Milking Stool

By Gary Lee Frye

ow much “extra” work are you willing to take on to ensure that your students have the programs they need to be successful? Would you be willing add another full-time job to your assigned duties? Lubbock-Cooper Independent School District and the Llano Estacado Rural Communities Foundation discovered that maximizing all the resources that are available is a full-time job. They hired me to create and maintain a system of development through grants and other fundraising efforts for the district and the foundation. In other words, I tap into grants as a funding source on a continuing basis and support my grant-writing effort with general foundation fundraising. This approach goes beyond merely writing a grant for a program to having a program for writing grants and fundraising. Adopting such a program will make fundamental changes in a school’s ability to effectively educate all its students.

Because funding is not always available for the basic instructional programs, let alone the special programs needed to ensure that every student will make adequate yearly progress (AYP), many campuses and school districts are turning to grants. In the short term, grants are wonderful things that enable an educators to build programs to meet the academic and other needs of students and their families. Grant programs usually result in more students being served, improved test scores, and a greater likelihood of making AYP.

But grants are short-term fixes because when the they end, the funds are gone—and there’s no way to pay for the needed program. In fact, if you are good at getting grants, the amount of grants that are ending at any given time in your school district could be more than some small school districts in West Texas have as a yearly budget. (The Lubbock-Cooper ISD’s Development Office and the Llano Estacado Rural Communities Foundation, the funding arm of the consortiums of six public school districts and one charter system, have generated more than $2 million in grant funding for several years.) If the grants dried up, what would happen?
A Three-Legged Stool
That question caused me to rethink basic school finance and develop a new system for school funding. I called this concept the “milking stool construct” because effective finance for schools should have three distinctly different funding legs to provide a stable support system for all students. The first leg is the funding that comes from the tax base. The second leg is grants, both formula and competitive. The third leg is an associated foundation that can legally raise funds from the community and other sources. The rationale for thinking about school funding as a three-legged milking stool is that with three legs, the stool will be stable even if one of the legs is longer or the ground is uneven. Stability in funding is the key to being able to create ongoing programs that can be sustained beyond any one funding stream’s resources.

The public tax base. At one time, the first leg of the milking stool was the only funding that a preK–12 public school needed. But because of legal challenges in 45 of the 50 states over inequalities in public funding, this leg has become much shorter. If everyone is equally poor, then law suits that are based on rich schools having greater access to resources than poorer schools will go away. This was not the intent of the challenges; poorer schools thought they would get more money into the system. But legislators are not willing to raise taxes to ensure that every school district has the same resources as the richest school in the state. Making everyone’s resources equal to the poorest school district in the state lets them cut taxes. So an unintended consequence has been that funding from general revenue sources has been decreasing for most schools for several years because of the economic downturn in the earlier part of this decade.

Grants. The second leg of the milking stool is grants, both formula and competitive. Title I funds and other federal resources help with programs for poor, at-risk, or other high-needs students. Some states used their block-type grants to focus on other special needs populations. But over the years, formula
grant programs have decreased as needs have increased.

Competitive grants can fill in the gaps in services and fund millions in special programs, but the problem of what to do when the “soft money” ends and who will write the next grant remains. To maximize this revenue stream, every school district or group of school districts needs a development office. (For more on this topic, see Frye, 2005.)

The foundation. The third leg of the milking stool is a foundation through which the school or district can legally solicit funds from the community and other sources that normally do not contribute to schools because they are taxing entities. My district’s development office added this third leg when grants became more scarce earlier in this decade. The budget for grants at that time was about a million dollars annually and there were only two other school districts in the consortium, but the funding from grants went below $200,000 and could provide only the bare bones of the former programs.

To ensure more even and reliable funding, the consortium’s goal became to look for other funding and start the process of developing a foundation. Soon the Llano Estacado Rural Communities Foundation was formed as a system for obtaining local funds and creating a sustainability plan for all the grant programs that were being developed.

Starting the Job
Now that the concept is in place, are you wondering. How do I do it? The following advice will help you prepare for the undertaking.

Let vision drive the effort. You need a clear vision of what you want before you start seeking funds. And the vision cannot be, I want a new computer, I want a new reading program, or I want more staff members. Those wants are about the “stuff” of a program—you need a vision of a future for your students that cannot be achieved without the extra funds you are seeking. Facilitating students’ achievement of a grand goal enables you to be passionate in the grant proposal, which causes the reviewers to score it high enough to be funded. The vision must drive the development of the “ask” because if it does not, getting the grant or getting the donation becomes the driving force, not the benefits to the students.

At Lubbock-Cooper, the overall vision is developed in the motto “Building the Future…One Student at a Time!” It’s the lens through which all grant proposals are developed and written. If the grant programs help any student achieve a better future, then the effort is worth it. Also, by identifying need from the perspective of individual students, grant proposals can be written even when the majority of students on campus are achieving academic success. Until every student in every subgroup is achieving at the highest level on the state’s academic tests, there is a need. All campuses of a school district, not just the low performing ones, can develop a grant program if they can frame their vision in terms that inspire.

Align needs and goals. Establishing need requires that you develop a rationale that aligns your school’s needs with the funder’s goals. When funding comes in the form of a grant, the request for proposal (RFP) will set the guidelines for establishing need. When it comes from a foundation, proving need is aligned to the goals of the foundation. The RFP will give you insight into what the foundation is interested in funding.

For example, businesses want to get positive publicity because they know that being associated with a school is good business. Be aware of this fact and use it to further develop your vision and benefit the business. Community stakeholders want to see their child or grandchild do well, want a desirable school to improve the resale values of their homes, or just feel that by supporting “their school” they can make a difference. Although each of these reasons will appeal to different stakeholders, if your vision inspires them, you can convince them to give to help you meet students’ needs. No matter what reason people have (and this includes people who work for government agencies), your task is to craft your request in a manner that shows how students are being helped and how your school comes closer to achieving its vision.

Prepare the dreaded proposal.
Everyone assumes that the hardest task is developing the grant or funding proposal. Because forms are now my life, I can state that this is not the case. Forming a consortium, getting the stakeholders on board, and ensuring that everyone’s vision of the future is aligned—those are the hard parts of developing alternative funding.

Reading and following the directions eliminates most of the problems that cause reviewers to give a proposal low scores. Always remember the golden rule: the one with the gold gets to make the rules. I say this both for humor and to make the point that the person writing the check has the right to tell you what you must do to get the check. On the other hand, if the “rules” move your school away from your vision, don’t accept the check. The vision will let you determine whether funding a project within the funder’s guidelines will move you closer to the vision or farther away from it.

You must deliver your physical proposal in the manner that the
funder requests. The proposal is a test of whether you can read and follow instructions. If it is completed correctly, the funder will be inclined to think that you can deliver on the proposed program. So if the RFP says to use 11-point Tahoma font with 1.1-inch top, 0.7-inch bottom, 0.6-inch right-side, and 0.9-inch left-side margins using 1.5 spacing format, then do it. Also follow any page-limit guidelines, formatting suggestions, and so on—because they matter.

Finally, either answer the questions on the forms or follow the scoring criterion in the order that is stated in the RFP to keep the reviewers from having to hunt for information. Following the guidelines and using the scoring headers of the RFP will keep the reviewers from getting annoyed. A happy reviewer is inclined to give a proposal high scores, which means that your proposal will be ahead of others and more likely to be funded because funders start with the highest score and write checks until the money is gone.

**Measure your success.** The results of the program should be measurable and tied to outcomes that help you achieve your vision. These items should also be tied to AYP because this is the item that gives a standard measure of your students’ performance. The evaluation of the program should be tied to your school-improvement planning process. Linking the specific program to a general system of ongoing improvement lets you talk about sustaining the program beyond a grant’s funding. When this is linked to a local foundation funding system, a complete system of sustainability is created for every program.

**Manage funds carefully.** Create a basic system for managing the funds. This can be done simply in a three-ring binder that contains the original RFP, the original proposal you sent requesting funding, any correspondence between you and the funder, the negotiated proposal that sets the deliverables, documentation of how the funds were spent and copies of the checks, and the reports to the funder. This sounds like a lot of documentation to track, but it will make your life easier because everything will be in one place.

Those records should be kept in addition to the normal system that your school district uses. If you ever have an on-site review of the program, the reviewer will be impressed that your records are so complete and accessible. You can change the tone of the on-site audit from “gotcha” to focus on what your funding has done by asking the reviewer, “Now that you’ve seen that we’re accounting for the funds, would you like to see what your money did for the students?” I have never had an on-site auditor not want to see what his or her organization’s funding has done.

I hope this overview of a system of alternative funding inspires you to seek more information about grants and fundraising and convinces you that they are worth the effort. If your vision is big enough, it will inspire others and provide a world-class education for your students. That makes accepting another full-time job worth it.

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**REFERENCE**


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