So, your school needs a new language lab and doesn't have any money…

by Charles "Buzz" Blick

It is common knowledge that funding for education is very tight these days. Even great and necessary projects get delayed or cancelled entirely. Language labs are no exception. New language labs often sink to the bottom of the funding priorities list, while outdated labs continue to struggle along with worn-out equipment and ancient technology.

This article is not a list of funding sources and grant writing tips. Rather, in this short article I'll lay out a few ideas and an effective framework to think about, plan for and get the funding needed to make your new or updated lab a reality.

Necessary Assumptions for Successful Fund Raising

First, you must assume that you and the people you know have the ability to get the needed funding. That may seem fanciful, but it really is true. Successful fund raising for worthy projects requires a minimum of essential skills, but calls for hefty measures of creativity, teamwork, endurance and tenacity – generally in that order. If you can't force yourself to believe that funding is difficult, but attainable, then you probably should stop reading now.

Second, you should assume that the usual sources of funding for big projects, like building or updating a language lab

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(school improvement funds, technology grants, building bond drives, etc.), will not be available for your lab. Cutbacks are everywhere and are taking away the biggest chunks of money from projects that are seen as valuable - but not "essential" - to the success of the school.

Third, assume that there are other people (often with more power and/or seniority than you) who are apathetic and/or antagonistic to the idea of improving language instruction – let alone improving the lab facilities. In my 40 years of working with educators I have yet to find a worthy project that didn't encounter opposition.

Fourth, you must assume that "money follows commitment." Do you have a "team" of potential supporters (teachers, at least one building or district-level administrator, parent(s), student(s), business people, etc.), with members who are unified in their commitment to get the lab you need?

Levels of Commitment

1. "Yes" means "no" – When asked, people at Level 1 agree to do something, but it never quite gets done. Level 1 commitment can best be seen as an attempt to please others and/or avoid conflict, rather than actual commitment to turn a need into a reality.

2. "Yes" means "maybe" – Level 2 is an agreement of convenience, not commitment. This level of agreement is often found with people who feel that they "should" appear to be behind a funding effort, but will wait to see what support others give to an idea before they put any effort into it themselves.

3. "Yes" means (just) "yes" – Level 3 indicates lukewarm agreement - without the endurance and tenacity to move around or through unexpected, but generally unavoidable, obstacles.

4. "Yes" means "I'll go the extra mile" – Level 4 indicates a person willing to try a number of approaches, as necessary, to get something done.

5. "Yes" means "I'll do whatever it takes to make this happen." - Level 5 agreements are fairly unusual (and increasingly necessary) to actually bring a funding effort to fruition. People with this level of commitment are the gold standard for fund raising efforts.

Unless you are lucky enough to be in an unusually favorable situation, successful fundraising efforts require at least a couple of people operating at Level 4 or 5 for the effort to be successful – especially when resistance or apathy temporarily blocks the way forward.

Fifth, you must assume the well-laid plans work out – but rarely the way you expect them to. For example, a few years ago I facilitated a series of community-wide planning events

in five Idaho communities. At the end of each 3-day planning process, all of the representative community groups had reached consensus on a set of specific project outcomes, and had detailed action plans to meet their goals. A follow-up evaluation the next year revealed that, without exception, the goals were met, but not in the way they planned. Why did this happen? It seems that the expectation of success prepared participants to look for all reasonable – and some unreasonable – ways of meeting the goals. The openness to unforeseen possibilities for success prepared them to act in unanticipated but ultimately successful ways.

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Sixth, you must assume that there are current and/or potential supporters for the language lab – and that they are probably unknown to you. At its core, successful fund raising is the art of finding and recruiting supporters, while countering or neutralizing opposition.

If you believe the foregoing "assumptions" and are committed at Level 4 or 5, check out the following Steps to Fund Raising Success.

Recruit and Help Focus a Team of Supporters[1]

All difficult but important fund raising efforts require a team effort. Here I'm talking about a real work team or task force – people who are willing to both talk about what should be done and actually get knee deep in making things happen. In my experience, effective work teams are relatively small and compact – no more than 6-10 regular members, with others involved, as needed, on specific tasks or problems. The team's core group of members should be drawn from the ranks of key influence groups within your school and community– those groups that have both information and influence in getting things done.

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- A building or district-level administrator who has shown a real interest in foreign language instruction and has the motivation to actively work for improvements. You need a big gun, with access to the decision-making group(s) in your school or district, to run interference and plant seeds in the circles of power and influence. Be sure to come equipped with data that will help your administrator "sell" the new lab to others.[2]

- A key teacher or two who are knowledgeable and influential spokespeople for foreign language instruction and deeply believe that a new lab would increase student learning.

- The leader of an existing educational foundation and/or civic fund raising organization in your community – if you have one.

- An experienced fund-raiser, grant writer, etc.

- A student or two who has demonstrably benefited from foreign language instruction and/or the existing lab. It really helps here to get a student who is respected by both faculty and other students.

- A community and/or local business leader. The key here is to find someone who connects with various groups, has some tangible connection to the language lab (like a child currently enrolled in the school's language classes), and is generally respected for his/her opinions.

Team members should be:

- Informed on the need for a new or improved lab.

- Influential within the school and/or community.

- Experienced in getting things done.

- Motivated to make positive change a reality. Some great motivators are:

  – Success for their kids
  – Benefits for their organization/company/ community/school
  – Extrinsic motivations– recognition, promotion, etc.

Get Organized

Once you have connected with a team of committed people, you need do a bit of research and organizing.

1. Develop a core of essential information about language lab "best practices" for your school and students.

   a. Collect "life stories" from current and past students. How has language instruction benefited their lives?

   - Jobs
   - Travel
   - Confidence
   - Relationships
   - Other

   b. Research the available options

   - What companies provide state-of-the-art language lab software?

   - What companies provide the training, installation, technical support and follow-up that best meet the needs of your school?

   - What kinds of technology and course content will best serve the needs of your students?

   - What technology will best utilize your existing resources (current lesson plans and curricula, computers, networks, etc.)?

1 Probably the most practical advice I have ever gotten on building a good team effort is to run good meetings. For example, have a clear (written) agenda, don't waste people's time, and take good notes. The book, *How to Make Meetings Work*, referenced at the end of this article, is a good place to start.

2 Excellent research evidence for the value of language education is available through professional associations (ACTFL, your state department of education, etc.) the U.S. Department of Education, and other sources.

c. **Find and connect with relevant models for success.**

- Look around for other schools or districts in your region that have built language labs that best match your needs. Ask your potential supplier(s) of language lab technology to point you toward current "success stories" at other schools. Call the language department chair at those schools.

- If possible, visit the lab(s) at those schools. Take pictures with students present, and interview the students/staff to get ideas and collect information.

2. **Create a "narrative" for success in your unique school and community environment.**

Essentially, you need to create and consistently use a succinct, attractive set of descriptors that capture a valued end product for those people who can help make a new language lab a reality.

Here are a few examples from successful fund raising narratives:

- Success in a global economy
- International citizens
- Expanding student horizons/possibilities/rewards, etc.
- Educating a successful work force
- Creating a resourceful community
- Building bridges among different cultures, etc. [3]

3. **Start making contacts with potential local and regional funding sources.**

Assume that there are multiple potential supporters/contributors, with multiple motives for wanting improved language instruction.

Here are a few examples:

- Local educational foundations, charities, interest groups.
- Companies and businesses with an international focus, products and/or customers.
- Business associations (Chamber of Commerce, social networking sites – like LinkedIn™, Facebook™, etc.)
- Individuals with an international perspective, commitment to student success in the future, etc. The most committed individual supporters are parents with children in your school or district.
- Your local P.T.A. or P.T.S.A.

Team Exercise : Finding and Connecting with Potential Supporters

Step #1: Use the team you have assembled above to brainstorm a sociogram of potential supporters and/or contributors for a top-notch language instruction program in your school district. List all of the people and organizations that you think would respond positively to the words or narrative you developed in #2 above.

3 Take a look at *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, by Frank Luntz. See the Resources section at the end of this article.

- What member(s) of your funding team has a connection with them (social, professional, family, etc.) and might be a good contact person to get them involved?

Step #2: Identify individuals on your team who know each of the key people you listed in Step #1.

- Set up a timeline for team members to contact each of the potential supporters and then report back to the team. Generally, it is best to schedule a follow-up team meeting within two weeks, or people's busy schedules will relegate further meetings to the "whatever happened to…" stack of good intentions that never quite got completed.

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The most important thing is to keep looking for possible supporters and opportunities – and keep trying!

Helpful Resources
[Books and Websites]

- Bellman, G.M., (1992). *Getting Things Done When You Are Not In Charge*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Bridges, W. (2003) *Managing Transitions*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

- Doyle, M. & Straus, D. (1976). *How to Make Meetings Work*. Chicago, IL: Playboy Press.

- Kotter, J.P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

- Luntz, F. (2007). *Words that Work: it's not what you say, it's what people hear*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.

- *Foundation Center – Database Base on Funding Resources* www.foundationcenter.org

- *ACTFL – Advocacy and Resources for Foreign Language Education* www.actfl.org

About the Author:
Charles "Buzz" Blick, M. Ed., has worked with school districts, universities and other education-related organizations for over 40 years. At various times he has held positions as a school psychologist, federal grant administrator, project consultant, staff trainer, community planning coordinator, large group facilitator, and community engagement consultant. Buzz has co-authored several books and articles on organizational development within school districts. Currently, Buzz does group planning and organization development project work through his company, Changeforward (www.changeforward. com) and is a representative of eLearning and Teaching Solutions, (www.sonyelearning.com) a SANS Inc. Reseller for Sony and SANS instructional technology for language learning in the Pacific Northwest.

How two schools used different but equally successful methods to get funding for new language lab technology.

School: Cascia Hall Preparatory School, Tulsa, OK

Serves: Grades 6-12, < 600 students

Languages Offered: Chinese, French, German, Latin, Spanish

School: Garden City High School, Garden City, NY

Serves: Grades 9-12, > 1,000 students
98% Study World Languages

Languages Offered: French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish*

■ **Goals:** To strengthen the listening and speaking proficiency of students, as well as to provide greater global awareness through use of the lab, since the Internet can take them to places all over the world, and to include those experiences in the language lessons being taught.

■ **How They Funded It:** When administrators at Cascia Hall's Advancement Office realized that bringing a new language lab to the school would benefit each and every student, including future ones, they knew that the idea would appeal to both their alumni and parent groups. Its mass appeal and tangible nature made the lab a perfect signature project for the annual Cascia Parent Faculty Association (CPFA) fundraising efforts. Getting the CPFA president on board was the first step. After viewing the marketing materials, including a flash drive presentation provided by SANS Inc., and seeing the space where the proposed lab would go, she agreed that it would be a great project for the CPFA to underwrite. Making a presentation to the CPFA Board and the School Board was next; both groups gave approval to move ahead. Monies raised at the school's annual fundraisers, the Christmas Walk and a dinner auction, benefited the lab.

Since Cascia Hall would be the first school in Tulsa to have a digital language lab, they also contacted local media, which was happy to pick up the story. Parents were excited by the attention the school was getting, which started off the fundraising with a buzz. Information about the language lab was also added to the school's promotional materials.

> "Now that the lab is up and running, we give tours with live student led demonstrations at our CPFA meetings, alumni meetings, open house and back to school nights."
>
> – Kerry Hornibrook,
> Director of School Advancement

■ **Advice for Other Schools:** Use visual aids at parent and board meetings to demonstrate the language lab. Call and talk to other schools that have a lab. Get language teachers involved; if they are excited when they speak about the lab, parents will understand how this will trickle down to students. Take parents and donors into the space that you plan to convert to a language lab. This will give them a sense of pride and ownership once the lab is in place. Also, contact your local media and let them know about the lab and how it will impact curriculum and results.

■ **Goals:** Maximize the time students spend to develop the core language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Pair for collaborative projects that stimulate thinking and interpersonal communication. Practice world languages to instill confidence in listening and speaking the language.

■ **How They Funded It:** The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) played a central role in funding the new language lab at Garden City High School. The Board of Education, Central Administration, the PTA, and the community were addressed during a community review presentation on the importance and benefits of having a language lab. The PTA expressed a desire to make a substantial grant that would benefit and reach a large number of students and make a powerful, lasting impact to improve education for all children. Working together, the district supplied certain capital equipment; computers and furniture; while the PTA granted funds to secure the Sony Virtuoso and Soloist language lab software and headsets.

> "The students and world languages staff at Garden City High School will benefit greatly from this contribution both now and in the future. In times of limited resources, donations such as this make an incredible difference in the academic growth of our students."
>
> – Peter Giacalone,
> World Language Coordinator

Following a ribbon cutting ceremony attended by many PTA members, language teachers, students representing language honor societies, and administrative team members, and covered by the local media, the lab went into immediate use by the school's language teachers.

■ **Advice for Other Schools:** Look to your parent and community groups and seek resources beyond the district. Ask the PTA and other local parent organizations for their support, letting them know how the technology will benefit their children and other students in the future.

* Language learning in the district begins in grades 2-5 with a Spanish FLES Program. As students enter the 6th grade, they can choose to continue studying Spanish or choose Italian or German. In Grade 8, Latin is an elective and high school students continue with German, Italian, Latin, or Spanish. We continue with those languages through grade 8 with Latin as an 8th grade elective. In HS, students continue with French, German, Italian, Latin or Spanish. Currently 85+ students are studying more than one language.