FREE MONEY!

Cynthia Anderson

cyndeeanderson@sbcglobal.net
NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, LET'S TALK ABOUT GRANTS.

School library budgets are about as miserably low or nonexistent as many of us have ever seen. The population of school librarians who have not just one, but many school libraries to manage is growing. Time and funds are short, and needs for books, programming, and technology are high. Are you the one and only school librarian in your district? Do you serve multiple schools? Grant money is out there for you, and I want to encourage you to get some for your students and for their school libraries. Roll up your sleeves, and let's get started.

First Things First

Tell your administrator what your dream is for your library. Paint a crystal-clear picture of what you want your students to be able to achieve and what, in particular, you would need to make that dream come true. Never, ever, write a grant proposal without prior approval of your supervisor. You never know when she might find a spare $1,000 that must be spent by Friday or it will be recaptured by the state department of education. If she knows what you want, it could be your lucky day. But most importantly, do not surprise your administrator with a completed grant proposal without her preapproval. It will save you time and tears in the long run.

Start in Your Own Backyard

The best place to start looking for grant funds is close to home. Start with a simple plan and a quest for a local funder. Is your school seeking greater parental engagement? Go to your parent-teacher organization and pitch a mother/daughter book club centered on a book that the organization will purchase. That could be your first shot at writing a grant proposal. Take baby steps to start. Do you need a continental breakfast for your before-school chess club students? Write a proposal to the neighborhood grocer with a promise of a big "thank you" in the school newsletter. When you get small funding packages like these, add them to your resume. Potential funders are like banks—the better you look on paper, the more likely they are to take a chance on you.

Reach Out and Collaborate

Take out the town or neighborhood public librarian for coffee. Find out what is cooking in the public library and what possibilities exist for collaboration on a joint project that you could pitch to a potential funder. Grantors love to give money when it impacts more, not fewer, beneficiaries. Is a community college, university, or technical school in your vicinity? What about your art teacher or physical education teacher? Could you collaborate on a project with one of them and help several students improve skills? Funders love proposals that span the ages, reach across institutions, and involve school and community.

Network

Networking is one of the very best ways to find out where grant money is available. Get out of your biblio-silo and connect with others. Whether it is following your favorite library rock star guru on Twitter or reading a daily blog, reach out and connect with someone every day. You can't be everywhere simultaneously, so use technology to keep in touch with the movers and shakers who do know where the money is and have innovative ideas to share. Join a listserv like LM_NET and watch...
You need really great ideas for your grant requests. Follow some AASL member eagles to get inspired ideas for your proposals.

**TWITTER TIPSTERS**

David Warlick  
<http://twitter.com/dwarlick>

Allen November  
<http://twitter.com/nlearning>

Doug Johnson  
<http://twitter.com/doug_johnson>

David Loertscher  
<http://twitter.com/davidloertscher>

Chris Harris  
<http://twitter.com/infomancy>

Kristin Fontichiaro  
<http://twitter.com/activelearning>

Joyce Valenza  
<http://twitter.com/j0ycevalen2a>

**BLOG TIPSTERS**

Joyce Valenzaa  
<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com/profile/joycevalenza>

Buffy Hamilton  
<http://theunquotelibrarian.wordpress.com>

Allen November  
<http://novemberlearning.com/blog>

David Warlick  
<http://davidwarlick.com/2cents>

Doug Johnson  
<http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com>

David Loertscher  
<http://davidloertscher.wordpress.com>

Chris Harris  
<http://schoolof.info/infomancy>

Kristin Fontichiaro  
<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com/profile/KristinFontichiaro>

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for topics relating to projects for which you want to find funding. Make a reoccurring appointment in your calendar to prompt you to do a search for grant money once a week or once every two weeks. It only takes a few minutes to check the places you expect might have some grant money. You have to lift a lot of rocks to find a nice little nest of grant money.

**Kids First**

Funders want to help young people learn, achieve, communicate, stay in school, and graduate. Funders’ primary goal is not to make life better for school librarians. When you write your grant or pitch your idea, put the focus on the benefits to the students. Even though getting a grant might make your life better, that improvement is not a primary motivator for the funder. The funder wants to improve the lives of kids. Choose your words carefully; it is not about the school librarian. Picture in your mind a room full of grant readers sorting through proposals and sifting them quickly into two piles. One is for spending that is beneficial for students, and one is a stack of proposals that are intended to make life easier on the school librarians. Guess which stack gets the more serious reading? Be the wind beneath the wings of your students and you will help them achieve great things.

**Tie It to Learning**

If you are not on your school’s improvement team or on the data analysis team, sign up today. Grant money goes to those who have a specific goal, a specific plan to achieve that goal, and a way to measure the achievement of that goal. The goals that are most often funded are the ones that are designed to improve student achievement. Once you are serving on those school improvement and data analysis teams, you are privy to knowledge about specific learning goals in your school. Sit down and go through the high-stakes test results. Do your students need improvement in persuasive writing skills? If they do have a deficit in that area, how can you help from the school library? Do you have some prime examples of persuasive writing? Or are you fresh out of anything of interest to help teachers present strong examples of persuasive writing? If that is the case, collaborate with a teacher and develop a plan to teach persuasive writing skills. Start searching for what materials might help students improve persuasive writing skills. Get a list together of materials you could purchase if you had the funds. That would be a short, easy-to-write proposal and a great place to start developing or honing your grant-writing skills.

**Honey, Not Vinegar**

You have heard it before, but it is still true. You get more grant or gift funds with a can-do, energetic, positive, collaborative attitude than you do with all the strident voices you can raise and picket-line signs you can wave. Whether it is the administrative team, the school board, or a local museum board making funding decisions, people want to place their faith and funding in the easy-going, gets-along-with-others, cheerful go-getter, not in Ain’t-It-Awful-We’re-All-Going-to-Hades-in-a-Hand-Basket-for-Lack-of-Funding Ann or Andy.

**Be Prepared**

Like any good Boy Scout, you need to be prepared. Be ready with the mental summary of your dream library. What would that look like? Be ready to paint a verbal picture of that dream in language your potential funder can understand.
If you had that grant, what would students and teachers be able to do that they can't do now?

Get your resume ready. Most grant proposals require a current resume from the person or people requesting the grants. Keep a current version of your resume in your computer. Be ready to modify a copy of the file to include specific information that might appeal to the potential funder you have identified.

Do your students need some type of technology gizmos? If so, what are they? How much do they cost? What is the best price you have found for them? What is the shipping cost? Do they need any peripheral devices or software? Would your instructional technology team agree to support these gizmos if you had them? Be sure you know exactly what the request package would look like. Be ready to pull that information out with just a moment’s notice when a grant opportunity shows up. Be sure the technology powers that be would support your new technology if you had it. Don’t surprise the technology team with a new set of Apple products when the team will support only Windows computers.

Be Compatible

Your goals need to be compatible with your potential funder's goals. Look for a good match when you seek a funder. Think Match.com and e-Harmony. Do a compatibility test. Don’t apply to a funder whose mission is to help at-risk students if your students are not at-risk. Your mission must be compatible with the funder’s mission, or you are wasting your precious time.

Grant Writer’s Best Advice

If your school library is your field of dreams, write it (the grant); the money will come. Start small. Learn from others. Keep your eyes open for the prize. Put kids first. Collaborate. Cut your teeth on small grants before you tackle a big federal grant. The more grants you write, the better you get at it. Polish your enthusiasm and let it show through in your proposals. You are doing meaningful, life-changing work. Keep on keeping on. For your young patrons, you make a difference that lasts a lifetime.

Cynthia Anderson is associate superintendent emeritus in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. She has served as teacher, school librarian, school principal, library director, and as district administrator. Her most recent book is Write Grants Get Money, 2nd ed. (Linworth 2008).