

# Writing for the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries Program

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**O**n June 4, 2002, Laura Bush hosted a White House Conference on School Libraries to discuss the latest research on libraries, student achievement and successful local programs. Dr. Susan Neuman, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the United States Department of Education, spoke about the potential for libraries to foster achievement and the reality of the significant differences in the quality of school libraries in schools across the country. “Children in poor areas had mediocre to poor libraries,” she said, “[and] no librarian on site; further the libraries were often closed during the week....” She went on to document that many schools in poor areas had no libraries, but often had computer labs. This focus on technology at the expense of literacy has resulted in a “literacy divide,” where children have access to technology but neither the materials nor the assistance to use any resources to improve their reading skills (Neuman, 2002).

Dr. Neuman’s remarks are encompassed in the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program. Now in its second year, the program, which falls under President Bush’s education reform plan, No Child Left Behind (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I, Part B, Subpart 4, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. 6383), is part of the U.S. Department of Education’s mandate to dramatically improve student reading achievement. By focusing available resources, including those of school library media centers, on ensuring that no child is left behind, the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program offers school libraries federal funding for the first time in more than 30 years. With \$13 million in funding for 2003, the U.S. Department of Education expects to award 75–100 grants in September.

The Improving Literacy through School Libraries (LSL) program was created to help local education agencies improve reading achievement by providing students with increased access to up-to-date school library materials including well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media centers and professionally certified school library media specialists. LSL promotes comprehensive local strategies to improve student reading achievement by improving school library services and resources. An overriding theme of the program is that school library media centers contribute to the improvement of student reading achievement when there is increased collaboration among instructional and school library media center staff, provision of additional instructional materials and resources, and the extension of hours of operation to include non-school hours.

## Who’s Eligible for the LSL Program?

The LSL program restricts eligibility based on institutional and socioeconomic statuses. The applicant must be a local educational agency (LEA), as defined in section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Generally, this classification is determined by the State educational agency (SEA) for purposes of Federal education programs. School districts are the most familiar form of LEAs. Some charter schools in some states are also considered LEAs. Charter schools should always check with their state for the current status of charter schools to see if they are considered LEAs. Regional Service Agencies in many states are considered LEAs. These entities may apply as part of a consortium with eligible LEAs in their service areas. They may also apply directly for the schools they administer if they meet the family poverty eligibility requirement. State administered schools, such as schools for the deaf and the blind, state arts schools, etc., may also be eligible to apply if they are considered LEAs. Individual schools and private schools are not eligible to apply for a grant or to receive services through an eligible LEA for this program.

Local educational agencies in which at least 20% of the students are from families with incomes below the

poverty line are eligible to apply for the program. This criterion is very strictly enforced; poverty rates close to but below 20% still render the LEA ineligible to apply. The Additional Information section includes a link to a U.S. Department of Education listing of eligible districts.


### Preparing the Proposal

While a school librarian, teacher, grant writer, or even a parent can submit an Improving Literacy Through School Libraries application as long as it's signed by the district superintendent, the process benefits from intense collaboration among school librarians, grant writers, teachers, and administrators. Applications written without an integrated approach often reflect fragmented ideas and isolated implementation plans.

Applications must include standard federal grant forms as well as a one page abstract, program narrative, a budget narrative, and resumes for project directors and other key personnel. The focus of the peer review process is primarily on the program narrative, but since both the peer reviewers and LSL Program personnel have access to all of the application documents, it is essential that applicants not only submit all of the documents, but also ensure that they are completed accurately and attentively. Applicants are strongly encouraged to include all critical information in the program narrative and to not use appendices. Remember, peer reviewers appreciate concise and easy to read applications with pages consecutively numbered. It also doesn't hurt to use a consistent font and clean page layout.

Peer reviewers volunteer or are invited and include librarians, administrators, and reading specialists. Reviewers are bound by strict policies of confidentiality to not discuss the contents of applications or to contact any of the applicants. Reviewers are assigned proposals with respect to geographic balance. Often, reviewers do not read any applications from their home state. Conflicts of interest can arise from geographic proximity, involvement in proposal preparation, consulting relationships, and other links to the applicant. Peer reviewers are guided by a single mantra, "How does this proposal

increase student literacy?" Let this question guide the conception of your proposal and the articulation of its components.

 **Tip:** One of the best ways to learn about what grantors expect is to be a reviewer!

### LSL Evaluation Criteria

The LSL program includes an invitation priority set forth by the Secretary of Education that encourages applicants to focus on comprehensive and collaborative reading efforts that maximize the impact of the project on improving student reading achievement. While applications that explicitly reference this criteria are not given preference, this priority can be a useful theme to proposal development.


Since the LSL is a competitive grant program, your program narrative must address the selection criteria that reviewers use to evaluate your application. In fact, it's a good idea to present the proposal in order of the evaluation criteria, even if you construct the proposal in a different sequence.

**Table 1. Evaluation measures for LSL proposals.**

Meeting the Purpose of the Statute	10 pts.
• <i>What will the schools/district do?</i>	
Need for School Library Resources	10 pts.
• <i>Why does this need to be done?</i>	
Use of Funds	35 pts.
• <i>How will the funds be used to get it done?</i>	
Use of Scientifically Based Research	10 pts.
• <i>Why is this the best approach?</i>	
Broad-based Involvement & Coordination	10 pts.
• <i>How will they work with others?</i>	
Evaluation of Quality & Impact	10 pts.
• <i>How will they know the program works?</i>	

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2003.


Each element is weighed according to its importance, but losing a few points in a low point category can be more damaging than losing a few points in a high point category. Point assignments for the elements should also guide your effort on developing each area of the proposal.

 **Tip:** Bold a few key words that describe how you are meeting the criteria.

## 1. Meeting the purpose of the statute (10 points)

This criterion reflects how well the proposed project addresses the intended outcome of the statute to improve student literacy skills and academic achievement by providing students with increased access to up-to-date school library materials; a well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media center; and well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists.

While this explanation may seem to encompass the entirety of the grant proposal, this section should be seen as an opportunity for the proposer to give a “big picture” overview of project activities and how they specifically reflect the letter of the law. Proposers do not need to submit applications that work in all three areas; in fact, focusing on one or two areas may be an effective way to construct a proposal that is realistic for a twelve month time frame.


 Tip: Reference specific language from NCLB when describing project activities.

## 2. Need for school library resources (10 points)

This section should be used to establish the deficiencies in the district’s library program that demand attention from the LSL program. Proposals will be scored on how well the applicant demonstrates the need for school library media improvement, based on the age and condition of school library media resources, including: book collections; access of school library media centers to advanced technology; and the availability of well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists, in schools served by the applicant.

Throughout the review process, reviewers will assess how well the narrative explains the ways in which funds will increase student literacy. Since this criteria will be addressed in the Use of Funds area, establish the age and condition of school library resources, access to technology; and availability of well-trained certified library media specialists in the Needs section. Be sure to include information about student population, the percentage of students reading at grade level, the size of book collection and the subjects it covers, the average copyright year of

books, the number of computers in school libraries, and the number of certified librarians in each school. Explain how these conditions affect operations in school libraries, and what areas need improvement, as well as identify missing services that affect kids’ reading levels.

 Tip: Use tables to present data in a clear, readable format.

The LSL program staff weeds out proposals submitted by ineligible applicants, so there’s no need to extensively document your district’s socioeconomic condition. Don’t expect to get a grant if your funding needs stem from state or local budget cuts; the LSL program intends to fund work specifically focused on improving student literacy.

## 3. Use of funds (35 points)

Scoring of this criterion reflects how well the applicant will use the funds made available through the grant to carry out activities that meet its demonstrated needs. Focus on the main criteria that will help determine whether funding is awarded: provide a detailed action plan that describes how to use school libraries to improve student literacy; explain how the plan will accomplish that goal; and outline the concrete objectives, or outcomes, the literacy program will achieve. The LSL grant is to buy more school library materials so that needy media centers can improve student literacy. Applications must make explicit the connection between their program’s activities and the government’s goals in their narrative (McGowan, 2002).

A common area of expenditure is acquiring current school library media resources, including books. While the grant application should not specify titles that will be purchased, the narrative should address categories in which print materials will be bought. These categories should be addressed in the proposal narrative as areas of need or areas that enhance reading achievement.

While funds can be spent on computer equipment and software, it is essential that the link between technology and increasing literacy be made. Proposals that focus

on replacing outdated computers or purchasing color printers are rarely persuasive. Technology should be incorporated into the curricula of the school and used to develop and enhance the information literacy, information retrieval, and critical thinking skills of students. Requests for funds to implement an automated circulation system are also not encouraged unless you are able to make a case for improved circulation practices improving student reading achievement.

Technology can also be used to facilitate Internet links and other resource-sharing networks among schools and school library media centers, and public and academic libraries. While this provision was originally included to bridge any gaps eRate may have left, requests for funds relating to the Internet should focus on using the Internet for resource sharing activities like interlibrary loan and literacy-improving activities like viewing eBooks or participating in online work.

The professional development aspect of funding is an often misunderstood aspect of the LSL program. According to section 1222(d)(2) of the ESEA, professional development for school library media specialists and other instructional staff may be funded in order to gain skills in preschool age children’s early literacy development. Professional development funds may also be used for activities that foster increased collaboration between school library media specialists, teachers, and administrators. Shared planning time, joint teaching strategies, and plans for integrated use of the school library are types of allowable professional development activities.

Funds may also be sought to offset costs of providing students with access to school libraries during non-school hours. If these funds are sought, the proposal text should clearly describe the activities and staffing additional time. Reviewers will also be looking at the budget and budget narrative when evaluating use of funds. Be sure that every specified use of funds is also listed and described in the budget and vice versa. For example, a narrative that proposes to greatly extend library hours but does not describe how staff for these extended hours will be secured or paid will probably be penalized.

Allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updated materials, including books</li> <li>• Technology for literacy, critical thinking, info. retrieval</li> <li>• Internet links &amp; other resource-sharing networks</li> <li>• Professional development for school librarians &amp; other staff to gain preschool literacy skills</li> <li>• Access to school libraries during nonschool hours</li> <li>• Activities that foster increased collaboration between all grant stakeholders</li> </ul>
Not Allowed or Discouraged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building or renovating a school library</li> <li>• Support for general library operations like automation</li> <li>• Equipment &amp; supplies that don’t support literacy like furniture (there are limited funds available for bookshelves and other material if they are tied to meeting literacy goals)</li> <li>• Professional development for other age groups’ literacy skills</li> <li>• Hiring new media specialists &amp; paraprofessional staff</li> </ul>

Table 2. LSL expenditures


Remember, specify what actions you will take in your district’s school libraries to improve reading skills. It’s not enough to list books and materials you plan to buy. The Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program operates from the perspective that libraries are funded to improve reading achievement-based literacy, not information literacy.

Often, proposers look upon the LSL program as a way to hire additional media specialists or paraprofessional staff. Using funds for this reason is not prohibited, but it does have its drawbacks. Since the grants are only for twelve months, the proposers will need to address how quickly the new staff can be hired, trained, and integrated into program activities. Proposers will also want to address how new staff people will be retained beyond the duration of the grant. A better way to approach bringing new staff into the program is to have the district support the hiring of new staff and to have the grant program support the activities of new personnel.

#### 4. Use of scientifically-based research (10 points)

This section determines how well the applicant will use programs and materials that are grounded in scientifically-based research, as defined in section 9101(37) of the ESEA. Although this section is not assigned a high number of points, it is a clear reflection of how well thought out proposed activities are.

In this area, it is not adequate to cite school library achievement studies without linking them to proposed activities. Likewise, citing promotional literature or anecdotal accounts of a particular reading program's effectiveness does not demonstrate how specific program activities were selected for their basis in scientific research. Literature cited should document program activities' ability to improve phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies.


 **Tip:** Find scientific approaches to your areas before determining your Use of Funds.

Take some time and do your homework for this section! Let the literature guide your program decisions instead of trying to find articles to support your proposed work. Show that your program is based on objective, rigorous and scientifically proven research. Many reviewers feel that good, thorough reference to relevant literature reflects your ability to make thoughtful, informed program decisions.

### 5. Broad-based involvement & coordination (15 points)

This section addresses how well the applicant will extensively involve school library media specialists, teachers, administrators and parents in the proposed project activities and effectively coordinate the funds and activities provided under this program with other literacy, library, technology and professional development funds and activities.

While not all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, administrators, etc.) need to be involved in every aspect of the proposed work, applicants should demonstrate a willingness to include them in various aspects. Teachers may contribute to the grant writing process, parent volunteers may assist with staffing after school hours, and administrators may help to implement the project evaluation. Be creative in determining the different roles everyone can play and look upon collaboration as a way to diffuse project responsibility rather than to slow project progress.

 **Tip:** Assemble a program development team of stakeholders prior to proposal writing.

Another important aspect of this section is to discuss how the proposed work will complement existing district reading programs, including Reading First grants, eRate activities, and other professional development initiatives. Take an inventory of the programs in the district and look at the gaps—these gaps are detailed in the Needs for School Library Resources section. Once needs are identified, decide which of them can be addressed through allowable program activities—these are Meeting the Purpose of the Statute and Use of Funds sections. Then, research possible approaches to these activities and select the ones best suited to the library environment—this is the Use of Scientifically Based Research section. Identify relevant and accessible data that will help to inform the selected approaches. Combine these data with goals and ways to measure goals—this is the Evaluation of Quality and Impact section. This often under-utilized section is actually key to putting the proposal together!

### 6. Evaluation of quality & impact (20 points)

This critical part of the application is also the most challenging. Each applicant must propose an evaluation plan that addresses both the long and short-term objectives of the project and its impact. This criterion measures how well the applicant will collect and analyze data on the quality and impact of the proposed project activities. Items to measure include the extent to which the availability of, the access to, and the use of up-to-date school library media resources in the elementary schools and secondary schools served by the applicant were increased, and the impact on improving the reading skills of students. For example, is the expected outcome of closely aligning your library collection to the district's reading plan to increase student use of the school library and circulation? While circulation and use statistics may already routinely be kept, proposers will want to make sure that they demonstrate the existence of baseline data and clear ideas of what significant improvement will look like.

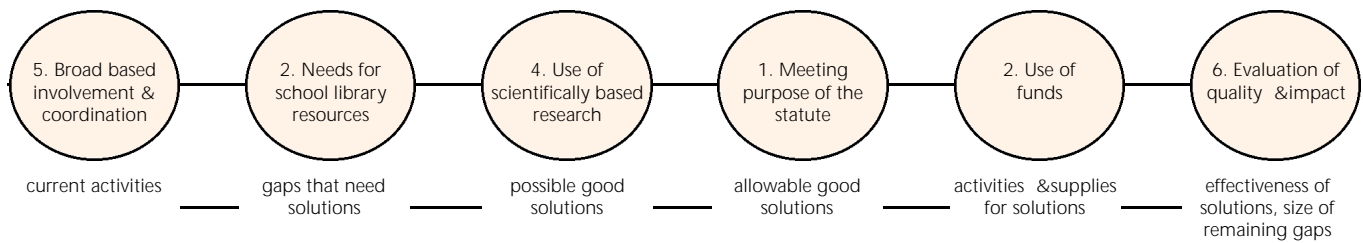


Figure 1. Possible preparation order of LSL elements

Evaluation plans should include both formative and summative elements. That is, evaluation activities should occur on an ongoing and in a final manner. For ongoing measures, it is important to show how the results of these analyses will be fed back into the program's implementation. Proposals must include methods of assessing the program's impact on student reading achievement. While this area may seem harder to evaluate, many of the techniques of evidence based practice can help to guide the development of metrics in this area. Evidence based practice is done in the context of best practice. Best practice is comprised of identifying goals, developing processes and strategies, examining outcomes and successes, and evaluating practices critically and reflectively in the light of outcomes (Todd, 2002; Todd, 2002).

Summative evaluations should take the form of a final report. This report should honestly document the program goals, baseline data, summarize the results of the interim formative measures, discuss how those measures affected continuing program implementation, and show how much progress the program made toward its goals.

**Tip:** Include plan to share results with school board, conferences, and publications.

Since we're not all clairvoyant and in control of every aspect of the ever-changing school environment, don't be afraid to document places in which the program did not meet your expectations and to discuss changes you would make to future implementations. Program development is a learning process that benefits from collaboration, communication, and reflection.

### Conclusion

Since the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program is the first federal initiative in over three decades to specifically target the enhancement of struggling

school library programs, it is essential that media specialists understand the elements of the program in order to assemble a coalition and proposal strong enough to gain the reviewers' attention and support student achievement.

Grant writing is often misunderstood as a combination of luck, prescience, and alchemy. But, the secret to writing effective proposals for this program is learning how to frame your needs in grantor's language. Elements should be addressed in a logical order, but presented in the requested sequence. Hopefully, deeper knowledge of this program will allow you to approach the process of writing for this program with a more appropriate mixture of timing, clarity and purpose. ●

### LSL Program Information

- *Improving Literacy Through School Libraries* <[www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/LSL/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/LSL/)>
- *Eligible LEAs with family poverty rates* <[www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/LSL/eligible/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/LSL/eligible/)>

### References

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