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David E. Rawnsley

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Proposal Writing Made Palatable

David E. Rawnsley

Proposal writing, while not an easy task, need not be an unpleasant one. The checklist and suggestions provided here should help to assure that is the case.

IN SPITE OF personal predispositions it is the rare school administrator who sooner or later doesn't find himself or herself involved in the development of a proposal. While this is rarely a pleasant experience, it does not have to be a traumatic one if a little organization is applied to the process.

The 20-item checklist on the following pages, based on some 15 years of helping various agencies apply for funds from a variety of sources, is offered as one way to put this organization into the process. The checklist has been helpful regardless of the type of funding source (federal, state, or private) that is being approached, even though there may be wide variations in the specifics of the application process.

It is always tempting to get someone else to do project planning and proposal writing for you, and some notes are provided at the end of this article concerning the types of assistance you might wish to seek. However, you should keep in mind that a proposal should be a workable plan even if it isn't funded. A school district frequently finds ways to implement a good plan out of its own money in spite of a lack of financial support from outside agencies.

Although this checklist is presented as a series of discrete steps, it will be an un-

David E. Rawnsley is an educational consultant, Educational Resources Center, San Mateo County Office of Education, Redwood City, Calif.

usual circumstance when each of the steps would be followed in the exact sequence offered. Nor is there any profound reason why they should be. If, however, all the steps are completed in some reasonable order, the proposer should be able to avoid any great surprises on the day before the deadline, or perhaps more importantly, the day after.

1. *Determine the specific area of need you want to work on, or the specific problem you want to solve.*

Avoid the proposal that is a solution looking for a problem. Also avoid:

- Confusing a personnel need (“we need a reading consultant”) with a student need (“students aren’t reaching reading objectives”). Personnel is a *solution*.
 - Analyzing the need or problem inadequately. For example, stating that your students have a reading problem doesn’t give you much insight into whether to plan a program to increase decoding skills or comprehension skills—or something else.
2. *Set the general goal you want the project to attain, match it with school or district priorities, and get the appropriate approval(s) to proceed with planning.*

This doesn’t need to involve developing a set of technically exact goals and objectives. It does involve defining what it is you are trying to plan in clear enough terms to be able to communicate it. Do get approvals from the superintendent, the board, advisory groups, and staff (depending on your district’s regular practices). Surprise is not a good tactic in developing projects.

3. *Investigate possible funding sources appropriate to your need and goal.*

Get copies of guidelines from prospective funding sources when possible and mark them up, making specific note of obscure or unusual requirements (such as requirements for matching funds, disallowment of certain types of costs, requirements to demonstrate involvement of special groups in planning, and so on) which can bring your proposal to grief at the last minute.

4. *Write down a plan for planning the project and writing the proposal.*

This plan should include:

- Who will be involved, and how.
- Who will be responsible for what.
- A timeline (which can be built by working back from the deadline).

The table of contents of the application form provides a good outline of what needs to be done. Remember in scheduling that many boards of education require two meetings to approve submission of a proposal, and that it will generally take a minimum of one week to type, proofread, and produce.

5. *Do some research.*

- Investigate what is known from research and experience about your need and the students who have it.
- Find out what solutions others may have used for the same or similar problems. Research indicates that the most effective programs are adaptations by local staffs or solutions developed and tried elsewhere. Have at least one alternative to your “pet” solution, if for no other reason than to have something with which to compare your idea.
- Gather information about your own situation, such as past performance of your students, background of staff, or materials already available. You’ll need it for the proposal.

All of this research provides the basic “stuff” for your rationale in step number 12.

6. *Select the approach you want to use to meet your need in general terms.*

Most proposals, regardless of funding source, will include:

- A statement of need.
- Goals/objectives.
- Rationale.
- Major activities.
- Evaluation.
- Personnel, materials, and equipment.
- Budget.

7. *Rewrite your needs statements and goals in formal terms and specify discrepancies between needs and goals/objectives if guidelines require them.*

This is the first step in actually writing the proposal. However, remember that until you give the final copy to the typist, anything can be revised. Don’t let anyone get too “ego-involved” in their first draft. People tend to fall in love with their own rhetoric.

8. *Analyze your project into components.*

Components are sets of major activities which reasonably group together around an objective or set of objectives (such as

instruction, staff development, parent involvement, and so on). Most educational projects include an instructional component, and this is the place to start. But remember that all projects require management, and making this a separate component may reveal a number of activities (and costs) you hadn't thought of beforehand.

There is no "true" set of components; unless the guidelines require a certain set, use what seems most reasonable and useful.

9. *Specify objectives for each component.*

Figure out how you will know whether a component is being successfully carried out and state that as an objective. Unless you are omniscient, your project will need revision in the second year, and organization by component provides a good way to see what should be revised.

10. *List major activities by component.*

List them once, and then go back and list them in reasonable order of occurrence. Simple flow-charting can be of great help here. Be very realistic when estimating how long an activity will take—it is unlikely that a new curriculum can be developed in two weeks, regardless of the abilities of your staff. Don't forget little matters like vacations and holidays when estimating timelines.

11. *Design the formal evaluation plan.*

Be realistic, get advice, and remember to budget for evaluation. First determine the purpose (or purposes) of the evaluation. Don't assume that the evaluation required in the guidelines will provide the same information that you (or your board) will want to know about the project. And don't propose to measure significant gains in student learning within six to nine months after the project starts. Try as hard as you can to base your evaluation on data which are normally collected. Be very careful about scheduling of standardized tests; too many projects expect to see gains in scores on tests administered four to five months apart, and this expectation is very likely to be a disappointment for technical reasons having nothing to do with your project.

12. *Write the rationale.*

Although some funding programs specify what should be included in this section, the rationale is basically a statement of why you chose this solution to your problem, and what makes you think it will work. One of the basic purposes of a rationale is to provide evidence (direct or indirect) that your school/school dis-

trict is capable of doing what is proposed. Don't confuse the rationale with the proposal. Too many project developers think that once they've written this section, the rest is boilerplate. Remember: A proposal is a plan of action, not a set of reasons.

13. *Determine personnel needs, job descriptions, and qualifications.*

In many organizations, particularly public ones, it is a complex process to get a completely new position authorized. Check to see if the project's personnel needs can fit into already existing job classifications, rather than inventing new ones. Also be careful not to require more credentials than are needed and/or required. Excessive credential requirements can increase personnel costs and severely limit the "pool" of candidates.

14. *List everything that you really need to make the project work that will cost something, and build a budget.*

The budget is the financial expression of your plan of action, so the plan and the budget should match virtually item for item. It is usually easier to build the budget in the form you are most used to, and then translate it into the form required. Remember that salaries will almost always be determined by district salary schedules, not by what you think you can get away with paying someone in order to keep the budget down. Don't forget that someone has to pay for administering the project (even if this is no more than bookkeeping). Include these costs as overhead (if allowed—sometimes it isn't), or as direct cost items. Budget realistically for what you need; "under-budgeting" can have as adverse an effect on proposal review as "over-budgeting" and won't add to your local reputation as a planner if you are funded.

15. *Review a draft of the project.*

Use the table of contents of the guidelines or application form as an outline for the review. Let all interested parties see the draft; don't wait until you have produced the "final" copies, or someone may "definalize" them by pointing out some awesome omission.

16. *Prepare a summary for preliminary board (and advisory committee) review.*

First make sure your board will accept such a summary. If not, you'll have to move your schedule for the next three steps ahead considerably.

17. *Get the proposal typed, proofread, and assembled.*

This step can be started before Steps 18 and 19 are completed, but

don't staple the proposal together yet. Be forewarned that typing a proposal is not like typing a letter; be available to the typist. A draft is rarely so clear and lucid as to be beyond misunderstanding.

This step inevitably takes longer than you think it should.

18. *Get the necessary signatures on resolutions, assurances, and title pages, and insert them into the proposal.*

You can be collecting these pieces of "boilerplate" throughout the writing process, but you won't get far without them.

19. *Build your table of contents, and put it into the proposal.*

Along with being a necessary part of the proposal, building a table of contents is an excellent way to assure that you haven't forgotten something. Compare yours with any which may appear in the guidelines. Now you can staple.

20. *Submit the proposal.*

Remember most deadlines specify the date the funding agency must *receive* the proposal, not the date it is to be mailed. It is a good practice to send proposals by registered mail. Always include the number of copies required by the guidelines. Produce and keep enough copies to pass around if you are funded; after all, the proposal is a plan of action, not something to be filed while you spend the money in some other fashion.

Resources for Assistance

Planning a project and writing a proposal is not a simple activity, and you may need to call in some outside assistance. The kind of assistance you do seek will depend upon your specific needs, but most will fall into one of the following categories (or some combination of them).

- *Content-area Consultants*, frequently called "experts."

These are people with experience, knowledge, and reputation in the area in which you are working. They can be particularly helpful during those steps in which you are selecting, adapting, or inventing a solution and planning a program. They can provide ideas, research knowledge, references to other programs, knowledge about what it will take to reach your goal, and (let's face it) a certain amount of "clout" to your proposal. However, if they write your plan and proposal, it will be theirs and not yours, and in all likelihood will not be as successful in implementation.

- *Planning Consultants*, or specialists in generalities.

Planners assist you in getting from a general idea to a specific plan of

action. Their specific skills are in designing, organizing ideas, and critiquing plans for completeness and continuity. Occasionally, these skills and those of the content-area consultant will be found in the same person, but one does not necessarily imply the other.

- *Proposal or project writers.*

These people take a well-developed plan of action and translate it into the forms and guidelines required by a specific funding source. In the process of doing so, they may be able to point out inadequacies in your plan, but if they are expected to fill in gaps in your planning (e.g., make up objectives) or to develop the plans themselves, they have been transposed into "creative liars." In some cases you may be able to find someone who can combine this skill with other types of consultation, but this can be overdone to the point at which no one else is involved in the project.

- *Technical assistance.*

This refers to assistance in meeting the technical requirements of a particular application process. Included are such things as interpreting guidelines and regulations, reviewing of proposals to see if they match the requirements of the funding source, giving assistance in filling out specific forms, and providing information about funding alternatives. Intermediate agencies are good places to look for this type of assistance. When in doubt, don't be bashful about contacting the funding agency itself. Most will be very helpful up to the point of giving you an advantage over other applicants.

Even the best of proposals are not always funded, but there are important side benefits to a well-organized, project-development activity. These can include an increase in the clarity with which those involved look at a problem or need, development of skills which can be used in day-to-day program planning, and better understanding on the part of staff of the complexities of planning and budget-building. Good management of the process, however, is the key.

Testing Effective If Used Properly

Standardized testing has suffered more from the excessive expectations of its advocates than from the attacks of its critics, according to William W. Turnbull, president of the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Turnbull suggests that standardized testing be put into proper perspective—as an objective, accurate method for teachers to assess how much their students have learned and as a basis for comparison to students in other classes, schools, and states.
