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Building Grant Capacity in Schools

Why the Logic Model Comes Before the Narrative

TSG Advisors – Education

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INTRODUCTION

"Can't we just write a grant for that?"

The question surfaces in nearly every board meeting and budget conversation. A cost appears that the operating budget cannot absorb, someone suggests a grant, and the room moves on. The harder question is rarely asked: does the organization have a process for turning a need into a fundable proposal?

For most schools and districts, the honest answer is no. That is not a failure of ambition or of writing talent. Grant capacity is a system — a repeatable way of identifying opportunities, testing an idea against what a funder actually buys, and documenting the reasoning behind a request. Organizations without that system start from scratch every time, and the cost compounds with each application.

This paper examines what happens before the first sentence of a narrative is written, why the logic model is the most useful planning tool available to an applicant, how to build a credible case for need, and which practices most reliably separate funded proposals from unfunded ones.

ALIGNMENT

Before the First Sentence

Applications are returned or rejected for misalignment more often than for weak writing. Three questions, answered before drafting begins, prevent most alignment issues.

Does the request align with the funder's mission and eligibility requirements? Every notice of funding opportunity contains an eligibility section and a purpose section, and the purpose section is where a funder states plainly what it intends to support. A recent federal charter school replication competition, for example, specified both who could apply and what the funds could be used for — increasing enrollment, adding grades, or opening new campuses based on the model of an existing high-quality school. An organization whose plan does not fit that description is not a weak applicant; it is the wrong applicant.

What has this funder already funded? Most federal programs publish their award lists. Those lists reveal the realistic range of an ask, the target populations that have drawn support, and — often overlooked — the names of peer organizations who have already succeeded. Prior grantees are usually willing to say what they believe made the difference and what they would do differently now that they are in implementation.

Has the program officer been contacted? Where pre-proposal contact is permitted, and it usually is, it is one of the most valuable investments of time in the entire application process. A short concept paper and a thirty-minute conversation can redirect an application before it is written. In one case, an applicant preparing a workforce training request had planned to devote a substantial share of the budget to scholarships — an allowable cost. The program officer indicated a clear preference for investment in training and equipment instead. The application was restructured and funded. Without the call, it would have been submitted misaligned with the funder's priorities and would likely have failed.

> A funder who becomes a thought partner before submission is worth more than any amount of polish afterward.
>
> PRE-PROPOSAL CONTACT

THE LOGIC MODEL

Making the Reasoning Visible

A logic model — sometimes called a theory of change — is a one-page visual representation of a project. It answers three questions: Where are you going? How will you get there? What will tell you that you have arrived?

The name is literal. Logic models are called logic models because they make the logic of a project explicit. If the narrative describes a building, the logic model is the blueprint. The narrative tells reviewers what an applicant plans to do; the model shows how the pieces fit together and whether the structure will stand.

Funders are not only asking whether an idea is good. They are asking whether the reasoning behind it is sound. A model that holds together demonstrates four things at once: that the applicant has thought past the concept to implementation, that the organization has the capacity to deliver what it promises, that a measurement plan already exists, and that the connection between dollars and results is one a reviewer can picture.

Most models share five components. Inputs are the resources available: funds, staff, time, facilities, partnerships. Activities are the work itself — the instruction, services, or events delivered. Outputs are raw counts that answer how much was done. Outcomes answer what changed for participants, expressed in quantifiable terms. Impact is the long-term condition being pursued, which is typically larger than the program and slower than the grant period.

Consider an illustrative case used in TSG's training sessions. A school with a ninth-grade Algebra I pass rate of 54 percent proposes a tutoring and coaching program. Inputs: grant funds, a half-time math coach, intervention curriculum, teacher professional development time. Activities: small-group tutoring three times weekly and weekly coaching cycles. Outputs: 120 students served, 40 sessions delivered, 12 teacher trainings. Outcome: 78 percent of participants pass Algebra I, measured by course grades and state assessment results. Impact: math proficiency rises school-wide and graduation rates climb.

Read left to right, the model becomes a chain of if-then statements. If a coach and curriculum are funded, then tutoring can run three times weekly; then 120 students receive 40 sessions; then the pass rate reaches 78 percent; then proficiency rises more broadly. Every element must survive that sentence. The method, stated plainly, is to build the model backward — outcome first, with a number, a baseline, and a source — and read it forward. Built the other way, starting from what the organization already does, the result describes a budget rather than a theory that earns one.

> Outputs are what you did. Outcomes are what changed. Reviewers can tell the difference; many applications cannot.
>
> THE DISTINCTION THAT DECIDES APPLICATIONS

WHEN THE LOGIC DOES NOT HOLD

The Gap Between the Ask and the Promise

Most applications begin with a real need: a position the organization is about to lose, a program it already runs, a coordinator it cannot otherwise afford. Someone then reads the notice of funding opportunity and records the outcomes it rewards — higher graduation rates, school-wide proficiency gains, more students college-ready. Two honest lists, drafted in two different rooms, are then stapled together.

Nothing connects them. No if-then statement runs from funding a college and career coordinator to a ten-point gain in graduation rate. Reviewers read both ends of the application and cannot trace the path between them. Good schools with genuine needs lose grants this way, and the failure is almost never dishonesty — both ends are true. They were simply never required to sit in the same sentence.

A logic model that exposes this gap is not failing. It is working. But it will not resolve the gap on its own; it forces a choice among three options. Change the ask, and request funding for what actually moves the outcome, even when that is not the expense that created the pressure. Change the outcome, and promise what the program can reach inside the grant period. Or change the program, so that the work leads to what is being promised. A related constraint applies to existing costs: funders generally will not supplant current funding, and expect to see something new or expanded.

Four failure modes account for most of the rest. Outcomes that nothing can measure — students who are “empowered,” “supported,” or “successful” — cannot be delivered or evaluated, and an outcome that cannot fail cannot succeed either. Timelines the grant cannot reach, such as graduation-rate gains promised within a two-year award, invite arithmetic the reviewer will perform. Models built after the narrative inherit commitments already made rather than shaping them. And models that include too much lose the thread entirely: an overcrowded page prevents a reviewer from identifying the central strategy.

EVIDENCE

Building the Case for Need

A statement of need is an argument, and persuasive arguments require evidence from multiple sources. No single statistic carries an application. Independent sources pointing toward the same conclusion do — institutional data such as benchmark, attendance, and course performance results; stakeholder surveys capturing teacher, family, and student priorities; peer-reviewed research and federal data; and documented best practices with a record of results.

Four techniques make that evidence land. Multi-year trends carry more weight than a single year: three to five years of data distinguish an off year from a sustained condition an organization cannot close on its own, which is precisely what a funder is looking to address. Comparative data supply context — a 54 percent pass rate means little until it is set beside district, state, and national figures, at which point the size of the gap becomes the argument.

Qualitative evidence establishes stakes where numbers establish scale. A teacher's account of students arriving without foundational skills, paired with survey data showing most families report the same struggle at home, is more persuasive than either alone. And the consequences of inaction deserve explicit treatment: naming who goes unserved, and what follows for them, converts a description of a problem into a decision the reviewer is being asked to make.

Partnerships belong in the same evidentiary frame. Community organizations, higher education institutions, employers, public agencies, and other education providers each play a distinct role in implementation, and stating those roles in a table demonstrates delivery capacity rather than merely good intentions. Letters of commitment substantiate it. Drafting those letters for partners to review and edit is both a courtesy and a practical step — most partners are grateful for it, and most sign what was sent.

OUTLOOK

What to Watch

01 **Eligibility continues to widen**

Federal and state programs have gradually opened to a broader range of applicants, including charter schools and other organizations historically outside certain competitions. Eligibility language is worth rereading each cycle rather than assuming last year's answer still holds.

02 **AI will change drafting speed, not the standard of evidence**

Generative tools are now routinely used to draft sections and assemble supporting evidence. They also produce citations that do not survive verification. Every source an AI tool supplies should be traced to the original before it reaches a reviewer, and the responsibility for determining what the application can credibly promise remains with the applicant.

03 **Local and philanthropic channels remain underused**

Community foundations aggregate many donor funds in one place and are among the most accessible funders for a school that has already done its planning. A completed logic model makes an organization ready for opportunities it did not anticipate.

CONCLUSION

Build the System, Not the Application

A single funded proposal solves a single problem. A grant process solves the next one, and the one after that. Organizations that build a reusable framework — a current logic model, a documented case for need, a partner roster, a funding calendar — stop starting from scratch and begin drawing on work already done.

That shift is often worth more than the award that prompted it. In TSG Advisors' experience with schools under expansion or turnaround pressure, the most durable result of a successful application has not been the money. It has been the shared account leadership arrives at — of what the organization is trying to accomplish, who benefits, and what it will take — which then supports additional grants, major gifts, and planning well beyond the original request.

The distance between a good idea and a fundable one is not writing talent. It is the thinking that happens before the writing begins.

ABOUT TSG ADVISORS – EDUCATION

TSG Advisors – Education seeks to serve as a leading partner in education and workforce consulting by bridging policy development with strategic implementation. We work alongside public institutions, nonprofits, government agencies, philanthropy, and private partners to develop practical strategies that support effective programs, strengthen alignment between education and workforce systems, and advance high-impact practices across the education landscape.

Our team supports partners across the full arc of funded work — program design, grant development, implementation, and evaluation — with experience on both sides of the process, as applicants and as evaluators of funded programs.

For questions about this analysis or to learn how TSG Advisors – Education can support your grant strategy, please reach out to our Education practice.

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