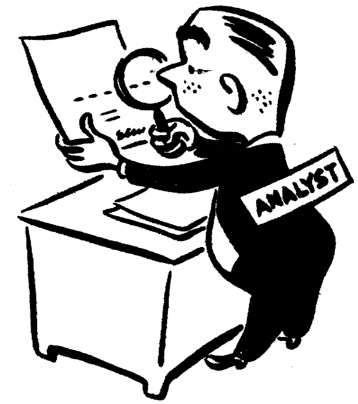
Reviewers' Handbook



A GUIDE FOR REVIEWING STANDARD GRANT PROPOSALS

1st

EDITION

Reviewers’ Handbook

A Guide to Reviewing Standard Grant Proposals

Compiled by the Grants Office
Maryland State Department Of Education

November 1998

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INTRODUCTION

As funding for special projects diminishes, it becomes increasingly important to award grants to those projects that demonstrate the greatest potential for success. A clearly defined review process and properly trained reviewers are essential to finding the best proposals.

This handbook is intended to serve as an orientation to the review process. Although the criteria for assessing proposals will differ among competitions, all good grant proposals have common traits. This handbook demonstrates how to review and evaluate a “typical” grant proposal. The specific criteria for your grant competition will be provided to you in the form of a scoring rubric. To understand the role of the reviewer, it might be helpful to look at the entire grant process.

When grant competitions are announced, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) distributes a Request for Proposal (RFP). An RFP is a document stating the terms of the grant award. Information contained in an RFP includes: the kinds of projects the awards will fund, the information to be included in the proposal, guidelines for writing the proposal, the deadline for proposal submissions, and other relevant information. Upon receiving the RFP, applicants begin the process of constructing their project to the funder’s requirements. The best projects begin before a competition is announced. A prepared applicant will research a problem, set goals, and determine a course of action long before a funder is identified.

MSDE invites applicants to a technical meeting, where they clarify points in the RFP and receive tips on writing their proposals. Those who attend technical meetings consistently submit superior proposals.

Proposals are prescreened immediately following the submission deadline. Proposals are checked to insure that they meet the submission requirements, such as: font size, margins, binding, cover sheet criteria, page limits, word limits, assurances, and other requirements. Those not meeting the prescreen requirements are disqualified.

After the prescreening process, the remaining proposals are read and scored by reviewers. The results are then sent to a review panel who makes the final decision on which projects are awarded grants. While the reviewers score projects based solely on the merits of the proposal, the review panel and/or the superintendent may consider other criteria such as geographic distribution or previous awards.

After the final decisions regarding the awards have been made, the recipients are notified. Grant recipients then conduct their projects and evaluate the results.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

The review process begins with selecting the reviewers. Typically, reviewers are chosen from a variety of backgrounds to ensure a broad perspective. To ensure that all proposals receive consistent, reliable scores and helpful, well considered comments, reviewers are assigned to teams. Teams are composed of a well-balanced mix of people with a variety of backgrounds and expertise. All team members are assigned the same proposals to review, allowing them to consult with one another. Reviewers should:

1. Attend an introductory meeting to review the RFP, discuss review procedures, and meet your team members. You will receive your grants, scoring rubrics and any other relevant documents here.

2. Read and sign the *Conflict of Interest Statement*.

3. Familiarize yourself with the RFP.

4. Read the scoring rubric and familiarize yourself with the review criteria.

5. Read the proposals.

6. Provide helpful comments.

7. Award points.

8. Reconvene with your team to review your comments and adjust your scores accordingly.

9. Return all essential documents.

HOW TO READ A PROPOSAL

- Schedule 2 to 4 hours to read and critique an average proposal of 15 to 20 pages.
- Familiarize yourself with the review criteria, content requirements and content priorities.
- Read the entire proposal straight through. This will provide you with a good idea of the overall project.
- Read the proposal a second time. Jot short notes in the margins to help you remember questions or points when writing your comments and awarding points.
- As you read through the project narrative, put a "$" next to anything that might cost money. This will help you later on when you try to match the project narrative to the budget.
- Highlight sections that address the content requirements or priorities.
- Discuss your thoughts with your teammates. Different perspectives help you see a proposal's strengths and weaknesses.

HOW TO CRITIQUE AND SCORE A PROPOSAL

- When making your comments, be as specific as possible. Remember that applicants will be read your comments to improve their proposal writing skills. Refrain from using subjective words such as "bad" or "good."
- For clarity, reference specific parts of the proposal. Quote the proposal if necessary. The person reading your comments may not be familiar with the details of the proposal.
- Write neatly. People will be reading what you write.
- Try to phrase everything as a statement. Questions aren't wrong, but statements are less ambiguous than questions.
- Award points after making comments.
- Do not exceed the maximum score allowed for each section.
- Score using whole numbers.
- Save the top scores for proposals that surpass the standards set by the RFP.

THE BIG PICTURE

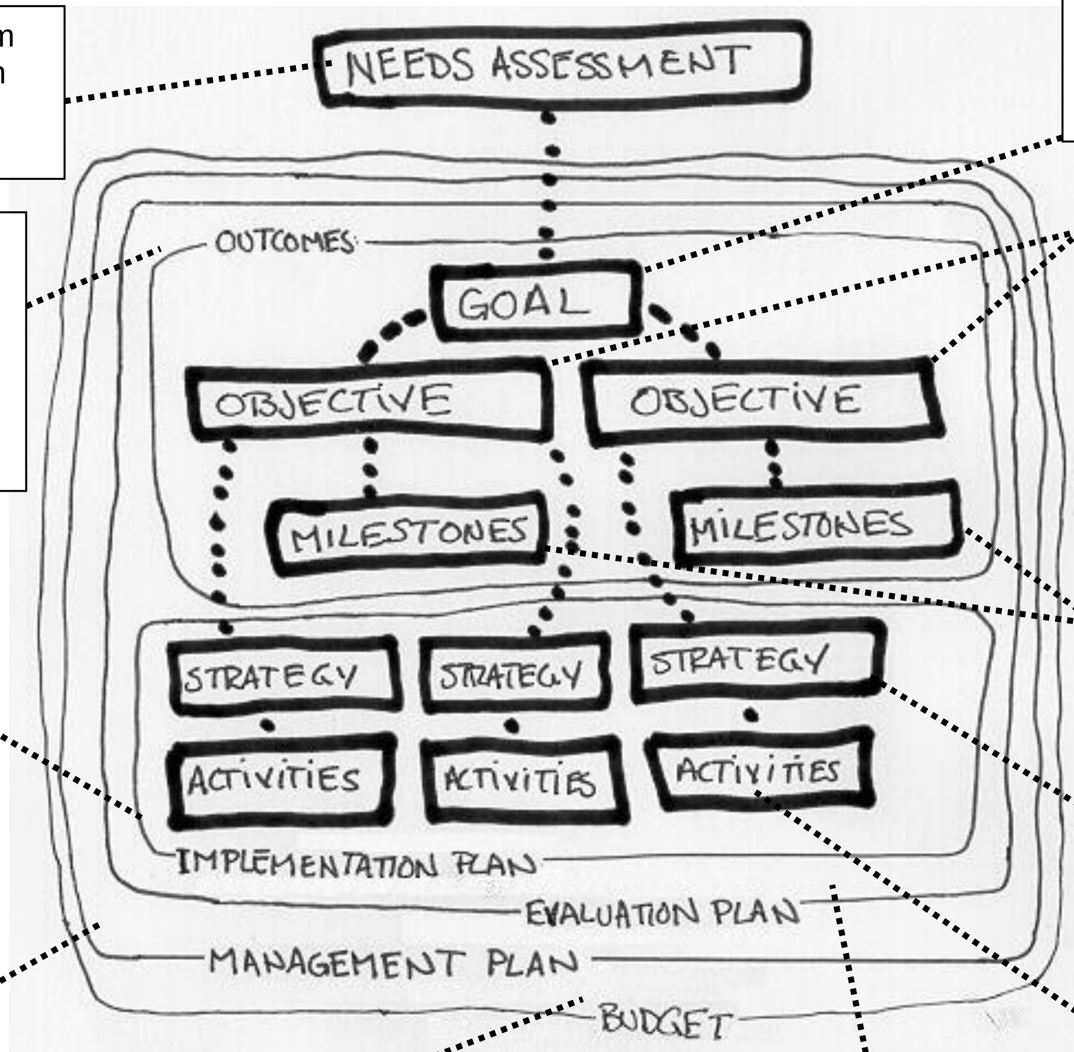
A proposal contains many sections. Nonetheless, all sections are dependent upon and related to the previous sections. The entire proposal should function as one coherent document with each section flowing logically from its predecessors

Standard proposals submitted to MSDE should contain the following sections, in the following order.

Project Narrative

Cover Sheet	The first page of the proposal containing the title, applicant's name and authorized signatures.
Abstract	A one-page overview of the entire proposal.
Table of Contents	A guide to the contents of the proposal.
Needs Assessment	A study demonstrating a need for the proposed project.
Outcomes	A statement of what the project is intended to achieve.
Implementation Plan	A plan for achieving the stated outcomes.
Evaluation Plan	A plan for evaluating the success of the project.
Management Plan	A plan for coordinating and directing the efforts in support of the implementation and evaluation plans
Integration With Educational Reform	A discussion of how the proposed project helps meet school, community, LEA, MSDE and national goals.
Future Plans	A discussion of how the project will continue past the funding period.
Budget	A detailed report of all requested and in-kind financial resources.
Appendices	Any relevant information not required in the project narrative, including resumes of key personnel and letters of commitment from project partners.

This chart illustrates how all the major sections of the proposal should be related.



Establishes the problem and is foundation upon which the rest of the proposal is built.

The ultimate intended outcome. Usually takes several years to accomplish.

The project's expected achievements. Outcomes are based on the needs assessment and consist of goals, objectives and milestones.

Outcomes derived from the goal. They state what the applicant will accomplish by the end of each year or designated phase.

Outcomes derived from objectives. They state what the applicant will accomplish by certain points during each phase or year.

Consists of the strategies and activities used to accomplish the stated outcomes.

General approaches used to achieve the stated outcomes.

Directs all actions necessary to support the implementation and evaluation of the project.

The specific instances of direct service described by the strategies.

Describes the financial resources needed to fund the entire project.

A study to assess how effectively the implementation plan attains the outcomes.

RED FLAG

Proposals should speak with one voice. Sections that are written in different styles, or use different fonts, often have different authors, who have very different ideas about the project. Make sure each section logically follows from the previous section.

STYLE

For the most part, a proposal is graded according to the merits of each of its sections. Nonetheless, a proposal that does not follow basic rules of style can be difficult to read and critique. Here are a few stylistic rules.

A well written proposal will:

- Avoid Jargon.
- Define all acronyms.
- Not use the first person.
- Have no run-on sentences.
- Use concise language.
- Be free from typos and grammatical errors.
- Avoid metaphors or flowery language.
- Not make emotional appeals. A good case is built on research and reason.
- Have sections that logically follow from previous sections.
- Support all facts, even the seemingly trivial ones. The reader should be able to answer the "How do you know?" question for any assertion made.

DISSECTING THE PROPOSAL

THE COVER SHEET

The cover sheet is reviewed in the prescreen process and is generally not scored. Nonetheless, the cover sheet is the first impression the reader has of the project and reflects a lot about the professionalism with which the project proposal was prepared. A good title sheet contains only the information requested by the RFP in the order specified by the RFP.

A good title will:

- Be concise and explicit.
- Focus on the outcomes to be achieved, not the methods used.
- Often use a subtitle to clarify the main title or to indicate the nature of the project.
- Not be cute.
- Avoid acronyms.
- Avoid jargon.
- Avoid words that add nothing to the reader's understanding, such as "A Study on..." or "A Proposal for..."
- Not list the project's location.

Bad Title: Students Making Inroads to Learning Excellence
Uses a 'cute' acronym (S.M.I.L.E.)

Bad Title: Funding Staff Development
Focuses on funding, not on outcomes

Bad Title: Installing LAN Systems to Promote School Interconnectivity
Uses Jargon

Good Title: Raising SAT Scores For First Generation College Bound Students

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St. Acme County Public Schools

Meeting the State Math Exam Standards
A Comprehensive Approach to Improving 7th Grade performance

Project Contact:

Dr. Jane Smith
St. Acme Middle School
300 Smart Street
Acme City, Maryland, 21222
Telephone (410) 555-5555
Facsimile (410) 555-5554

Project Partners:

Acme City Chamber of Commerce
St. Acme General Hospital
St. Acme Community College

Amount Requested: $200,000

Joanna ElJefe 1/23/98
Dr. Joanna Eljefe Date
Superintendent of St. Acme County Public Schools

RED FLAG

Abstracts have word limits and proposals have page limits. While conciseness is a virtue, proposals should use every word and page to convey every possible bit of information about the project. Failure to use all available space may indicate that the project's details have not been thought-out.

THE ABSTRACT

This is the first scored section of the proposal. The abstract serves as a brief overview of the entire project. It should summarize information from the needs assessment, outcomes, implementation plan, evaluation plan and management plan. If separated from the rest of the proposal, it should stand on its own. There is usually a word limit of about 250 to 300 words.

A good abstract will present the following information:

- The problem to be addressed.
- The goals and objectives of the project.
- The strategies and activities to be used.
- Who will be served by the project.
- Where the project will be run.
- The project's time frame.
- The qualifications of the participating organizations and staff.
- The benefits of the project.

In addition, a good abstract will:

- Not exceed the word limit.
- Use concise language.
- Present an overview of the entire project that closely matches the Proposal Narrative.

RED FLAG

A table of contents that does not match the page numbers in the proposal is a sign of last minute writing. Last minute writing can result from a lack of scheduling, poor management skills, or contentious partnerships.

THE TABLE OF CONTENTS

The table of contents is intended to be an aid for the reader. While it is not scored, looking at it can give the reviewer some an insight on how carefully the project was constructed.

Here are a few page numbering conventions:

- The cover sheet is not numbered but is considered to be page “i” (lower case, roman numeral one).
- The abstract is number “ii” (lower case, roman numeral two).
- The table of contents is not listed in the table of contents. If you’re looking at it, you should know what page it’s on.
- Table of contents pages are numbered iii, iv, etc.
- The needs assessment is the first page of the Project Narrative and is numbered “1". Subsequent pages of the project narrative are numbered consecutively.
- If the budget is considered part of the project narrative, it will be number accordingly. Otherwise it will have specially designated page numbers such as “B-1, B-2, B-3 ...”
- Appendices will be labeled “Appendix A, Appendix B, Appendix C ...”

RED FLAG

Don't be snowed by a blizzard of irrelevant statistics. A needs assessment should contain only data relevant to the problem. Teen pregnancy rates in a proposal to reduce drug use only confuse the issue and indicate a lack of direction.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A compelling proposal will have a clearly defined problem illustrated by a needs assessment. A needs assessment is a systematic review of information collected from a variety of sources, analyzed to determine strengths and weaknesses, and prioritized for action.

Beware of "backward engineering." When applicants get the RFP, they often start dreaming about what they can buy with the money. After putting together a wish list, they work backwards, searching for a problem their solutions can fix. The best projects **start** with a needs assessment. Before project designers determine which activities to run, strategies to use, or computers to buy, they should identify the problem. The needs assessment is the proposal's foundation. If it isn't done correctly, problems with the proposal grow exponentially through each section. By knowing how each section is related to its predecessors, you can easily spot backward engineering.

A good needs assessment will:

- Clearly state the problem.
- State what data was collected to confirm the existence of the problem, the sources of the data and the methods used to collect it.
- Present easily measured quantitative data (test scores, absentee rates, etc.).
- Present qualitative data in support of quantitative data (results from interviews, focus groups, etc.).
- Use multiple methods to document the problem (surveys, analysis of school records, previous studies, focus groups, etc.).
- Use multiple data sources (teachers, students, parents, etc.).
- Use national or state data to establish the problem's existence outside of the local area.
- Use local data to document the problem in the local area.
- State who is affected by the problem.
- State when and where the problem exists.
- Document the factors contributing to the problem.
- Document current or past efforts to address the problem.
- Show why those efforts failed or are inadequate to address the total need.
- Discuss the organization's history or expertise in dealing with the problem.
- Discuss the consequences of not dealing with the problem.

CONNECTIONS

Outcomes must address problems identified in the needs assessment. Goals or objectives that are **not** rooted in the needs assessment indicate a project that is not thought through. As a reader, you should find easy answers the question: "Why this outcome?"

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Outcomes are statements that state what the project hopes to accomplish. Good outcomes are essential if a project is to demonstrate success. Outcomes consist of goals, objectives and milestones. Every outcomes statement must be:

- Clearly stated. There should be no ambiguity as to what the outcomes hopes to accomplish.
- Measurable. Outcomes reference easily quantified indicators such as: test scores, absenteeism, grades, promotion rates, pre and post survey results, etc. While increasing children's happiness may be laudable, "happiness" is difficult to measure and should not be the subject of a outcome.
- Ambitious. Outcomes should not be timid when it comes to setting levels of success. If the school is already experiencing an 8% increase in test scores per year, the project should set levels of success at more than 8%.
- Realistic. Projects can sabotage themselves by setting unrealistic levels of success. A school experiencing an 8% increase in test scores per year may not be able to accomplish an 80% increase.

The following five elements should be found in every outcome statement.

1. A quantifiable level of success.
2. A specific deadline for completion.
3. A clearly identified target population(s) to be served and evaluated.
4. A baseline of state, local or school defined data or standards, by which to judge how ambitious and realistic the objective is.
5. An evaluation tool by which to measure progress.

When reviewing this section, make sure that there are outcomes for every client-group the project will target. If the project is to provide services to parents, teachers and students, there should be goals, objectives and milestones for parents, teachers and students.

RED FLAG

100% is just not realistic. Outcomes must be achievable in the stated time frame. Any project that promises 100% success with all clients is setting itself up for failure. Outcomes must be ambitious, but they should never be unattainable.

The Goal

Goals state what the project team ultimately hopes to achieve. Goals address the primary problems identified in the needs assessment.

It's okay to have more than one goal. However, the more goals, the more unwieldy a project becomes. Consequently, it is preferable for a project to have a few, focused goals.

Goals have long term deadlines covering multiple years. If a project is short term (1 year or fewer), the goal may extend beyond the end of the funding cycle.

This an example of a goal statement containing the five elements:

Specific & quantitative level of success

Target Population

By the end of the grant period, 70% of high school seniors, in the participating high schools who were reading below grade level in the ninth grade, will achieve a rating of *satisfactory* on the county high school reading examination, a 20% increase over current levels.

Long Term Deadline

Measurement Tool

Baseline

Objectives

Objectives are outcome statements that address what the project hopes to accomplish at the end of each year. It is typical to have multiple objectives. Nonetheless, the fewer the objectives, the more directed the project.

Objective(s) should encompass only the funding cycle. If the award covers many years, objectives cover each year of the project. Objectives must be presented for each year of the funding period.

Considering the previously stated goal, a good objective might be:

Quantitative level of success

Target Population

By the end of first year, 15% of high school seniors, juniors, and freshmen in the three participating high schools who were reading below grade level in the ninth grade will achieve a rating of *satisfactory* on the county high school reading exam, a 10% increase over current levels.

Short Term Deadline

Measurement Tool

Baseline

RED FLAG

Milestones are not items on a "To Do" list. Deadlines for management actions are not proper milestones. Installing a computer lab by January, or conducting a workshop by the end of the year, does not measure the progress of a client.

Milestones

Evaluators, directors and steering committees will want to know what progress is being made. If things aren't going well, it's important to know as soon as possible so that changes can be made. Because objectives cannot always be evaluated until the end of the project, each objective statement should have milestones associated with it. Milestones are the checkpoints that measure the periodic progress toward a stated objective. They are typically evaluated quarterly. However, the frequency with which they are evaluated is determined by the nature of the milestones and the data collected to evaluate them.

Milestones have very short deadlines. While the quarterly evaluation of milestones is standard, the deadlines can be set semiannually depending on the nature of the milestone.

Milestones are related to objectives. They measure progress towards an objective by breaking the objective into steps, or employing a standard that is good indicator of progress (e.g. use quarterly grades as an indicator of MSPAP improvement.) They should take into account the dynamics of the project. A project's impact may not be felt for months. Project designers should anticipate this and be gauged accordingly. Overly ambitious milestones can make a good project look bad early on.

If the objective is to decrease in absenteeism by 20% by the end the final marking period, one set of corresponding milestones might be:

Specific & quantitative level of success

Target Population

Short Term Deadline

1) There will be a 2% decrease in student absenteeism, by the end of the first marking period from the previous year, as measured by school records.

Baseline

Measurement Tool

2) There will be a 7% decrease in student absenteeism by the end of the second marking period, from the previous year, as measured by school records.

3) There will be a 13% decrease in student absenteeism by the end of the third marking period, from the previous year, as measured by school records.

CONNECTIONS

A top-notch implementation plan requires proper outcome statements. An implementation plan should be based on research or rational that indicates that the selected strategies and activities will result in the stated outcomes. Without proper outcomes, picking the proper strategies becomes impossible.

THE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The implementation plan details how the project will accomplish its outcomes. This section consists of discussions of the strategies and activities the project will employ.

Strategies

The implementation plan should begin with a discussion about the strategies used to accomplish the stated outcomes. Strategies are broad approaches (methods, procedures, techniques) employed to accomplish an objective. Strategies either address the problem detailed in the needs assessment directly or address factors that contribute to it. In this way, strategies are directly related to objectives. Every objective should have at least one strategy associated with it. Examples of strategies include: professional development, after-school programs, mentoring, parent nights, etc.

The introduction should cite studies, models, previous programs or some other evidence that the strategies and activities will result in the desired effects. Have these strategies been successfully employed elsewhere? Which experts recommend them and why? Without this support, there is no evidence that the proposed strategies will work. Without research, there is no reason to believe that the chosen strategies will accomplish the stated outcomes.

All the strategies should work together. The implementation plan should look like one plan, not a hodgepodge of unrelated strategies. Make sure that the project's clients have all or most of the services available to them.

This section should answer the following questions:

- What strategies are to be employed?
- Why were these strategies chosen? How do they help achieve the stated outcomes?
- What evidence is there to show that these strategies will be effective?
- What other options were available and why were they rejected?
- How do the different strategies work together to achieve the outcomes?

RED FLAG

Management actions should never be listed as activities. Projects that center their attention on hiring people and buying equipment lose site of the fact that their main purpose is to make a difference for the client.

Activities

Activities are "where the rubber meets the road." They are the specific steps taken to accomplish the objectives. While strategies are general, activities are specific. Activities happen on specific dates and involve direct service to clients. If "mentoring" is a strategy, the mentoring session that happens on February 25th is an activity. Activities are grouped by strategy and thus are related to an objective.

Things that are **not** activities are actions that should be included in the management plan. While these actions are essential steps in conducting activities, they do not involve direct service themselves. Examples include: purchasing equipment, hiring staff, developing curriculum, conducting evaluations and holding meetings. These things should be addressed in the management plan.

Each activity should be listed (usually in a chart), and include the following information.

- The objective it is expected to help achieve.
- The strategy it supports.
- The date(s) it will occur.
- A brief description.
- The target audience. (Who will directly and indirectly benefit from this activity? Parents? Students? Teachers? Community Members? Administrators?)
- The person(s) conducting the activity.

Depending on the RFP, additional information may be required about each activity. This may include:

- How many people will be directly and indirectly served by the activity.
- The evaluation procedures that will be used to determine the activity's success.

The number of activities listed depends entirely upon the project. Large development projects may spend most of their money and effort in the management plan. A project that has only a few activities can still be effective.

CONNECTIONS

Evaluations require a needs assessment, outcomes, and an implementation plan.

A needs assessment serves as a baseline.

The outcomes and implementation plan are the subjects of the evaluation. The evaluation depends on the preceding sections. If they are poorly designed, it will be impossible for the evaluator to do his/her job.

THE EVALUATION PLAN

Demonstrating a project's effectiveness requires an evaluation, and an evaluation requires a plan. The plan must include details for conducting both a final and ongoing evaluation. Annual evaluations are necessary for projects that span multiple years.

The evaluation plan will:

- Pose questions for the evaluation to answer.
- Describe the process for data collection.
- Describe who will conduct the evaluation.
- Include staffing and budgetary resources that have been allocated for evaluation.
- Present a clear plan to disseminate evaluation results.

Ongoing, Annual & Final Evaluations

A good project will have ongoing, annual, and final evaluations. The final evaluation happens at the end of the project, assesses the entire project, and measures the project's success in achieving the goal(s). If the project spans multiple years, annual evaluations assess each year or funding cycle and measure the project's success in achieving the objectives. The ongoing evaluation covers a segment of each year and measures the project's success in achieving the milestones.

Ongoing, annual and final evaluations should:

- Use quantitative data such as test scores or attendance rates.
- Use qualitative data such as the opinions of teachers and parents.
- Interview the clients receiving direct service.
- Assess the project's cost-effectiveness.

Evaluators

Included in the evaluation plan should be a brief listing of all the key people involved in the evaluation and their responsibilities. All evaluators should have brief descriptions of their qualifications, which are supported by resumes in an appendix. This includes independent evaluators.

RED FLAG

An independent evaluator is not a substitute for an evaluation plan. A thorough discussion of evaluation methods, data collection, and analysis must be provided. If a detailed plan is not provided, chances are that no real evaluation will happen.

Evaluation Questions
A good evaluation starts with a good question. There are two types of evaluation questions- “outcome questions” and “process questions.” Every plan should have both.

Outcome questions are concerned with goals, objectives, and milestones. Essentially, is the project doing what it was designed to do? Examples of outcome questions include:
- Have the goals, objectives, and milestones been met?
- Were they met on time?
- How many clients were served?
- Did the project produce any unexpected benefits?

Process questions are concerned with the strategies, activities, and management of the project. They look at the mechanics of the project. Examples of process questions include:
- Is the project cost effective?
- Are the strategies, activities, technologies, teaching techniques, or software appropriate for the target audience?
- How do clients feel about the project?
- What factors are keeping the outcomes from being met?

Data Collection
To conduct a proper evaluation, data must be collected. This requires time, expertise, and access. Therefore, the evaluation plan should describe:
- What data is be collected.
- How the data is to be collected.
- Who will collect the data.
- When the data is to be collected.

Proper data collection methods will:
- Collect both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Employ a variety of collection methods (surveys, analysis of student records, focus groups, etc.)
- Use the sources described in goals, objectives, and milestones.
- Collect all the data needed to answer the evaluation questions.
- Employ many of the same methods used in the needs assessment.

RED FLAG

Does the evaluation plan pledge financial resources without giving numbers? Check the budget. It should include all evaluation expenses. Under-financed evaluations reveal applicants who don't want to be held accountable for accomplishing the project's outcomes.

Data Analysis and Establishing a Baseline

Progress can be measured only if it is compared to something else. Therefore, it is essential to establish a "baseline" of data. If an outcome is where you want to go, a baseline is where you start. A detailed needs assessment can serve as a baseline. Other methods may be chosen to provide the most accurate measure of success. Beware of evaluation plans that don't establish a baseline. You can't tell how far you've come unless you know where you've been.

Baselines might be established by:

- Establishing a control group.
- Pre-testing clients.
- Analyzing student records prior to receiving services.
- Reviewing records from similar students in the previous school year.

Dissemination/Utilization

Sharing evaluation results maximizes a project's benefit. Even failed projects can teach valuable lessons. A good dissemination plan will spread news about the project after the final evaluation and during the project's implementation. A good plan not only lets other people know how well the project performed, but builds support for the project as well.

Before a dissemination plan can be devised, stakeholders must be identified. Dissemination methods should be based on how best to reach the stakeholders. Examples of methods are: websites, TV, newspapers, newsletters, presentations at conventions, sending reports to various groups or agencies, public meetings, and phone calls.

Resources

Evaluation and dissemination take time and money. A good plan will discuss the resources dedicated to it. Expenses associated with an evaluation and dissemination plan might be:

- Stipends for independent evaluators (amounts differ, but $3,000 to $10,000 is typical).
- Substitutes if teachers are involved in focus groups or other evaluation activities.
- Advertising expenses for TV, radio or newspaper.
- Expenses associated with hosting a website.
- Contracted services for website, newsletter, or flyer design.
- Software for data analysis.
- Temporary employee for data entry.

Evaluations take time, The evaluation plan should state how long it should take to accomplish the evaluation and demonstrate that enough work-hours have been dedicated to completing it.

CONNECTIONS
The management plan is based on the implementation and evaluation plans. Decisions about purchases, hiring, and curricula development can be made only after these plans have been established. Buying computers makes sense only if you need them to employ a strategy or evaluate your success. Choosing a less effective strategy that uses computers because someone wants computers is backward engineering.

THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Most programs fail due to weak management. Here a few of the most common mistakes:

- Failure to start on time.
- Failure to submit required reports.
- Failure to monitor performance of the project regularly during implementation.
- Failure to keep adequate documentation.
- Failure to assure continuity and quality of the project in light of personnel turnover.
- Failure to have a fiscal procedure in place.
- Unauthorized budget deviations or account transfers.
- Failure to form lasting partnerships in which all members recognize and fulfill their clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Failure to complete the project in a timely fashion.

A management plan describes, schedules, and assigns responsibilities for all the actions necessary to carry out and support the implementation and evaluation plans.

Partners

Partners are partners only if they contribute something to the project. While they might receive some compensation, organizations or companies that merely sell goods or services are vendors. The proposal should present a clear discussion of the project partners and include the following information:

- Each partner's respective role, or why that partner is crucial to the project.
- The specific contributions each partner will make in the forms of financial support, equipment, personnel, or other resources. This should be quantified in financial terms if possible.
- What the partner hopes to gain through the partnership and participation in the project.
- The partner's historic role or expertise in dealing with the problem addressed in the needs assessment.

Everything said about a partner in the management plan should appear in the letter of commitment. Partnerships fall apart when partners fail to spell out, in detail, everyone's roles and responsibilities. When partnerships fall apart, projects fall apart.

RED FLAG

Is the applicant a consortium? Are there multiple project directors? Having one person in charge of the details makes for a smoother running project. When there are too many people running the show, responsibilities get shirked and the project can lose direction.

The Steering Committee and Project Oversight
Proper project oversight is an important part of a well-run project. Every project should have a governing board known as a “steering committee,” which meets at least quarterly.

Committee members should include representatives of all the major stakeholder groups. A stakeholder is anyone who has an interest in the project. Parents, teachers, and professionals are common stakeholder groups. Since the project partners are clearly stakeholders, all partners should have a representative that sits on the committee. It’s good sign when a parent or representative of the project’s clientele is included on the committee.

While the day-to-day decisions about the project should be left to the project director, the job of the steering committee is to make the major decisions. The committee should approve changes in policy, strategies, budget and outcomes. Mid-term and final evaluations should be submitted to and approved by the committee as well. The committee may have other duties depending on the nature of the project.

Staff
Review the list of key staff members involved with the project, their roles, responsibilities and qualifications. The minimum qualifications of not-yet-hired staff should be listed as well. The percentage or amount of each staff member’s time dedicated to the project should be indicated. Check to see that each staff member is dedicating enough time to manage the project properly. As a rule of thumb, project directors should dedicate at least 25% of their time to the project.

Management Plan Worksheet
Management actions are the tasks necessary to implement and evaluate the project that do not provide direct service to clients. In other words, they are not the activities contained in the implementation plan. Examples of management actions include hiring staff, ordering supplies, installing computers, developing curricula, and conducting meetings. Management actions may involve most of a project’s time and budget. That’s okay.

RED FLAG

Management plan worksheet, too brief? Check the number of pages in the project narrative. Short narratives and brief worksheets mean hastily assembled projects. If there's more room, there's more room for details.

The management plan worksheet contains the details of the management plan. It is a chronological listing of all the actions necessary to carry out the project. It provides dates and assigns responsibility for each management action.

A well-considered management plan worksheet will:

- Provide as much detail as can fit within the project narrative page limit.
- Cover the entire grant period.
- Include all major management actions.
- Assign responsibility by job title (in case of personnel turnover).
- Provide a range of dates for ongoing actions.

Here's an example of a management plan worksheet:

MANAGEMENT PLAN WORKSHEET

Management Action	Date(s)	Person Responsible
Post announcement for Project Director position	August 15	Principal
Conduct Interviews for Project Director	Sept 4 - 8	Principal
Notify hiree and send memo to arrange for background check	Sept 11	Principal
Hold staff meeting to announce project commencement	Sept 15	Principal & Project Director
Post final evaluation results on website	June 30	Project Director
Forward final evaluation to MSDE	July 1	Principal
Meet with SIT to review report and discuss future plans	July 10	Principal & SIT

RED FLAG

Don't let a proposal get away with merely stating that it is part of an overall reform effort. The proposal should clearly state how the project is part of a bigger plan. The specific goals, policies or efforts of the bigger plan should be cited.

INTEGRATION WITH EDUCATION REFORM

Projects are not run in a vacuum. They are often conducted in schools, which are governed by local education agencies, which receive funding from local governments, which must meet state and national standards. If a project is to be successful, it is important that it is aligned with the goals, efforts, and plans of these organizations. This section should present a discussion of how the project is part of a bigger picture.

Some questions this section should answer are:

- How does this project help meet the goals and objectives of the school improvement team plan?
- How does this project fit into the local education agency's master plan?
- How does this project help meet MSDE educational standards? (e.g. MSPAP, Core Learning Goals)
- How does this project help meet national education goals or fit into national initiatives? (e.g. Goals 2000, Title I, etc.)
- Does this project coordinate efforts with any other projects currently underway?
- Will resources be shared to increase efficiency and cost effectiveness?

RED FLAG

Beware of plans for future funding that only say that more grants will be sought. Grants are generally meant as startup money. Future grants are problematic and should not be relied upon.

FUTURE PLANS

What happens to the project after the grant period? If it is worthwhile, it should continue. Therefore, there needs to be a plan to maintain the project beyond the grant period.

Partners

Because a project depends on its partners, the partners should have plan for their future relationship. Will the partnerships continue? If so, what new roles will each have? Beware of projects with partnership commitments that last only as long as the initial funding, especially if partners are receiving sizable compensation for their efforts. Make sure that any future plans for continued partnerships are stated in the letter of commitment.

Plans for future funding

Most projects will require financial resources to keep operating. Wages, supplies, and transportation cost money. There should be some commitment from the grantee to “pick-up” the financial obligations. Because projects are run to evaluate their impact, LEA’s may pledge tentative support for future funding based on the project’s performance. Nonetheless, there should be some commitment. A letter from a superintendent or other person of authority stating the level of commitment to continuing the project should be included. This may appear in the appendix.

There are other ways of insuring future funding. The project may begin charging for services, receive funding from an outside agency, or begin a campaign to raise funds from donations. Any plans to do these things should be detailed and should address any legal or ethical problems that may result.

If a project cannot get sufficient financial commitments, plans for reducing project costs may be included. Plans might include switching to a volunteer workforce, reducing the number of clients, or eliminating the the least cost-efficient services. Again, detailed plans should be provided.

RED FLAG

Does the budget contain money for a grant writer? This is not an allowable expense. Grant writers should be paid by the applicant and not from grant awards. Only expenses incurred after the award has been made can be included in the budget.

BUDGET

Both the project narrative and the budget describe the entire project. Needless to say, they should tell the same story. Everything mentioned in the project narrative must be reflected in the budget, and every line item must be stated or implied in the narrative. Budgets that include line items not found in the project narrative are of grave concern. Likewise, all expenses implied in the project narrative must be accounted for in the budget, either as requested funds or in-kind contributions.

Budget Narrative

There should be a justification of the budget. This should include explanations of vague line items, details of how costs were estimated, and an explanation of how the budget is cost-effective. All line items should be justified either in the budget narrative or the project narrative.

Budget Chart

This chart details the project's expenses. Each expense is called a "line item," and line items are grouped in categories called "objects." There are six objects:

1. Salaries & Wages
2. Contracted Services
3. Supplies & Materials
4. Other Charges
5. Equipment
6. Transfers

Each line item must contain the following information:

- Description of the expense
- Method of calculation
- Amount requested
- Amount contributed as in-kind
- Total amount

The budget narrative should follow the following four-column format:

Item	Requested	In-Kind	Total
SALARIES & WAGES			
Project Director (18 months @ $30,000/year)	$22,500	$22,500	$45,000
TOTAL SALARIES & WAGES	**$22,500**	**$22,000**	**$45,000**
CONTRACTED SERVICES			
Bus Transportation (2 buses X 4 trips X $200/bus/trip)	$1,600		
TOTAL CONTRACTED SERVICES	**$1,600**		**$1,600**
SUPPLIES & MATERIALS			
Notebooks for Professional Development Seminar (20X$10/ea)	$200		$200
. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .
TOTAL BUDGET	**$115,200**	**$72,000**	**$187,200**

RED FLAG

Don't be fooled by diversionary tactics. Look for large sums in line items like "supplies." Applicants sometimes divert equipment, paper, or even thumbtacks from the project. To do this they may over-estimate expenses or create unnecessary line items.

To determine if an expense is warranted and reasonable, the description should be brief and complete. That is to say, there should be no vague line items. Vague line items lack the detail needed to understand what is being purchased. They may need to be broken down into multiple line items or described in greater detail. Here are some vague line items, followed by revisions:

Vague	Revised
Supplies	Supplies for professional development (notepads, overheads, etc.)
Computer Lab	200 Mhz Computers Network Cards Laser Printers Cables
Mileage	Mileage for Project Director between schools

Other examples of vague line items include contracted services, consulting, refreshments, transportation, and software.

Each line item must show all the numbers used to calculate the number in the *total* column. Line items that are calculated using stipends or flat fees must be indicated as such. There should be no ambiguity as to how a number was derived.

Look for "padding" in the *amount requested* column. Padding is over estimating an expense so that a budget adjustment can be made later to divert funds for other uses. Use the calculations to determine if each line item is reasonable and consistent with current market prices. Also, look at the calculations to see how many of each item is being ordered. Is more being ordered than needed for the project?

The *in-kind* column contains the contributions being made to the project. If the grant is a matching grant, the in-kind contributions must equal a percentage of the requested budget. Even if there is no required match, in-kind contributions should be indicated since it is important to demonstrate that the entire cost of the project is being covered. Percentages of an employee's time are common in-kind contributions. People found in the in-kind column should be mentioned in the project narrative.

The *total* column should indicate the entire expense of the project. It is also important that all expenses indicated in the project narrative are included in the budget, even if they are in-kind.

RED FLAG

Too little is not enough. In-kind contributions of 1% to 10% of someone's time are meaningless and should not be regarded as a valid in-kind contribution. Listing a lot of highly paid people who donate very little time is a way of meeting matching grant requirements without contributing anything.

Comparing the Budget and the Project Narrative
The budget and the project narrative are two versions of the same tale. So it's essential that they tell the same story. Here's how to see if they match:

1. As you read the project narrative, put a "$" next to items that cost money. Write implied expenses in the margins.
2. When you are finished, skim back through the project narrative. As you find come across a "$" look for that expense in the budget.
3. When you find a match, put a "X" next to the budget line item and an "X" through the "$."
4. If you find quite a few items in the budget, or a lot of dollar signs in the project narrative without an "X," then the budget and the narrative don't match.

Here is a checklist of things to look for when scoring the budget:

- Budget follows the four-column format.
- Total requested budget does not exceed the maximum award.
- "Total amount requested" matches "amount requested" on cover sheet.
- All columns add correctly.
- Budget contains no vague line items.
- All the line items are implied by the project narrative, or justified in the budget narrative.
- All expenses in the project narrative appear in the budget.
- All items in the *total* column are derived from the calculations provided.
- All costs are reasonable according to current market values.
- All line items are justifiable and necessary.
- There are no in-kind contributions for less than 10% of a person's time.
- Budget appears to be free from padding.
- All expenses are incurred after the grant is awarded.
- There are resources budgeted for evaluation and dissemination.
- Budget summary sheet is included.

Budget Summary Sheet
The budget summary sheet is required of all MSDE grants and should be accompanied after the budget. There should be a copy of the Budget Summary Sheet inside the RFP.

RED FLAG

Don't waste time reading thick appendices of irrelevant information. Some applicants believe that more is better and include superfluous information. If it doesn't seem relevant, don't bother. All the information you actually need should be in the project narrative and budget.

APPENDICES

Appendices contain relevant information not required in the project narrative. All information required to be in the project narrative should be in the project narrative. The appendices may not be used to circumvent the page limit. Required appendices include the assurances, resumes of key personnel, and letters of commitment.

Assurances

The assurances page is a legal document regarding the duties of all grant recipients. It must be signed and dated by the superintendent or the head of the applicant's agency.

Resumes

Resumes of all key personnel must be included. Resumes should not extend beyond one page and should contain only qualifications directly related to the project.

Letters of Commitment

There should be a letter of commitment from each of the project partners. There should be a letter from each school involved, signed by the principal and the entire SIT. All letters should be addressed to the applicant, not to MSDE or any MSDE official.

A good letter of commitment will:

- Indicate that the partner knows and supports the goals and objectives of the project.
- Describe the partner's roles and responsibilities in the project.
- Describe and quantify the partner's contributions to the project.
- Acknowledge all relevant information mentioned about the partner in the project narrative.
- State what the partner hopes to gain by getting involved in the project.

Other Appendices

All the critical information should be in the budget and project narrative. Sometimes, applicants like to include other information to flesh out their proposal. These can be helpful and might include:

- Letters from end users of the project's services.
- Examples of curricula or surveys.
- Analyzed data from a needs assessment.
- Letters of support from elected officials, stakeholders, or nonprofit agencies.