

A Closer Look at Writing Needs Assessment Statements

How many of us have discovered a grant source and tried to think of a project we could apply for? Good programs and services begin with planning, and the first step in planning is often a needs assessment. Since you never know when the opportunity to apply for funding to help your youth services programs may appear, having a project idea developed will give you a head start. Here are some tips for preparing that first step---a good needs assessment statement for grant applications.

Gathering the data: Choose an appropriate data gathering tool for the type of information you are seeking. Here are some general guidelines, from Library Coach Ruth Metz (*Ruth Metz Associates, Needs Assessment Workshop, 2008*):

1. **Information scan:** Do a preliminary search for local information and/or sources in which you can find relevant information. This will help you determine which, if any, additional data gathering tools you will need. Examples: Census data, school free and reduced lunch data, IRI scores, county profiles, current research recommendations, etc. Your own library statistics will also provide relevant information, such as average number of families that attend storyhours, number of teens in your Teen Advisory Group, average attendance of teen programs, number of library cards checked out each year, summer reading participation numbers, etc.
2. **Key Informant interview:** Set up a meeting with those who have knowledge in your area of interest. These “experts” can be school principals, counselors, library consultants, teachers, agency directors, etc. These individuals can provide data, as well as personal insight about trends and needs.
3. **Stakeholder interview:** If possible, set up some meetings with the people who will most benefit from your service, in order to determine their wants and needs. Examples include parents, teens, child care providers, etc.
4. **Focus group:** If possible, hold a meeting for a group of 8-12 stakeholders on a specific topic. Make sure someone effectively records the groups’ comments. This tool should be used in conjunction with an information scan and/or key informant interview.
5. **Survey:** This can be useful to establish broad-based data about the “target” community, but should be used in combination with credible data gathered from information scans or key informant interviews. Surveys should be kept to a minimum number of questions. A word of caution: Surveys can be very time-consuming and the data can be unreliable if the sample is too small. If conducting a large-scale needs assessment it is better to hire a professional to conduct your survey.

Writing a statement: Depending on the grant application, needs statements can take a variety of forms. Be sure to read the grant criteria carefully before determining how you will present your assessment findings. If you are simply summarizing your findings in a paragraph, **be sure to cite your sources and use hard data.** Applications based on solid data are more likely to be funded than applications based solely on observations or anecdotal stories.

As an exemplary example, a recently funded Read to Me Minigrant application contained the following components in their needs assessment description:

- Description of the town: geographical, population, number of K-12 students, number of schools, free and reduced lunch rates, Title One information, Headstart information, budget shortfalls.
- Chart of the 2007 Poverty Guidelines from the *Federal Register*
- Average income in the county
- Research connecting poverty rates, parent education level, and student achievement
- IRI scores: local school district compared to state
- Current research on early literacy and brain development
- **Rationale of library's proposal as it relates to data collected**

Though many of the Read to Me grant applications contained data such these, many applications simply described why the staff thought the proposal would benefit the target community. Some applications included data that was unclear, or did not cite a source. Many applications included statements that were not based on objective data. Here are some statements we found, along with suggestions that include data:

- *"Many of our parents want..."* could be stated as, "A recent survey of current storytime attendees shows that ___ percent would attend this program if offered."
- *"There are a lot of..."* could be stated as, "The 2007 census indicates that ___ percent of the population is"
- *"We have a high rate of poverty,"* should include specific numbers from the census, free and reduced lunch rates, etc.
- *"Many do not..."* should state the number of people based on some sort of gathering tool.

Here are a few useful links:

- Census information: www.factfinder.census.gov
- Idaho Reading Indicator scores: <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/ipd/iri/IriAnalysis.asp>
 1. Choose current school year.
 2. Choose grade and session (Fall kindergarten scores are most logical choice as an indication of early literacy preparedness)
 3. Level: You can find scores on the statewide, district-wide or single school level.
 4. Category: You can choose total students, or break them down into subgroups, such as race/ethnicity.

5. “Benchmark” means that these students are reading at grade level. “Strategic” means that these students are not yet reading at grade level and will need extra reading support from the school. “Intensive” means that these students are reading way below grade level and will need very focused reading interventions from the school.
 6. There are several ways to report the data, dependent on your needs statement: percentage of children reading at or near grade level (add benchmark and strategic); percentage of children reading below grade level (add strategic and intensive); percentage of Hispanic students reading at/below grade level; percentage of low-income students reading at/below grade level (Title I); etc.
- Free and reduced lunch rates, by Idaho school district:
<http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/cnp/statisticsFinance/>
 1. Scroll to **Free and Reduced Lunch by District**, and click on most recent year.
 2. There are four tabs at the bottom of the spreadsheet. Click on “Participant Eligibility.”
 3. Find your school or district; the percentage of eligible children is in the last column. Note that kindergarten and preschool children are not included in this percentage.

If the link above does not open, try this:

 - First go to <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/cnp/>.
 - Then click on Statistics and Finance. Proceed with Number 1.
 - Other Idaho nutritional information: <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/cnp/>
 - Idaho Schools’ Report Cards (test scores, district info, statistics, etc.)
<http://www.sde.state.id.us/ipd/reportcard/SchoolReportCard.asp>
 - 2009 Child Care in the State of Idaho, from the Idaho Child Care Resource and Referral (Idaho CCR&R) and National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (NACCRRRA): <http://www.naccrra.org/randd/data/docs/ID.pdf>
 - [Idaho Head Start Data Book, 2008 Edition](#)
 - Child Welfare League of America, “Idaho’s Children 2007”
<http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/Statefactsheets/2007/idaho.pdf>
 - [Annie B. Casey Foundation “Profile for Idaho”](#)
 - Idaho Kids Count <http://www.idahokidscount.org/>
 - Idaho Office for Refugees, [Population Information](#)