as you envision it, convince the funding agency that your application is the one to select? Be as objective and self-critical as possible in answering these questions.

**SELECTING PROGRAM OPTIONS:** After you have identified the specific need to be addressed, considered various intervention strategies, and determined the scope of the program, you must select program options which will most likely lead to success in achieving your goals.

In choosing options, it is best to have as much consensus as possible from everyone who will be involved. This includes teachers, other program staff, and the local school council, as well as parent and community support groups. It is likely that if more individuals and groups "buy into" the program during the developmental stage, it will have a greater chance for success.

In selecting program options, program planners must consider local school and Chicago Public Schools policies to eliminate the possibility of a conflict. It is equally important to consider the goals and purposes of the funding agency.

**SELECTING THE ACTIVITIES:** Now that you have identified the problem, established goals and objectives, and chosen program options to determine the approach you will take to resolve the problem, it is time to select activities which will enable the program implementers to achieve the stated objectives. Choosing appropriate activities is a critical step and requires careful consideration.

The primary factors in determining activities are the characteristics of the participants themselves: their ages, interests, needs, levels of maturity, and abilities. Activities appropriate for one group will rarely be appropriate for a differing group. Even classrooms within the same grade level of a school may demonstrate subtle but significant differences. Identifying the participants before selecting activities is, therefore, important to ensure that their specific needs are considered in detail.

Yet another important concern in selecting activities is the relationship between those activities and the stated objectives of the program. Will the activities explicitly support the objectives? For instance, a student incentive program that will improve attendance and, therefore, increase time-on-task does not necessarily translate into greater academic achievement. Selecting appropriate activities requires understanding of the skills needed to achieve the objective.

A firm grasp of the program's objectives is also essential in establishing the scope and sequence of the activities. Equally important is the timeframe in which the program is to be implemented. These factors are interrelated and must support one another if the program is to be successful.



A final factor in selecting program activities is the staff who will be involved. The staff ought to have the training, ability, and experience to implement the program successfully. Will additional staff training be necessary? Or is it possible that the staff you intend to implement the program may be overqualified for this particular project?

Once these considerations have been addressed, it is time for the program developers to select activities which, in their judgment, will best enable program participants to achieve the goals and objectives of the program. Again, it is necessary to carefully review the RFP and any other funding agency guidelines, including the required proposal format and style. The extent to which you follow these guidelines will be influential in determining whether or not the program gets funded.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU'VE REACHED YOUR GOAL?**

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU'VE REACHED YOUR GOAL?**

**PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION DESIGN:** Program activities should enable participants to reach the objectives or goals established for the program. Attaining those goals is, in fact, the purpose of the program and the reason why it has been funded. It is important for the participants, the program implementers, the managers, and the funder to know the extent to which those objectives have been met. This is the function of the program evaluation.

To program participants, the importance of achieving the goals is obvious. They will become better able to perform their tasks or assignments; they will acquire greater skills or enhanced appreciation; they will achieve greater knowledge or understanding.

Achieving program goals is equally important to program designers, administrators, implementers, and funders. In setting up the program, the designers, implementers, and funders selected what they felt were the best alternatives to achieve the desired results.

Achievement of the goals confirms their professional judgment. On the other hand, the inability of the program to achieve its goals does not necessarily call their judgment into question. It means that, in this case, with its unique situation, this program did not succeed. Much can still be learned by program designers, as well as by funding agencies, from programs which do not entirely succeed.

The evaluation component provides many answers for program managers and other interested individuals. It is not intended as a test to determine the success or failure of a particular approach or technique.

The evaluation design is determined by the type of assessment information needed. Typically, funding agencies want to know whether or not the program was entirely successful, or, if it was not, what caused its limited success or failure. There is never a threat that funding may have to be returned. Likewise, program staff often want additional information which may be helpful in planning future programs, providing greater insight into the needs of the program participants, or shedding light on the usefulness of the program methods or activities. The primary focus of the evaluation ought to be on the objectives and goals of the program itself.

**PROGRAM EVALUATION MODELS:** There are as many program evaluation models as there are program designs. In some cases, a sophisticated evaluation may be required. In most cases, however, funding agencies do not want an evaluation design that tests their understanding of statistics. This is also true of program developers, administrators, and implementers. A model which simply answers the question, "Have we attained our goal?" with very few distractions, is the type of model they all prefer.

A basic evaluation usually consists of a comparison of data from before and after program implementation. If the goal was to increase the grade equivalency scores of fourth-grade pupils in mathematical computation, the evaluation design would simply

compare scores from a standardized math test administered to those students before and after the program. In other cases, the evaluation process may be as simple as counting the number of times a particular event occurs and comparing before and after totals. This might be appropriate if the goal of the program was to increase the number of parents involved in monthly PTA meetings or to reduce the number of times students are sent to the principal's office for discipline. Overall, the key to a successful program evaluation is simplicity.

One of the great dangers in designing an evaluation is assessing achievement toward a certain goal in a way that is not appropriate. If, for example, participating student attendance rates are 85% and scores for reading comprehension for the same students are two years below expected norms, you could reason that, if we could get attendance up to 95%, reading comprehension scores would increase. Consider this scenario: After implementing an incentive program in which students were paid twice the minimum wage for class participation, attendance rates increased to almost 100%. The goal of 95% was surpassed and, therefore, the program was a "success." However, the question remains, "What about reading achievement?" In reality, reading achievement may have dropped further, to 2.6 years below expected norms. The problem here is that the stated goal, increasing the daily rate of attendance, has little to do with reading achievement, the implicit goal of this particular program. Scores dropped because students who had no interest in school stayed in school for the cash incentive but pulled the averages down even further. In short, if increased attendance is your goal, measure attendance; if academic achievement is your goal, then measure academic achievement.

**SELECTION OF EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS:** There is a great deal of information available on student and school characteristics. This information is gathered through instruments currently used systemwide and includes results of the **Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)**, **Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)**, and **Student and Staff Racial/Ethnic Survey**. Data which can be obtained from existing sources may be used in the assessment of your program. This will reduce the stress on program participants, since they would not need additional testing. It will also save valuable staff time and the cost of a special program assessment. If existing measures cannot be used, there are numerous alternatives available. These include other standardized tests, inventories, questionnaires, locally developed surveys, observation techniques, and records, including attendance and grade records, school reports, and other sources of miscellaneous data.

To summarize, before completing the evaluation design, review the RFP to make sure you include whatever the funding agency requires as part of the evaluation, including its format and style.

**HOW MUCH WILL THE PROGRAM COST?**

## **HOW MUCH WILL THE PROGRAM COST?**

The budget section of the proposal is where you must itemize the costs of the program. A well-planned budget will ensure that the requested financial support will be adequate to carry out the objectives and meet the proposed goal. The budget also provides a convenient way of reviewing the entire proposal.

Except for the abstract portion, the budget is usually the last section written. However, it must be considered throughout the proposal planning process. Nowhere is the impact of the budget more important than in the selection of a funding source. However, the selection of a funding agency should not be the controlling factor in planning the budget. Modifications of the program design may have to be made, but the proposed program should not be arbitrarily trimmed to fit the funds available from a specific source. It is essential to maintain the integrity of the program design. If this cannot be done for a particular funding source, you will need to seek alternative funding. Staff in GAD can provide assistance in identifying appropriate funding sources for various programs.

A good rule to follow in developing a budget is to work through the narrative of the proposal to identify activities, to estimate the cost of each item involved, and to identify the funding sources. Every item in the budget should be explained in the narrative and, conversely, all financial items described in the narrative should be included in the budget. For instance, if a program requires that students visit museums, then the costs of bus transportation and admission fees should be included in the budget.

In developing a budget, proposal writers should denote items that will be contributed by the school district, as part of its obligation to each student, as well as items that will be covered with other funding, such as Supplemental General State Aid (SGSA) or IASA Title I. Such items may include in-kind contributions of space, staff time, facilities, or instruction materials.

The budget is really an estimate of what it will cost to implement a program. The exact costs of some items, such as salaries, may not be known until after the program is funded. You would not budget for an inexperienced teacher with a bachelor's degree if your proposed design requires the services of a reading specialist.

Budget items should be grouped into broad categories, and a total cost should be given for the entire category. This will indicate where funds are to be expended and will help determine the cost-effectiveness of the proposed program. Typical budget categories are: Professional Personnel, Civil Service Personnel, Contracted and Consultant Services, Staff Transportation, Pupil Transportation, Nontextual Materials, Instruction Materials, Food, Fixed Charges (i.e., pension, insurance, and hospitalization), Capital Expenditures, Supplies, Furniture and Equipment, and Rental of Equipment or Space.

Certain budget categories such as equipment or furniture, may involve large costs and many different kinds of items. It would be awkward to include a long list of specific

items in the body of the budget. In such cases, list the general item in the body of the budget and refer the reader to an attached list of specifics.

Budget items should be stated in unit costs, rather than aggregate costs. For example, if textbooks for 2,000 students are needed at a cost of \$5.30 each, the budget entry should read, "Textbooks: \$5.30 each x 2,000 students = \$10,600." In listing personnel, the monthly pay rate and the number of months should be included, for example: "Teachers: 2 @ \$2,000 month x 10.25 months = \$41,000." Describing budget items in this manner, instead of simply stating, "Textbooks: \$10,600," or "Teachers: \$22,662," provides a clearer picture of the costs.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the budget process is planning for continuation of the program once the original funding from the agency is terminated. Proposal writers must ask the following questions during all phases of the proposal process: "Can we continue the activity with other funds after the grant funding expires, or can a specific component be eliminated at that time without jeopardizing the integrity of the program?" Funding for a proposal that contains mostly salaries is not likely to be continued. Many promising and innovative programs have languished because there were no budget considerations made beyond the funding period.

Frequent reference has been made to the importance of following the requirements of the funding agency. This is also true in the budget planning process. A promising proposal may be denied funding if the required budget format is not followed exactly or if it is not properly completed. If the RFP calls for a three-year budget, a failure to provide one may jeopardize the possibility of funding.

Proposal developers should carefully think through all the budget requirements requested by the funding agency as they plan the program. Staff in GAD can be contacted for additional information on budget procedures, approximate costs of specific items, and other financial matters.

**WHAT'S NEXT?**



## **WHAT'S NEXT?**

**PLANNING THE PROPOSAL WRITING PROCESS:** After you have identified a need, considered alternative solutions, and reviewed funding opportunities, you are ready to make an informed decision as to whether or not a proposal for outside funding should be developed.

**MAKING THE DECISION TO WRITE THE APPLICATION:** The decision to write an application or proposal should be based upon several factors. The first is the availability of a person who actually has time to write the application. Usually, it will require a significant sacrifice of personal time. If those who need to make such sacrifices are unable or unwilling to do so, do not waste time trying to develop an application. Do not be intimidated by the competitive process, but do be concerned about using your limited resources wisely and make sure you have the support of staff members and your local school council.

**READING THE REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP):** Read the RFP carefully. The majority of proposals that are never funded fail because they do not follow the criteria specified in the RFP. Close adherence to the RFP is the single most important thing you can do to improve your chances for funding. In reviewing the RFP, take careful notes on how your proposal will address each point.

**ESTABLISHING A PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE:** There are a number of key steps which must be completed if your proposal is going to meet the deadline for submission. Some of these may be under your control, while some may be the responsibility of others. Using a calendar, work backwards from the deadline date to ensure that all steps which must occur prior to proposal submission are completed on schedule. In some cases, proposals may need authorization from the Board of Education before they are submitted to the funding agency. All criteria specified in the RFP must be met prior to the deadline for submission.

**PITFALLS OF PROPOSAL WRITING:** There are numerous reasons why proposals are rejected by funding agencies. Proposal errors are the pitfalls which jeopardize grant applications and increase their chances of rejection. A little investigative work and planning can reduce such errors considerably. Mistakes often begin at the planning stage, are continued through the writing, and extend through the submission of the grant application. Among the pits into which grant seekers frequently fall are: selection of an inappropriate funding agency, selection of the wrong staff person or persons as proposal writer(s), vague presentation of the subject, inconsistency and incoherence of style, vague or inappropriate language, noncompliance with funding agency guidelines, and inadequate explanations of expenditures in the proposed budget.

There are thousands of public and private funding agencies. In fact, there are more than 30,000 foundations alone. As a result, selection of a federal, state, municipal, corporate, or foundation funding agency should be based upon determining which are most likely to fund the anticipated program. An investigation of funding agencies which have

previously provided grants to similar programs in the applicant's region is a good start. This information can be acquired by asking local schools or institutions who have received funding. Follow up those inquiries by contacting GAD or the GAD Web site. Provide a brief description of your school's needs, goals, and proposed activities. Finally, with the assistance of GAD, stay informed about public and private agencies and available grants which address your school's stated needs.

Another pit into which grant applicants may fall concerns the selection of a proposal writer. School personnel who are well-informed and articulate regarding students and their academic achievement and who are directly affected by the identified problem should be chosen to write grant proposal applications. Therefore, classroom teachers are often best equipped to be proposal or application writers.

The proposal writer should be an individual with excellent writing skills, capable of producing a convincing argument to a funding agency. The writer must be able to convey the idea that a specific school has the plan, the qualifications, and the staff to best implement a proposed program and to reach its stated objectives. Perhaps of greater importance is the ability to present the proposed program in clear, concise language and in a simple and understandable format. Both language and format must convey confidence that the program's objectives will be reached within the stipulated timeframe and budget.

Usually, the question arises: Is it possible for a team of writers to produce the proposal? Often, the perception of proposal writing as an overwhelming task may be used to justify a team approach. In some instances, a cooperative group of individuals can produce a proposal; in fact, every proposal is literally the result of teamwork by everyone who is likely to be influenced by the program. A team effort often produces a healthy multiplicity of ideas and approaches. During the planning stage, for instance, a diversity of ideas for solutions to the school's problem is a definite enhancement. However, during the actual writing of a proposal, diversity of writing styles usually disrupts continuity of thought and may render the proposal difficult to read. Therefore, under most circumstances, team planning is a great idea, but team writing should be avoided.

After a proposal writer has been selected, that person must make sure that the proposal's subject and focus are well-defined. A vague focus lends itself to a response of "No!" from the funding agency.

Requesting funds from the public and private sector merely because dollars are available is a waste of the proposal writer's time. It also diminishes time which proposal readers could better spend evaluating more worthy applications. Matching identified, well-documented needs with an appropriate funding agency tends to reduce the likelihood that a school will pursue a "fad" solution. A clearly identified need also dictates what will be evaluated and implies a method of evaluation. Proposals which do not present a specific subject, such as attendance, reading, self-esteem, parental involvement, dropout prevention, or drug abuse, stand little chance of being funded. It is unrealistic to anticipate funding for a program which does not address a need that has been thoroughly

documented through test data, conferences, and interviews, or to expect funding for programs which lack focus, or to assume that all schools have the same needs and interests.

Proposal writers frequently misinterpret RFPs calling for “creative” or “innovative” programs to mean, “Let’s do our own thing.” As a result, many proposal writers have minimized the needs, goals, activities, objectives, and evaluation portions of their proposals. Consequently, funding agency evaluators are sometimes presented with grant applications which are vague, inconsistent, incoherent, and unfundable.

Acquiring funding is not the result of luck. Careful description of needs, goals, activities, objectives, and an evaluation demonstrate good planning from beginning to end. Furthermore, simple, clear language, devoid of educational jargon, enhances a proposal’s chances of being understood and accepted by funding agency evaluators. A proposal which is coherent and cohesive demonstrates that the school understands its problem, has a plan for solving it, and is capable of reaching its objective. A clear, concise document is essential to the relationship which emerges between the funding agency and the school; the proposal becomes a contractual agreement, binding the agency to the school to which it has extended funds.

Whether the grant application is a preprinted form supplied by the funding agency or an informal narrative provided by a local school, it must include needs, goals, activities, objectives, an evaluation, and a budget. Form, content, and writing must be clear and concise regardless of the format. Funding agencies may offer thousands of dollars to finance programs of instruction; however, thousands of competitive applicants are eager to make these funds their own. As a result, funding agency evaluators will not take time to figure out unclear syntax or phraseology.

Picture yourself as a proposal reader. You have been requested to rigidly enforce certain standards. Your agency funds approximately \$3 million worth of \$20,000 proposals annually. Within the next 10 days, you alone must read 600 proposals. When you realize that Abba Elementary School has not included the evaluation section of your foundation’s grant application, how do you resolve the problem? You are happy to return Abba Elementary School’s application and advise the school that new applications will be available by August for the coming academic year. Thus, anticipated funds have been denied to Abba because no evaluation was included. Missing required portions as well as incorrect use of information are two of the most serious pitfalls in proposal writing.

A final and pervasive pitfall which often plagues proposal applicants is the inadequate explanation of how funds will be disbursed. Funds requested by grant seekers must appear reasonable to effectively support the proposed program. The budget page is where a proposal illustrates that it represents a good value. Evidence of cost-consciousness, cost-effectiveness, and efficient funds management may be provided by a simple budget plan in the proposal’s format. Explanations of cost per participant, resources already available, and in-kind contributions are also integral.

Acquiring funding through the proposal process is a challenging but not overwhelming task. However, it does require clear thinking and planning, good writing, and continuity of purpose. Constant awareness of the close relationship between the planning, writing, and submission stages of a successful proposal must be combined with careful avoidance of the deadly proposal pitfalls.