

by Jacob Milner

Are You Missing Out?

Stan Levenson reveals new funding options for schools



Stan Levenson

If anybody knows how to get grants for public schools, it's Dr. Stan Levenson. The independent consultant and author of *How to Get Grants and Gifts for the Public Schools* (Allyn & Bacon, 2002) has been speaking about funding issues for decades, and has helped dozens of public and private school districts formulate funding strategies for the future. Now, as Dr. Levenson prepares for the release of his latest book, *Big-Time Fundraising for Today's Schools* (Corwin Press, 2006), he has shifted his area of focus from developing strategies to strengthening ones that already exist. Contributing writer Jacob Milner caught up with him to talk about what new advice he has for schools in search of funding.

Q: Are there new sources of technology funding for schools to consider?

A: There's a lot of competition for funding projects for schools and school districts in the United States. While the federal and state governments continue to give monies, we are beginning to see a lessening of funding from these sources. I would recommend that schools and school districts explore with vigor corporate and foundation grant opportunities at this time. These entities know the importance of technology and the impact it has in business, commerce and our everyday lives. Therefore, they will welcome strong, well-thought-out projects that have positive implications for change in schools.

Q: How much money is available?

A: According to the American Association of Fundraising Counsel (AAFRC), more than \$248 billion

was contributed to worthy causes across America in 2004. Of this amount, approximately \$34 billion (13.6 percent) went to education, second only to religion.... What is most interesting is the fact that more than \$197 billion of all contributions, including bequests, came from individual donors, and more than \$40 billion came from corporations and foundations. What does all this mean to public schools trying to bring in outside monies? It means that the schools need to learn how to pursue individual donors like never before. It also means that going after grants and gifts from corporations and foundations should also be a part of the overall fundraising strategy.

Q: How should educators go after this money?

A: Utilizing a group-process technique, prepare a case statement of two to five pages in length that is

clear, concise and compelling. It is imperative that you include the precise reason for your appeal, what you will achieve if your objectives are met, and the students and staff who will benefit.

Next, recruit volunteers in your community to work on your fundraising committee. Invite prominent citizens who are well known and well thought of to an orientation meeting held by some of the key people in the school district, such as the superintendent, principals, board members, teachers, community leaders and others. Use a PowerPoint presentation or other powerful audiovisual means to communicate your message and highlight your cause.

Ask those who choose to volunteer to make a commitment of time and money before the meeting has concluded. Make certain that [these] volunteers contribute their gift first before they approach prospective donors. This will help by providing them with "boasting rights" and

will demonstrate to prospective donors that the cause is so worthy that the volunteers have already made contributions.

Q: What type of funding arguments will impress corporate and individual donors the most?

A: You will discover that decision makers will be receptive to your ideas (whether it's technology or some other area of need) if you present a clear vision based upon a comprehensive needs assessment, goals that are overarching, objectives that are measurable, activities that are realistic, an evaluation component that is well thought out and a budget that is realistic. You will also find that individual donors, when approached properly, will be receptive to your ideas and will contribute big bucks to technology if you involve them in the planning process, listen to their ideas, welcome their input and ask for the gift when the time is just right!

Q: What are the biggest mistakes K–12 educators make in seeking grants?

A: I think the biggest mistakes that educators make in seeking grants is not identifying the most competent people to complete the grant application, not matching the district's needs with the funding agency's interests, not following directions, not providing enough time to complete the task at hand and not asking for enough money. I also believe that school districts across the United States should be establishing development offices

(just like at colleges, universities and private schools) and go after big grants and gifts, rather than spending a lot of time on bake sales, candy sales and car washes. A development office, with reasonable expectations, will become a profit center for your school district in two to three years or less. What a deal!

Q: What are the most important things to remember when writing grant applications?

A: Writing successful grant applications takes a lot of time and expertise. However, there are a lot of resources out there to assist you. In most grant applications, whether they are mini-grants or major grants, there are six basic components. These are needs

assessment, goals, objectives, activities, evaluation specifications and budget. I always recommend that you first learn how to write a mini-grant (under \$5,000) before attempting to write a major grant, especially a federal or state grant. I also recommend that schools and school districts consider going after corporate and foundation grant opportunities because they have fewer requirements and more funding cycles. For example, the feds usually have just one funding cycle a year, while many corporations and foundations have multiple funding cycles. Also, you will find that corporations and foundations usually require grant applications of 1 to 10 pages, while the feds and some states require applications of 50 to 100 pages. It would be worth your while to explore funding opportunities at the corporate and foundation levels.

Q: Where can administrators go to search for new grant opportunities?

A: The federal and state governments usually announce new grant opportunities on their websites.... Additionally, I would recommend readers visit the *eSchool News* website for the latest technology and funding info and subscribe to the site's very comprehensive e-mail newsletter called "Grants and Funding Alert."

Jacob Milner is a freelance education writer and editor based in northern California. His last contribution to i.e. magazine was a feature article titled "Tap into Your School's Technology Mentors."

