Proposal Writing Top 10: Tips from Funders (Who’ve Written Lots of Grants)

Sydney Sidwell, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation
JC Aevaliotis, Polk Bros. Foundation
Tip 1

Does the funder already fund arts education? If the answer is yes do not spend your time telling them why arts education is important. They already know that.
Every funder is different. Figure out what aspect of arts education the funder cares about. Do they care about supporting future professional artists? Arts integration? Arts education as social justice? More arts in schools? A particular geography? After-school arts programs? Arts for social and emotional learning? Art for art’s sake? The preservation or furtherance of an art form?

Whatever it is, know it and state simply how your program furthers their interest. Be specific.
Tip 3

Make sure to include the obvious relevant details. Tell the funder what you are proposing and how much you are asking for on PAGE 1. Please don’t make them hunt for the information in the depths of the proposal, even if their format asks for program scope as the 12th question.

RELEVANT INFORMATION: how many people do you serve? how many hours of instruction do you provide? where does your program take place? what are you trying to do? who do you serve? Include age, race/ethnicity, what community they live in. If applying for a school provide information on your community.
Organization and program budgets tell a story. Make sure they make sense and demonstrate priorities. If they don’t, explain why. And if you or someone in your organization doesn’t have experience in budget presentations ask for help. Ideally long before the deadline. If applying for a school, build a grants team (admin/leadership, arts liaison, faculty partner). This will take more time, but it can help beyond the grant opportunity.
Tip 5

Know what’s going on. Funders are working in the same space you are working in. Know who else provides similar programs and how your program is similar or different. Know the policies and issues influencing the sector, in broad strokes. (I had an applicant say – “What CPS Arts Education Plan?”) Ingenuity has made this easier for you – take advantage of the information they provide because the funders certainly are. And the arts landscape in CPS has shifted. It’s not perfect, but better than it was 5 years ago. Consider assets-based descriptions of CPS and your partnerships as an alternative to deficits-based narratives.
Tip 6

Instill confidence: Know the field. Explain why your program is good and how you know it’s good. Do this concisely. You don’t have to use flowery language or use all 500 words if you’ve said it well in 250. This is different from bragging or making hard-to-substantiate claims (this is the best, most unique, only, etc). Unadorned, simple confidence, grounded in specifics and humility.
Tip 7

Share problems. Let your funders know what’s going on and how they can help. This is especially true for long standing funders. Once an investment is made – they don’t want you to fail. This is important, and different from complaining.
Tip 8

Share and demonstrate what you are learning. Foundation program officers learn the most from their grantees and this can drive funding priorities. If the field is shifting let us know.
Tip 9

Development staff and program staff need to work together (or the teacher writing the grant and others on faculty/staff). If you are a program person – don’t let development people make stuff up. If you are a development person – make the program person tell you what’s going on and give you the information you need to do your job well. This always means planning ahead on applications. And remember that the CEO (or principal) is the chief development officer and program person. Make sure you are all working together.
Tip 10

Evaluation and assessment: The bane of our existence and the thing that can make or break a successful grant application. Work with your program officer to figure out what is expected and what is realistic. Educate your program officer on how you think about evaluation and assessment, how you use this information, the value added to your work, and how much it costs to evaluate and assess.
Funding Sources for CPS Teachers

- [http://www.cpsarts.org/teachers/arts-funding-information/arts-essentials/](http://www.cpsarts.org/teachers/arts-funding-information/arts-essentials/)
  - Info on Arts Essentials grants
  - Info on Creative Schools Fund
- [http://www.cpsarts.org/teachers/arts-funding-information/other-arts-funding-resources/](http://www.cpsarts.org/teachers/arts-funding-information/other-arts-funding-resources/)
  - Links and info on 10 grant-making sources
  - Info on 5 crowdfunding resources you can use
  - Links to 12 places for free or cheap supplies and 5 stores with educator discounts
THANK YOU!

Sidney Sidwell, Lloyd A. Fry Fdn.
ssidwell@fryfoundation.org

JC Aevaliotis, Polk Bros. Fdn.
jcaevaliotis@polkbrosfdn.org