

Capitalizing on Grants to Transform School Communities

Grants have the power to transform learning and create lasting change in a community.

By Anne R. Sisk, MS

It always starts with an idea. Sometimes, the idea is small, building momentum over time. Sometimes, the idea is so large, it is more like a vision . . . a vision to change an ailing school, to create a program that will help students learn, or to introduce new technology into existing classroom practices. As the idea begins to take shape, the visionary begins to realize how much work will go into pulling it off—so much work that it may seem overwhelming with insurmountable obstacles.

Teachers and administrators face those obstacles daily when exploring new ideas: How will they create buy-in among their colleagues? How will they assemble the

right team to launch the new initiative? How will they ever find the resources to fund the project?

All education leaders are familiar with grants in some way, whether they have used them to purchase computers for classrooms, professional development for teachers, or new programs or services. School districts typically think of grants as a mechanism for funding those temporary solutions or often larger problems, and they tend to work in isolation to apply for and implement the grant award (perhaps by simply purchasing consultant services).

Yet grants have the potential to be used in much more creative and interesting ways. Grants have the power



to transform and create lasting change. Grants have the ability to affect students and learning in ways that go beyond prescriptive teacher training and technology.

By creating meaningful partnerships between school districts, universities, and community-based organizations, the potential effect of a grant initiative transcends the traditional school day and influences how students access services, interact with their families, engage in learning, and grow into productive adults. This article relates the story about how grants have been leveraged not just to change a school but to transform an entire community.

Transforming a Neighborhood

A decade ago, the Beechwood neighborhood in Rochester, New York, was a typical urban neighborhood, beset with poverty, high crime, and low student achievement. Yet several active citizens and community organizations were unwilling to accept the apathy and decline. One such community organization, NorthEast Area Development Inc. (NEAD), realized that the transient nature of residents who were primarily renters hindered a sense of community pride and responsibility. NEAD set out to renovate abandoned properties and to promote homeownership, helping stabilize the neighborhood's population.

Because the area had no supermarkets, most residents relied on bodegas or corner stores for groceries.

Unfortunately, with a high markup and scant or no fresh fruit or vegetables, residents were forced to subsist primarily on canned and boxed goods.

NEAD tackled that problem next, receiving a large grant from a local foundation to purchase a corner store and transform it into a thriving grocery featuring fresh, healthy food (with a planned urban garden out back). Residents were able to work in the store in exchange for fresh food.

That grant began a pivotal community-university relationship, as researchers from the University of Rochester joined that grassroots community effort to transform the corner store, documenting the process and training residents to conduct their own research, empowering them to voice their own needs and stories.

Outside entities making assumptions about what residents need or want can be viewed as invasive and intrusive unless outsiders act as the catalyst for or facilitator of change, not as the implementer (Bergdall 2003). The notion that those entities (such as university researchers, nonprofit organizations, or companies that want to donate goods or to engage in feel-good measures) know what certain neighborhoods need is presumptuous. Research can sometimes back up certain assumptions, but the key to addressing a neighborhood's needs is to engage its residents in the process through initiatives like asset-based community development (Kretzmann and



McKnight 1993). Without asking residents and encouraging their participation in the process, there is no way to accurately gauge the services or goods that will truly make a difference.

In fact, successful school reform often begins in the community, which was the case in Indianapolis after a struggling high school was closed. The community organized a grassroots effort to reopen the school in 2000. Several community organizations and a large university (Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis) joined the effort. By 2006, the school, George Washington Community High School, had the highest graduation rate in the district, and by 2009 (and the two subsequent years), every graduate was accepted into some form of postsecondary education (Officer et al. 2013).

In fact, successful school reform often begins in the community.

Yet the community cannot transform a school without assistance; partnerships between schools, local universities, families, and community organizations have the greatest chance of success (Cooper 2014; Officer et al. 2013). Bringing people together across social divides can bridge gaps in resources, differential power, and organizational structures (Edens and Gilsinan 2005; Parker, Templin, and Setiawan 2012). Grants can be used to build the bridge if the partnership is able and willing to maintain it.

In addition to the community-university partnership, NEAD also established a robust relationship with the elementary school in its neighborhood—School No. 33, serving approximately 1,200 K–6 students. NEAD’s 10-year collaboration with School No. 33’s teachers and administrators has helped reduce its poverty rate from 98.2% in 2001 to 89% in 2010 and shift School No. 33 from a “school in need of improvement” to a school “in good standing.”

With a thriving community–university partnership and a successful school–community organization partnership, the next logical step was to bring them all together.

Combining the three entities (NEAD, School No. 33, and the University of Rochester) allowed the partnership to flourish further, as grants were sought to add enhanced opportunities and services for students at School No. 33.

A state grant was obtained to create an after-school program for struggling students at School No. 33. That grant was a true partnership of the school district, university, and community; all were involved in designing and implementing the program once grant funding was received. Traditionally, school districts would apply for and create their own after-school or summer programs. By working as a team with complementary knowledge

and skills, this particular partnership was able to create a program for students who were previously unwilling to participate in a voluntary after-school program (targeting black and Latino males who were most at risk of dropping out of school).

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Summer programs round out the collaborative offerings of this particular partnership, with a Horizons summer program offered at the University of Rochester for students in the Rochester City School District (primarily from School No. 33), and a summer program run by NEAD for district students in the Beechwood neighborhood. Both programs have been demonstrated to reverse the summer learning loss experienced by many urban students with gains of one to two months in math and reading. Grants have been pivotal to the growth and success of those programs.

Although grants cannot usually be viewed as a permanent source of funding, they can be used as a catalyst for putting the programs, personnel, and resources in place to sustain successful initiatives long term. By developing partnerships with universities and community organizations, school districts can distribute responsibility and combine resources for maximum effect.

In the partnership described here, grants are applied for on the basis of eligibility, introducing a plethora of funding opportunities that the school district or university would be unable to apply for independently. The university is often in a position to contribute significant in-kind resources (such as faculty time, tuition, or facilities). Universities and school districts can not only partner to create programs for preparing teachers or school administrators (both done successfully between the University of Rochester and the Rochester City School District), but they can also partner with community organizations to foster change at the neighborhood and family levels.

Establishing Relationships with Potential Partners

A certain amount of mistrust may arise when a university enters a community or school setting with an offer to help or to “fix” problems, often viewed as the “ivory tower” issue (Parker, Templin, and Setiawan 2012).

We have learned that approaching educational or community issues from a deficit perspective does not recognize the strengths, achievements, and resilience of that community, even if there are some issues to be addressed—because there are always *some* issues,



regardless of how high test scores or graduation rates are. Using an asset-based framework highlights the work that has already been done, and the accomplishments that have already been made (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Building trust and recognizing that each partner brings a different set of knowledge and skills are crucial elements of establishing a productive partnership (Baker 2011).

Grant professionals can be instrumental in helping establish a partnership and identifying potential collaborative funding opportunities. However, the best partnerships are often created by the people who have a mutual interest in working toward a common goal. If each partner has its own goals or indicators of success—even if approaching the project with good intentions—the partnership will likely fail (Edens and Gilsinan 2005). Identify the common goal first, create the partnership, and then bring in someone with grant expertise to help identify potential funding opportunities.

Leveraging New or Existing Partnerships

Adding the responsibility of screening potential grant opportunities to an already-harried school administrator with numerous other responsibilities might not move projects forward quickly. If your school district is not large enough to warrant having a full-time grant

professional on staff, there are excellent freelance grant writers all over the country.

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Finding someone who specializes in educational grants is important; ensuring that they also have experience in managing large-scale federal and state proposals with multiple subcontractors or consultants is vital to the success of a fledgling partnership. There are also subscription services with varying levels of support and fee structures for compiling grant opportunities that can at least get the ball rolling.

If school district leaders truly want to influence the health and safety of their students within and outside the school setting, establishing meaningful partnerships with different groups is crucial for affecting the academic, social, and emotional well-being of their students.

Schools and communities are inextricably intertwined; if one is struggling, the other will struggle as well. Locating a grant professional who understands those nuances, who is familiar with a broad range of funding types, and

who is flexible and adaptable regarding the needs of each project—such as switching the lead applicant on the basis of eligibility—is important.

Many educators and administrators have successfully stretched themselves to the limit to do it all, but building trust and relationships takes time. Grant professionals can be brought into the process strategically and at the right time, to cement those relationships and to do the work most people do not want to

do or do not have the time to do, including identifying funding opportunities, developing the idea into a fundable project, and preparing proposals.

Grant seeking should be a collaborative process.

Grant seeking should be a collaborative process, with each member of the team bringing complementary knowledge and skills, including

someone to seamlessly weave that collective knowledge into a fundable proposal. It sounds like a lot of work, but the potential benefits vastly outweigh the time and effort. Imagine the tremendous effect on the students when everyone comes together (school administrators and teachers, university colleagues, families, and community organizations) with the goal of not just educating them but raising them, supporting them, and caring for them, so they develop goals and aspirations and believe that they can do anything they set their minds to. How can they not succeed under those circumstances?

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