

# **The Invisible Gatekeeper**

## **Navigating Education Funding Deficits and Gender Disparities Through Grant Writing Literacy**

**Susan Thomas**

Marywood University, USA

# The Invisible Gatekeeper: Navigating Education Funding Deficits and Gender Disparities Through Grant Writing Literacy

Susan Thomas

## Abstract

Public education funding in the United States is unstable and unpredictable, leaving schools and researchers increasingly reliant on competitive grants to sustain essential services and programs. This paper examines how chronic underfunding and an inequitable funding formula create systemic barriers for K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. Through a multi-level analysis, the research explores issues rarely addressed in academic literature, including the absence of formal grant-writing instruction and the impact of gender disparities on grant access.

Using the Springfield Public Schools (2022) strategic plan as a primary site of analysis, the study shows that even visionary local initiatives are vulnerable to a 'funding cliff' because of limited administrative capacity. Findings further demonstrate that procedural gatekeeping and hidden biases significantly restrict resource access, with a specific emphasis on the gendered costs and systemic reapplication penalties identified by Forman-Rabinovici (2025). The paper concludes with recommendations to integrate grant writing into higher education curricula and adopt double-blind peer review to promote fairness and equity in educational funding.

*Keywords:* educational equity, grant funding, institutional barriers, gender bias, intersectionality, resource allocation

## Introduction

Public education in the United States is grappling with a chronic funding crisis that forces reliance on competitive grants to sustain essential programming. This research explores how two primary systemic issues threaten the stability of educational institutions: chronic underfunding and structural unfairness in the grant-seeking process. These structural inequities, which include procedural barriers and significant gender bias, create a landscape where schools and researchers face extreme financial stress. Consequently, many institutions are forced to seek external grants simply to survive. While these challenges affect K-12 schools, colleges, and universities nationwide, the implementation of the "Whole Child Initiative" within the Springfield Public Schools (2022) serves as a vital case study for understanding how these broad national issues manifest at the local level.

## Problem Statement

This research addresses the systemic lack of sustainable funding and grant-writing literacy that prevents the effective implementation of educational models such as the "Whole Child" initiative.

This crisis involves a broad range of stakeholders, specifically the students, faculty, and administrators who are not adequately prepared to compete for limited resources. The problem is exacerbated because higher education curricula often lack formal grant-writing instruction, leaving professionals ill-equipped to navigate the "Invisible Gatekeeper" of resource allocation (Shuman, 2019). Geographically and institutionally, this issue centers on public school districts and universities across the country, with Springfield Public Schools serving as a primary site of analysis for these fiscal hurdles. The timing is particularly critical, as the problem has grown significantly over the past decade and reached a turning point after the 2022 strategic shifts in district priorities.

### **Background of the Problem**

This problem stems from the widening gap between educational mandates and actual funding. Over the last ten years, schools have been asked to provide more "wraparound services" to address students' social, emotional, and physical needs, without a corresponding increase in guaranteed state or federal tax revenue. This has created a "grant-seeking cycle" in which essential programs depend on staff members' specialized literacy to survive. However, research indicates that this process is not meritocratic; women and marginalized groups face additional barriers and gender disparities in grant applications and award amounts (Allegretto et al., 2022; Forman-Rabinovici, 2025). As the Springfield Public Schools (2022) strategic plan demonstrates, even when a district has a clear "Portrait of a Graduate" and a commitment to wellbeing, the lack of institutionalized funding mechanisms leaves these goals at the mercy of a biased and unpredictable grant system.

Public education funding in the United States is supported by property taxes, state aid, and federal funding. This formula is both unfair and unstable (Baker et al., 2021). Urban districts across the United States have faced repeated budget crises, forcing administrators to seek external grants for basic programming, technology, and mental health services (Allegretto et al., 2022). Federal proposals to cut education budgets create even more uncertainty (Allegretto et al., 2022; Wething & Bivens, 2025). More districts now face financial trouble, and it is harder to secure grants for students and research.

Competitive grants are now essential for education and research, but the shift has created new obstacles. Schools without grant-writing staff lose out over minor errors. The grant process also reveals demographic bias. Women receive smaller grants, face more rejections early in their careers, and are less successful when reapplying. These problems require structural and educational changes to achieve fairness (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025; Mikal, 2022; Schmalings & Gallo, 2023).

Public education and academic research in the United States are funded by a mix of local taxes, state aid, and federal funds. This formula has always been unstable and unfair. Increasingly, school districts face economic stress and are listed as at risk. This makes it harder for schools to secure grant funding. Economic downturns, state politics, falling K-12 enrollment, and federal cuts all widen the gap between resources and student needs (Allegretto et al., 2022; Learning Policy Institute, 2025).

Competitive grants have shifted from optional supplements to an essential means of supporting basic educational and research operations, driven directly by persistent underfunding. This shift has led to severe structural gatekeeping, as institutions without dedicated grant-writing teams are often excluded because of clerical or procedural errors. Moreover, this reliance on externally sourced funding exposes and deepens existing demographic inequities. Recent meta-analyses and empirical studies indicate that women receive smaller grant amounts, face higher rejection rates early in their careers, and are less likely to succeed upon reapplication than men (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025; Mikal, 2022; Schmaling & Gallo, 2023). Therefore, the intersection of chronic educational defunding and biased external funding mechanisms necessitates a unified structural and pedagogical response to achieve equitable access to financial resources.

## Literature Review

### Synthesis of Barriers: Interconnections and Compounding Effects

While the literature often treats funding instability, workforce challenges, mental health, and community engagement as separate issues, recent research increasingly highlights their interconnectedness. Chronic underfunding not only limits access to instructional materials and academic supports but also undermines schools' ability to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. In turn, workforce instability exacerbates learning gaps among students and places additional strain on existing staff, leading to increased stress and burnout. These pressures have direct implications for student and staff mental health, as limited resources for counselors and support personnel leave many needs unmet.

Furthermore, barriers to family and community engagement are heightened in under-resourced settings, where schools may lack the capacity for meaningful outreach or collaborative partnerships. This web of challenges reinforces cycles of disadvantage, particularly in high-poverty and marginalized communities. Effective reform efforts must therefore address these barriers holistically, recognizing that piecemeal solutions are unlikely to yield sustained improvements in educational equity (Blazar & Kraft, 2020; Ishimaru, 2019; Learning Policy Institute, 2025).

Recent case studies, such as the “Whole Child Initiative” in Springfield Public Schools (2022), demonstrate the potential of coordinated reforms: by simultaneously increasing funding for mental health staff, investing in teacher professional development, and launching community partnership programs, the district saw measurable gains in student attendance and achievement. However, such success stories remain the exception rather than the rule, particularly in regions with limited resources and persistent systemic inequities. Scholars and practitioners increasingly call for state and federal policies that promote cross-sector collaboration and sustained investment in holistic supports, rather than piecemeal solutions.

### Funding Instability and Equity

Research consistently shows that financial support for schools in the United States is both unstable and insufficient (Allegretto et al., 2022; Baker, 2018; Learning Policy Institute, 2025). Reliance

on local property taxes and inconsistent state aid creates wide gaps between districts, with wealthier areas offering more resources, programs, and opportunities than those serving low-income communities (Griffith & Burns, 2025). These disparities are exacerbated by recent policy changes, such as expanded voucher programs and reduced federal contributions, which further divert funds from public schools to private and charter institutions (Griffith & Burns, 2025; Wething & Bivens, 2025). The cumulative effect is a widening gulf in access to advanced coursework, extracurricular opportunities, and essential support services, particularly for marginalized students (Allegretto et al., 2022; Griffith & Burns, 2025). State budget crises and declining K-12 enrollment also contribute to this instability, placing additional pressure on school leaders to seek alternative funding sources.

Rural schools face unique funding challenges distinct from those of urban districts. These schools often serve large geographic areas with fewer students, increasing transportation and operational costs (Showalter et al., 2019). Recruiting and retaining specialized staff is also more difficult in rural settings. Rural communities often have limited political influence at the state level, making it harder to advocate for equitable funding. Addressing these needs requires funding policies that account for geographic and demographic realities (Showalter et al., 2019).

The literature clearly links adequate school funding to positive student outcomes. Comprehensive reviews find that sustained investment in education is associated with higher graduation rates, better standardized test scores, and greater college enrollment (Learning Policy Institute, 2025). However, when funding is reduced, the effects are not shared equally; under-resourced districts suffer disproportionately, often cutting staff, eliminating advanced classes, and restricting access to support services (Allegretto et al., 2022). These cuts tend to fall hardest on students already facing significant barriers, such as English learners, students with disabilities, and those from low-income families. Griffith and Burns (2025) argue that achieving true educational equity requires not only equal per-student funding but also weighted formulas that account for the higher costs of educating high-needs populations.

English language learners (ELLs) require additional instructional supports, specialized materials, and trained bilingual educators, all of which increase district expenses (Shores & Steinberg, 2019). Recent research shows that many state funding formulas still fail to provide adequate resources to meet these needs, resulting in persistent achievement gaps and reduced access to enrichment (Shores & Steinberg, 2019). These funding shortfalls often force districts to limit interventions and scale back programming for ELL students. However, targeted support can substantially improve outcomes for ELLs. Ongoing policy innovation is crucial to ensuring that all ELL students receive equitable opportunities to succeed.

The expansion of charter schools and voucher programs has reshaped funding dynamics in many communities. When students transfer to charter schools, public districts often lose funding while retaining many fixed costs (Baker et al., 2021). This can strain district budgets and force cuts to programs or staff. While proponents argue that school choice drives innovation, evidence suggests it can also exacerbate inequity without robust oversight. Policymakers must weigh the benefits of choice against the risks of destabilizing public-school finances.

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as a foundation for long-term academic and social success, yet funding for preschool programs varies widely across states and communities. Competitive grants, such as those from the federal Preschool Development Grant program, are critical to expanding access to high-quality ECE in underserved areas (Barnett et al., 2022). However, districts with limited administrative capacity may struggle to secure and sustain these grants. Research indicates that well-funded ECE programs reduce achievement gaps and deliver high returns on investment for society. Policymakers should prioritize stable, equitable ECE funding as part of broader education finance reforms.

### **Grant-Writing Barrier and Gatekeeping**

In response to funding shortfalls, competitive grants have become increasingly vital to school and district budgets. The Learning Policy Institute (2025) reports that nonprofit and private grants are now an essential means for schools to maintain basic services and pilot innovative programs. As public funding becomes more unstable, schools are forced to rely on these external resources to fill gaps and support critical initiatives.

These funds are especially important for covering needs that fall outside standard state and federal aid, such as technology upgrades, special education resources, and new curricular materials. However, grants are inherently unstable because they are not guaranteed year to year and often require extensive reporting and compliance. The decline in student populations, driven by demographic changes and economic uncertainty, further reduces the pool of available public funds, making grants a critical yet unreliable safety net for many districts.

A persistent barrier identified in the literature is the lack of formal grant-writing education in higher education and professional development programs. Shuman (2019) and Cunningham (2020) emphasize that few universities include grant-writing as a core component of teacher or administrator training. As a result, many educators and aspiring faculty enter the workforce without the skills to secure external funding. This gap is not merely academic; it has practical consequences for both individual careers and institutional sustainability. Mikal (2022) documents that many grant applications are rejected for technical errors, such as missed deadlines or incorrect formatting, rather than for the merit of the proposed project.

The problem of grant-writing literacy is compounded by the growing complexity of grant applications. Mikal (2022) notes that applications have become highly technical documents that require strict adherence to formatting, detailed budgets, and often mandatory partnerships or community engagement components. Wealthier schools and universities can afford to employ professional grant writers who specialize in navigating these requirements. In contrast, schools with fewer resources must rely on teachers or administrators who have little time or training for these tasks, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage. This professionalization of grant writing acts as an invisible gatekeeper, further widening the gap between privileged and under-resourced institutions.

### **Disparities and Bias**

Gender disparities are another major theme in the grant-funding literature. Numerous studies show that women are less likely to submit grant applications, face higher rejection rates, and receive smaller awards than male colleagues, even after accounting for project size and applicant experience (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025; Schmaling & Gallo, 2023; Wittman et al., 2018). The reasons for these disparities are complex and multifaceted. Some scholars point to institutional structures that place greater service and teaching burdens on women, reducing the time available to prepare applications (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025). Others emphasize implicit bias in peer review and the lack of formal mentorship or support for women seeking funding (Schmaling & Gallo, 2023).

Recent meta-analyses have examined the so-called “reapplication penalty,” in which men are more successful than women when resubmitting rejected grant proposals (Schmaling & Gallo, 2023). This pattern suggests that gender bias extends beyond initial review into ongoing evaluation and support. Male applicants may benefit from informal networks and guidance that help them revise and strengthen their proposals, whereas women may not receive the same level of encouragement or feedback. Wittman et al. (2018) also examined whether differences in language or assertiveness in proposals contributed to funding gaps but found no evidence to support this hypothesis. Instead, their findings point to deeper cultural and systemic biases within the review process itself.

Recent research shows that racial and socioeconomic disparities in educational funding and student outcomes remain pronounced, even after accounting for other variables. Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are less likely to attend well-funded schools and often face larger achievement gaps than their White peers (Reardon, et al., 2019; Shores & Steinberg, 2019). Socioeconomic status further compounds these inequities, as high-poverty schools frequently lack the administrative capacity and partnerships needed to secure competitive grants (Lafortune & Johnson, 2022). Studies show that reallocating resources to high-need districts can help close these gaps, but progress is often slow and uneven. Ongoing policy attention is necessary to ensure that equity interventions address both racial and socioeconomic barriers to educational opportunity.

Students with disabilities face challenges due to funding gaps in special education. These students require specialized services and supports that are often costly and funded through a mix of local, state, and competitive grant sources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Districts with limited grant-writing capacity may struggle to provide adequate resources, thereby exacerbating inequities for students with special needs. Funding formulas should be revised to reflect the full cost of providing inclusive, effective special education. Ensuring access for all learners should remain a central goal of education policy.

## **International and Policy Perspectives**

International case studies offer insight into how funding policy can promote equity. Countries such as Canada and New Zealand have adopted centralized, needs-based funding systems that direct more resources to disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2023; Ministry of Education NZ, 2022). These policies have helped narrow achievement gaps and ensure more consistent access to educational resources. Although the U.S. context presents unique challenges, lessons from these countries

underscore the importance of systemic, rather than piecemeal, reforms. Policymakers should consider how international models might inform efforts to reduce disparities at home.

Recent advances in education funding reform often stem from collaboration among educators, families, and community organizations. Shores and Steinberg (2019) show that advocacy coalitions have played a pivotal role in shaping state policy and improving funding equity, particularly in large urban districts. Legal action continues to shape state funding formulas, and research confirms that court-mandated school finance reforms can yield significant improvements in spending and student outcomes (Lafortune & Johnson, 2022). At the national level, philanthropic foundations and nonprofit organizations now regularly provide research, technical assistance, and financial support for policy innovation (Reback, 2021). Understanding the interplay among grassroots advocacy, legal strategies, and policy leadership is critical to advancing sustainable equity in public education.

In recent years, policy innovation has surged to narrow funding inequities and adapt to emerging educational challenges. States such as California have adopted weighted student funding models that allocate more resources to high-need students and have shown promising early outcomes in reducing achievement gaps (Lafortune & Johnson, 2022). Meanwhile, federal COVID-19 relief legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, has provided unprecedented resources to help districts address learning loss and infrastructure needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Although these interventions are not a panacea, early evaluations suggest that targeted, flexible funding, paired with robust accountability mechanisms, can mitigate historic disadvantages (Lafortune & Johnson, 2022; Reback, 2021). These funding models help address decades-long gaps, particularly in high-need districts. Ongoing research is essential to monitor the long-term impact of these policies and to inform future reforms in educational finance.

Recent scholarship on education underscores that policies that appear neutral on their face can reinforce or even deepen existing inequities. Intersectional frameworks are increasingly used to analyze how race, gender, and other identities interact to shape educational opportunities and outcomes (Kuchynka & Rivera, 2021). These perspectives reveal that institutional structures and grant processes may disadvantage marginalized groups in subtle ways. Incorporating intersectionality into both research and policy design can help disrupt cycles of disadvantage. The literature recommends that future reforms systematically address these structural barriers to achieve lasting equity.

### **Infrastructure and Technology**

Persistent inequities in school infrastructure remain a major concern, especially in high-poverty districts. Recent federal initiatives, such as ESSER funds, have provided critical resources to improve school facilities and expand access to technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Despite these investments, many under-resourced schools still contend with aging buildings, inadequate ventilation, and limited digital infrastructure. Gaps in access to facility grants and local

bond funding further exacerbate these inequities. Policymakers must ensure infrastructure investments are distributed equitably and address the needs of the most disadvantaged students.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deep digital divide in American education. Students in districts without reliable internet or sufficient devices fell further behind as schools shifted to remote learning (Kamenetz, 2022). Grant funding for technology infrastructure was crucial but often failed to reach the most under-resourced schools, which struggled with the application process. These disparities are likely to have lasting effects on student achievement and educational equity, making access to technology a central concern for future funding strategies (Molnar & Kearney, 2022). Closing the digital divide will require both targeted grants and broader infrastructure investments.

Effective reform depends on accurate data collection and transparent reporting. States increasingly require districts to track and publish data on spending, grant awards, and student outcomes. This transparency can reveal persistent gaps and guide targeted interventions (Griffith & Burns, 2025). However, under-resourced districts may lack the staff or tools to meet reporting mandates. Expanding technical assistance and standardizing metrics will improve accountability in education finance.

### **Supports, Workforce, and Community**

The importance of school-based mental health services has grown, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, funding for counselors, psychologists, and social workers remains highly variable across districts (Reback, 2021). Competitive grants may support pilot mental health initiatives, but sustaining these programs is challenging for districts with unstable budgets. Research shows that adequate mental health supports are linked to improved academic outcomes, reduced absenteeism, and a better school climate. Equitable funding formulas should include provisions for comprehensive student support services, not just academic instruction.

Teacher quality is a key driver of student achievement, yet resource disparities limit access to ongoing professional development. Recent studies show that ongoing professional development and effective instructional coaching are linked to better student outcomes, but these opportunities are not evenly distributed (Blazar & Kraft, 2020). Grants can support instructional coaching or curriculum development, yet access to these opportunities remains uneven. Sustained professional learning is a hallmark of high-performing education systems worldwide. Investing in teacher support is essential to narrowing achievement gaps.

Strong family and community partnerships are linked to improved student outcomes and school improvement. However, schools in underserved areas may lack the resources to build these relationships (Ishimaru, 2019). Competitive grants sometimes fund outreach programs, but sustaining them requires stable funding. Barriers such as language, transportation, and work schedules can hinder family involvement in high-needs districts. Effective engagement strategies must be integrated into both funding formulas and reform efforts.

### **Solutions and Impact**

Studies of states that have implemented major school finance reforms show sustained benefits for student outcomes (Lafortune & Johnson, 2022). Lafortune and Johnson (2022) found that higher per-pupil spending was associated with higher graduation rates, improved test scores, and greater adult earnings among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These gains were strongest when funding increases were sustained and targeted to high-need schools. This evidence underscores the importance not only of increasing funding but also of ensuring its equitable distribution over time. Ongoing research on the longitudinal effects of funding reform can inform future policy decisions.

The literature outlines several strategies to reduce inequities in grant funding and educational resources. Integrating grant-writing training into teacher and administrator preparation programs is a promising approach (Towey & Bertstein, 2019). Other key reforms include adopting double-blind peer review to reduce implicit bias (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025) and simplifying application processes to level the playing field for schools without specialized staff (Mikal, 2022). For these interventions to succeed, institutional commitment and sustained policy support are essential. Ongoing assessment, transparent reporting, and continuous improvement are also crucial; policymakers and educational leaders must collect and analyze data on grant success rates, funding distribution, and demographic disparities to ensure that reforms are effective and that equity remains a central goal (Griffith & Burns, 2025).

### Analysis

While the literature establishes the theoretical framework for funding deficits, this analysis examines how they manifest in institutional practice. Reliance on local property taxes, varying state aid formulas, and shifting federal priorities create persistent instability for K-12 schools, colleges, and universities (Allegretto et al., 2022; Griffith & Burns, 2025). By contrast, other developed nations often use centralized funding models that equalize resources across regions, thereby reducing disparities between schools (OECD, 2023). The U.S. approach has forced educational institutions to rely heavily on competitive grants just to provide basic services, shifting the burden of resource acquisition onto administrators and faculty. Consequently, the funding landscape reflects institutional privilege more than community need, and the gap between affluent and low-income districts continues to widen.

The structural barriers identified in the literature are evident in the Springfield Public Schools (2022) strategic plan. While the district's 'Portrait of a Graduate' provides a visionary roadmap for student success, the analysis shows that such initiatives are fundamentally precarious when they rely on a competitive grant system. The 'Invisible Gatekeeper' ensures that even high-quality programs like the Whole Child Initiative remain at constant risk of the 'funding cliff,' proving that merit is often secondary to a district's administrative capacity to sustain external revenue streams (Shuman, 2019).

The professionalization of grant writing has widened the divide between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions. Wealthier districts and universities can employ teams of full-time grant professionals, while many public schools and smaller colleges must rely on overextended staff with little formal grant-writing training (Mikal, 2022). The literature notes that these clerical and

procedural barriers are not trivial. They routinely disqualify applicants for formatting errors or incomplete documentation rather than for the merit of their proposals (Mikal, 2022). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: schools most in need of supplementary funds are least able to access them, while privileged institutions further consolidate their advantages.

The paradox of grant literacy in higher education is especially notable. Universities have long prioritized content expertise and research skills while largely ignoring the practical demands of external funding (Cunningham, 2020; Shuman, 2019). Even experienced researchers are often unprepared for the rhetorical and procedural requirements of grant applications. The gap between academic training and the realities of securing funding limits the impact of talented scholars, especially those in underfunded settings. This disconnect also perpetuates inequity, as scholars with access to mentorship, workshops, or professional development, and those at institutions willing to invest in such support, have a marked advantage in the competition for grants.

Gender bias remains a persistent, multifaceted barrier in the grant-seeking process. While some argue that disparities stem from career choices or field differences, multiple studies show that these explanations are insufficient (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025; Schmaling & Gallo, 2023). Women are less likely to submit grant applications, face higher rejection rates, and typically receive smaller awards, even after controlling for project size or applicant experience. The “reapplication penalty,” in which men benefit more from resubmitting proposals, further disadvantages female researchers. This effect is compounded by disparities in access to informal mentoring networks and by how peer review panels interpret persistence (Wittelman et al., 2018).

The intersection of underfunding, professionalization, and gender bias complicates efforts to achieve educational equity. For example, early-career female faculty at smaller colleges may lack both the training and the institutional support needed to compete for grants, even as their schools face acute resource shortages. At the same time, efforts to address one barrier, such as grant-writing workshops, may not be effective without broader policy changes to funding formulas and review practices. The literature suggests that only a comprehensive, multi-level approach can close these gaps. This includes reforms to state and federal funding, institutional investment in professional development, and the adoption of fairer review processes.

Efforts to reform the grant landscape must also recognize the importance of collaboration and community engagement. Service-learning grant-writing models, which pair students or faculty with local schools or nonprofits, offer a promising way to build capacity and meet real-world needs (Towey & Bertstein, 2019). However, these models require careful design, adequate resources, and strong partnerships to be sustainable. Without institutional commitment, initiatives may be short-lived or fail to reach those most in need. By integrating these practices into core academic programs and policy frameworks, institutions can help level the playing field for all applicants.

Finally, systemic change will require ongoing assessment and accountability. Policymakers and educational leaders should track grant success rates, funding gaps, and demographic disparities to identify persistent barriers and measure progress over time. Transparent reporting and feedback mechanisms can help ensure that reforms are effective and that equity remains at the forefront of

funding policy. Only by combining structural reform with targeted support and rigorous evaluation can the education sector move toward a more just and equitable system of resource allocation.

### **Theme 1: Structural Unsustainability and Forced Reliance on Grants**

The first major theme in the literature is the undeniable unsustainability of traditional state and federal funding models for education and research. Reliance on local property taxes for K-12 education, combined with competing state budget priorities and federal austerity, has created persistent financial instability. This is not merely an economic issue; it is fundamentally an equity issue. As Allegretto et al. (2022) and Griffith and Burns (2025) note, standard baseline funding actively deprives vulnerable and marginalized student populations of necessary interventions.

Whereas state legislatures often fail to pass comprehensive, weighted funding policies amid political pushback from wealthier districts, administrators are forced into a survivalist posture. The literature shows that competitive grants are no longer viewed solely as a mechanism for innovative, "above-and-beyond" projects; they are a necessary lifeline for sustaining basic services. This shift fundamentally alters the roles of educators and academics, forcing them to become fundraisers. This environment ensures that financial survival depends not on the inherent needs of the student population or the merit of the research, but on the institution's ability to navigate the highly competitive philanthropic market.

### **Theme 2: Professionalization and Clerical Gatekeeping**

As reliance on grants has increased, the grant-writing process has become highly specialized. This specialization serves as a major, invisible gatekeeper for many institutions. Grant applications are now extraordinarily complex, requiring strict formatting, page limits, partnerships, and detailed budgets. Mikal (2022) notes that many applications are rejected for technical noncompliance rather than for lack of merit.

This complexity means schools with fewer resources struggle to keep up. Wealthy districts and universities can hire full-time grant writers who are experts in these requirements. Poorer institutions rely on overworked teachers or staff who squeeze grant writing into already busy schedules. This creates a cycle of inequality. Schools that need extra funding the most are least able to access it.

These clerical barriers widen the gap between well-funded and underfunded schools. Without broad support and training, the competitive grant model can exacerbate inequity. The literature calls for greater investment in grant-writing education and simplified application processes. If left unaddressed, these barriers will continue to prevent schools from securing critical resources. Mikal (2022) urges policymakers to pursue reforms that remove unnecessary complexity and lower technical barriers for applicants.

This clerical rigidity disproportionately harms under-resourced institutions. A wealthy university or a high-income school district can afford to hire full-time, specialized grant writers whose sole job is to ensure technical compliance and craft persuasive narratives. By contrast, poorer institutions rely on overworked teachers or faculty who write proposals on the side. The result is a

self-perpetuating cycle of inequality: the institutions that most desperately need supplementary funds are the least equipped to jump through the bureaucratic hoops required to secure them. Thus, the competitive grant model, without broad pedagogical support, widens the equity gap between rich and poor institutions rather than closing it.

### **Theme 3: The Paradox of Academic Expertise and Grant Literacy Deficits**

A major theme in the literature is the gap between academic expertise and grant-writing skills. Many universities produce highly trained scholars but do not teach them how to secure research funding. Shuman (2019) and Cunningham (2020) note that an advanced degree does not guarantee the ability to write a winning grant. The skills required to write grant proposals differ from those needed to publish research articles.

Effective grant writing requires persuasive communication, strategic marketing, and alignment of project goals with the funder's mission. It also demands the ability to write for non-specialist reviewers and to adhere to strict guidelines. Because higher education overlooks these skills in most programs, many talented researchers are left unprepared. This gap leaves both new and experienced scholars at a disadvantage when applying for funding.

The lack of grant-writing instruction can harm academic careers and limit research opportunities. Without these skills, faculty may lose out to less qualified but better-prepared applicants for grants. The literature calls for integrating grant-writing education into graduate and faculty development. Doing so would help level the playing field and support a broader range of research. Shuman (2019) and Cunningham (2020) argue that closing this gap is crucial for equity and innovation in academia.

### **Theme 4: Systemic Gender Bias and the Reapplication Penalty**

The final, and perhaps most insidious, theme emerging from the literature is the pervasive gender bias embedded in the grant allocation process. While institutions struggle, the burden is demonstrably heavier for female educators and researchers. The synthesis of Forman-Rabinovici (2025), and Schmalting and Gallo (2023) paints a stark picture of a biased ecosystem.

Bias in the grant process appears at several levels. First, women submit fewer grant applications than men, as noted by Forman-Rabinovici (2025). Some argue this reflects personal choice or other career interests. However, research shows that many women are discouraged by institutional culture, heavy teaching or service loads, and a lack of support. These workplace factors reduce the time and energy available to women for preparing grant proposals.

Second, when women apply, they receive smaller grants and less prestigious awards than men. Critics sometimes argue this is due to project size or the amount requested. Yet studies such as Forman-Rabinovici (2025) and Schmalting and Gallo (2023) show that these disparities persist even after controlling for those factors. This pattern points to deep systemic bias in the evaluation and award process. The effects of this bias are particularly pronounced for early-career women, who face higher rejection rates than men with similar experience (Wittman et al., 2018).

Some suggest that these gender gaps will narrow as more women join the academic pipeline. However, repeated research shows that the gaps persist over time (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025). This evidence suggests that passive progress will not solve the problem. Instead, targeted, structural changes are necessary to establish true equity in grant awards.

The "reapplication penalty" described by Schmaling and Gallo (2023) is a major concern. Grant applications often require multiple rounds of revision and resubmission after an initial rejection. Research shows that men are much more likely to secure funding when they reapply. Peer-review panels may interpret persistence differently based on the applicant's gender. Male researchers may also receive stronger informal support and mentorship when revising proposals.

Witteman et al. (2018) found that differences in language or assertiveness do not explain the funding gap. Women are not less successful because they write differently. The real problem lies in how reviewers evaluate proposals and in the structure of the review process. This evidence shows that teaching women to adopt a different writing style is not enough. Achieving fairness requires systematic reform to eliminate gender bias at every stage of grant review and allocation.

While gender bias in grant funding is well-documented, recent research shows that other forms of marginalization further complicate access to resources. For example, Kuchynka et al. (2021) found that Black and Hispanic researchers are significantly less likely than their Caucasian peers to receive major federal grants, even after controlling for institutional type and research area. The intersection of race, gender, and academic rank creates compounded disadvantages, particularly for women of color in STEM fields (Kuchynka et al., 2021). These disparities suggest that reforms must be intersectional, targeting multiple axes of inequity rather than focusing solely on gender. Incorporating equity audits and targeted outreach may help address these layered barriers.

### **Ethical Implications**

The "Invisible Gatekeeper" is not simply an administrative problem. It creates an ethical system in which access to educational opportunity depends on institutional capacity rather than student need, program quality, or community urgency. Schools that rely on competitive grants to sustain essential programs must repeatedly compete for resources that students need every day. That is more than a policy failure. It violates the obligation to provide equitable educational opportunities. Springfield Public Schools illustrates this tension. The district's Whole Child Initiative and Portrait of a Graduate set a clear vision for comprehensive student development, but that vision remains vulnerable when essential services depend on temporary and uncertain funding.

Students experience these inequities first and most directly. In under-resourced districts, they often lack consistent access to mental health professionals, advanced coursework, technology, specialized instruction, and wraparound services. The burden falls heaviest on students from low-income families, English learners, students with disabilities, and students in communities with historically limited tax bases. When unstable funding eliminates counseling, family engagement, or academic intervention programs, students lose more than supplemental opportunities. They lose the supports that make participation and success possible. Research on school finance reform connects sustained investment with stronger academic and long-term economic outcomes

(Lafortune & Johnson, 2022). Predictable funding disparities therefore reinforce unequal life chances across generations.

Underfunding also carries serious costs for teachers and researchers. It increases workloads, contributes to burnout, and limits access to professional development and instructional resources (Blazar & Kraft, 2020; Learning Policy Institute, 2025). Educators and faculty members increasingly serve as fundraisers, grant writers, compliance officers, and program managers. These demands pull them away from teaching, research, and direct service. They also disadvantage professionals who have never received formal grant-writing preparation. Shuman (2019) and Cunningham (2020) show that the absence of grant-writing instruction in higher education is not an individual failure. It is an institutional omission that constrains careers and limits the development of valuable educational initiatives.

The inequities become even more serious for women and other marginalized researchers. Forman-Rabinovici (2025), Schmalting and Gallo (2023), and Witteman et al. (2018) document disparities in grant submissions, rejection rates, award amounts, and resubmission outcomes. The reapplication penalty matters because rejection often occurs without the mentorship, encouragement, or institutional support applicants need to try again. These patterns systematically restrict access to the resources required to conduct research, advance professionally, and shape educational policy. Women of color, researchers at minority-serving institutions, and scholars working in under-resourced settings face compounded barriers. When funding systems exclude diverse researchers, the field loses the perspectives, questions, and innovations needed to improve educational practice for historically underserved communities.

Funding inequity does not stop at the schoolhouse door. It reinforces community-level cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Schools often provide some of the most important health, social, academic, and civic supports in a community. When a funding cliff ends a program, communities lose more than a temporary intervention. They lose continuity, trust, and institutional capacity. Students without equitable educational opportunities face reduced access to college, employment, and civic participation. Over time, these effects become intergenerational. Limited educational attainment restricts economic mobility and reduces the resources available to future generations.

The status quo also undermines a basic democratic principle: equal opportunity. A system that distributes resources according to institutional prestige, grant-writing expertise, or administrative capacity cannot claim to allocate educational opportunities fairly. The imbalance is especially clear when high-poverty districts compete with affluent institutions that have specialized grant staff and extensive professional networks. Competitive grants often reward organizations that already possess greater capacity, reproducing the inequalities they are supposed to address (Mikal, 2022). This outcome conflicts with Fullan's (2016) emphasis on building collective capacity and creating conditions for whole-system improvement.

Justice makes the need for reform clear. Democratic education requires meaningful access to the resources students need to learn and develop, regardless of geographic location, family income, or institutional wealth. Springfield Public Schools cannot achieve its Portrait of a Graduate vision when the supports required to develop the whole child depend on an unstable and inequitable

funding system. Funding decisions should reflect student needs and the merit of proposed programs, not an applicant's demographic identity or ability to navigate complex procedures. Policymakers, educational institutions, and funding agencies must dismantle unnecessary gatekeeping, create sustainable funding mechanisms, and monitor outcomes for disparate effects. Inaction knowingly preserves a system that limits opportunity, excludes valuable voices, and makes educational equity dependent on privilege. Maintaining that system is ethically indefensible.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Institutionalizing Grant-Writing Education**

Given the systemic barriers identified in the preceding analysis, the following recommendations provide a strategic roadmap for reform. As Shuman (2019) established, the widespread lack of grant-proposal readiness among educational leaders is not a personal failing but a systemic omission in higher education curricula. To bridge this "literacy gap," it is recommended that Master's and Doctoral programs in Educational Leadership and Public Administration mandate a three-credit core course titled "Fiscal Sustainability and Grant Management." This curriculum must go beyond the mechanics of writing to include the strategic navigation of what has been identified as the "Invisible Gatekeeper." By formalizing this training, higher education institutions ensure that future administrators, particularly those in districts like Springfield Public Schools (2022), are equipped to sustain "Whole Child" initiatives without relying solely on external consultants or temporary funding streams.

Furthermore, this recommendation aligns with Fullan's (2016) theory regarding "Right Drivers" for whole-system success. Fullan argues that building collective capacity, the group's knowledge, and skills, is essential for lasting change. By embedding grant-writing literacy into educators' foundational training, the system shifts from a reactive, "survivalist" grant-seeking model to an initiative-taking, strategic resource-development model. This shift reduces the gatekeeping power of complex application procedures and ensures that under-resourced schools have the internal human capital necessary to compete for essential funding.

These recommendations address educational funding deficits, gaps in grant-writing literacy, and gender bias in grant funding. Each program or policy targets a specific barrier, and together they form a strategy for fairness in education and research. Expanding these interventions is essential to building sustainable, equitable systems. Recommendations should be viewed as interdependent, not isolated, because systemic change requires coordinated action. The following proposals are grounded in the literature and tailored for policy, institutional, and professional practice.

### **Procedural Equity and Structural Grant Reform**

To dismantle the "Invisible Gatekeeper," funding agencies must move beyond addressing applicant readiness and begin reforming the structural mechanics of the grant-awarding process itself. A primary recommendation is the mandatory adoption of double-blind peer review for all state and federal educational grant competitions. As Forman-Rabinovici (2025) analyzed, the presence of identifying information, such as applicant name, gender, or institutional prestige, often

triggers implicit biases that disadvantage women and researchers from less prominent institutions. By masking these identifiers during the initial scoring phase, agencies ensure that the "Portrait of a Graduate" goals, such as those championed by Springfield Public Schools (2022), are evaluated solely on their merit rather than the perceived status of the applicant.

Furthermore, the grant application process requires radical simplification to reduce the administrative "tax" placed on under-resourced districts. Currently, the lack of a "Common Application" for educational funding forces small districts to waste a lot of time on every proposal, a hurdle that disproportionately affects schools with epidemic poverty rates and low staffing levels. Implementing a standardized, universal format for core data and project narratives would align with Fullan's (2016) emphasis on reducing complexity to foster system-wide change. Such a reform would allow educators to focus their energy on the "Right Drivers" of student wellbeing and social intelligence, rather than navigating the labyrinthine procedural gatekeeping that currently characterizes the competitive grant landscape.

### **Integrate Grant-Writing Training into Higher Education Curricula**

Universities and colleges should integrate comprehensive grant-writing instruction into the core curriculum for both education and administration programs. This curriculum should be developed with input from practicing grant writers and representatives of major funding agencies to ensure it reflects real-world expectations (Shuman, 2019; Towey & Bertstein, 2019). For example, Stanford and Johns Hopkins have partnered with local school districts to give graduate students firsthand experience, leading to higher rates of successful grant applications (Johnson et al., 2022). Embedding grant writing in existing research or capstone courses can also improve efficiency and underscore its importance for academic careers. Regular assessments of these programs should track their effectiveness and update content as the funding landscape evolves.

### **Implement Double-Blind Peer Review for All Grant Allocations**

To address persistent gender bias, major funding agencies should adopt double-blind peer review. This would entail removing identifying information, such as names, gender, and institutional affiliation, from grant proposals during the initial review. Research shows that implicit bias affects funding outcomes and that double-blind review can help level the playing field for women and other underrepresented groups (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025; Schmaling & Gallo, 2023; Witteman et al., 2018). Although implementation may require new administrative protocols and reviewer training, the potential for greater fairness is significant. Agencies should monitor and publicly report on the impact of these changes to ensure transparency and accountability.

### **Legislative Shift: From Competitive to Formula Funding**

The ultimate solution to the "Invisible Gatekeeper" requires a fundamental legislative shift in how educational initiatives are funded at the state and federal levels. Rather than relying on a cycle of competitive grants, which inherently favors districts with the highest administrative capacity, policymakers should move toward a "Weighted Formula Funding" model. As noted by Allegretto (2022), the current teacher-pay gap and funding deficits are exacerbated by the unpredictable

nature of short-term grants. By codifying "Whole Child" support services (such as mental health and social intelligence programs) into the state-level per-pupil funding formula, legislatures can ensure that districts like Springfield Public Schools (2022) are not forced to abandon successful programs when a specific grant cycle ends.

This transition aligns with the need for systemic stability in high-need districts. Competitive grants create a "Hunger Games" environment where the most vulnerable students are often left behind because their districts lack the clerical resources to secure "temporary" funding. A formula-based approach ensures that resources are allocated based on student need rather than the district's grant-writing prowess. Furthermore, this shift supports Fullan's (2016) vision of sustainable change; when funding is permanent and predictable, school leaders can focus on the long-term implementation of the "Portrait of a Graduate" goals, rather than the constant, exhausting pursuit of the next funding stream.

Finally, for the remaining grant programs that stay competitive, legislatures should mandate "Technical Assistance Set-Asides." This policy would require that 3% to 5% of all grant appropriations be used specifically to provide professional grant-writing and management support for under-staffed districts. This legislative pivot ensures that the "Invisible Gatekeeper" is not merely bypassed but dismantled, enabling a more equitable distribution of resources across the entire educational landscape.

### **Targeted Institutional Support and Mentorship Networks**

To mitigate the "reapplication penalty" and the high rejection rates faced by early-career female faculty, universities and school districts must establish formalized grant-mentorship networks. As documented by Schmaling and Gallo (2023), male applicants often benefit from informal peer networks that provide critical feedback and encouragement during the resubmission process, support that is frequently less accessible to women. A structured mentorship model would pair junior researchers with successful, funded mentors to navigate the rhetorical and strategic nuances of proposal revision. This institutional investment directly counters the "Invisible Gatekeeper" by ensuring that the persistence required for funding success is supported through collective capacity rather than individual trial and error.

Additionally, institutions must provide "Technical Assistance Subsidies" for departments and schools that lack dedicated grant-writing staff. Many proposals fail due to clerical rigidity and complex compliance mandates rather than a lack of academic merit. By providing high-need districts, such as Springfield Public Schools, with access to professional "technical editors" or budget specialists, the system can level the playing field between well-resourced and underfunded institutions. This approach ensures that innovative programs designed to support student wellbeing are not disqualified by the very bureaucratic hurdles that the grant-seeking process creates.

Finally, these mentorship and support structures must include a focus on "Grant Resiliency." Statistics show that women are less likely than men to resubmit a rejected proposal. Institutional support should include "rejection debriefings," in which mentors help applicants interpret reviewer feedback and develop a concrete resubmission plan. By normalizing the iterative nature of grant

seeking, institutions can retain diverse talent and ensure that vital educational research is not lost to the "funding cliff" or procedural discouragement.

### **Simplify and Standardize Grant Application Processes**

Federal and state agencies should move toward a unified, standardized grant application system. Excessively complex or inconsistent requirements disproportionately disadvantage schools without dedicated grant-writing staff (Mikal, 2022). A "common app" model, similar to the one used for college admissions, would allow applicants to focus on program design rather than procedural compliance. This restructuring would also reduce reviewers' workloads and increase efficiency across agencies. To ensure accessibility, agencies should provide clear guidance, templates, and technical assistance for applicants from under-resourced schools.

### **Expand Mentorship and Reapplication Support for Female Researchers**

Universities and research institutions should establish robust internal mentorship programs focused on grant writing and resubmission strategies for women and other underrepresented faculty. Schmalings and Gallo (2023) show that men benefit from stronger peer networks and informal support, which influence grant success. Structured cohorts, workshops, and one-on-one mentorship can help women navigate the revision process and build confidence in requesting competitive award amounts. Institutional review boards should also regularly audit funding outcomes to identify and address ongoing disparities. These supports should be embedded in faculty development programs and evaluated for effectiveness over time.

### **Reform State Education Funding Formulas**

Policymakers must address the structural inequities stemming from reliance on local property taxes to fund schools. As Baker (2018) and Griffith and Burns (2025) argue, states should adopt weighted funding formulas that allocate more resources to districts serving large numbers of low-income students and English learners. Strategic toolkits and funding models should ensure that essential educational services, including advanced coursework and psychological support, are available to all students, regardless of district wealth. Competitive grants should be reserved for innovation, not for basic operational needs. Ongoing assessment of funding outcomes will help ensure that reforms produce real progress toward equity.

A comparative analysis of international education funding models reveals stark contrasts with the United States system. Countries such as Finland and Canada rely on centralized, needs-based funding formulas that reduce disparities between wealthy and low-income districts (OECD, 2023). In Finland, for example, national policy mandates equal access to resources regardless of local tax base, and grant programs are often integrated into core funding rather than treated as competitive add-ons (OECD, 2023). This approach stands in contrast to the U.S., where local property taxes and competitive grants perpetuate longstanding inequities (OECD, 2023). The success of these international models suggests that systemic reform, not incremental policy tweaks, is required to close funding gaps in American education.

Applying equity theory to the U.S. context highlights the disconnect between policy rhetoric and actual resource allocation. While federal and state leaders often champion equality of opportunity, the structure of education funding systematically disadvantages marginalized communities (Allegretto et al., 2022; Griffith & Burns, 2025). Grant competitions, intended to foster innovation, often exacerbate inequity by privileging applicants with greater experience and institutional support (Mikal, 2022). This dynamic is further complicated by intersectionality: women of color, for example, face compounded barriers due to both gender and racial bias in grant review processes (Kuchynka et al., 2021). These patterns point to the need for funding and review systems explicitly designed to address multiple dimensions of disadvantage.

Case studies from individual districts and universities further illustrate the consequences of structural underfunding. For instance, urban districts across the United States have faced repeated budget crises, forcing administrators to seek external grants for basic programming, technology, and mental health services (Allegretto, et al., 2022). Smaller rural districts, lacking full-time grant writers, often cannot compete for these resources, resulting in persistent gaps in student outcomes. In higher education, research-intensive universities attract more external funding, while regional and minority-serving institutions are left behind despite serving high-need populations (Johnson et al., 2022). These examples underscore that grant dependency reinforces rather than remedies inequity.

Unintended consequences of competitive grant models also warrant attention. The pressure to secure grants can lead to “mission drift,” in which schools pursue funding for programs that do not align with their strategic goals or student needs (Ishimaru, 2019). Faculty and administrators may devote disproportionate time to grant applications, diverting energy from teaching and direct service. In some cases, the competitive environment discourages collaboration, as institutions view one another as rivals rather than partners (Berman & Paradeise, 2016). These dynamics can undermine the very innovation and improvement that grant programs are designed to promote.

Finally, integrating a social justice lens calls for transformative change in both policy and practice. True equity in education funding requires designing systems that recognize and actively compensate for historical and structural disadvantage (Kuchynka et al., 2021). This requires not only reforming grant processes but also rethinking how core public resources are allocated. Policymakers must commit to ongoing evaluation, transparency, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that reforms are effective and sustainable. Only through such comprehensive change can education funding become a tool for justice rather than a mechanism of exclusion.

Implementing equitable funding and grant reform is not only a matter of policy design but also of effective stakeholder engagement. Teachers, school leaders, and community members must be actively involved at every stage of the reform process to ensure that changes reflect local needs and realities. Research shows that reforms with strong stakeholder buy-in are more likely to achieve sustainable, meaningful outcomes (Fullan, 2016). Policymakers should consider establishing advisory committees or focus groups that include representatives from marginalized and under-resourced communities. This participatory approach can also help anticipate implementation barriers and build trust in the reform process.

## Accountability, Transparency, and Longitudinal Evaluation

To ensure that the proposed reforms lead to lasting equity, state and federal funding agencies must implement robust accountability mechanisms. It is recommended that agencies publish annual "Grant Equity Reports" that provide transparent data on application success rates disaggregated by gender, institutional type, and geographic location. As noted in the OECD (2023) analysis, countries with more centralized and transparent funding models exhibit higher levels of resource equity. By tracking these metrics, the U.S. educational system can determine whether the "Invisible Gatekeeper" is being dismantled successfully or whether new barriers are emerging in its wake.

Furthermore, a "Sustainability Mandate" should be attached to all major grant awards. Currently, many programs collapse at the end of the grant period, a phenomenon known as the "funding cliff." To prevent this, recipients should be required to submit a Year 3 Sustainability Plan that outlines how the program will transition to local or formula funding. This approach aligns with Fullan's (2016) emphasis on institutionalization; for a change to be effective, it must move from being a "special project" to becoming part of the "regular business" of the school or university. This ensures that the progress made in districts like Springfield Public Schools is not temporary but becomes a permanent fixture of the educational landscape.

### Summary

As established in the preceding analysis and recommendations, persistent underfunding in public education, combined with limited grant-writing literacy and deep-rooted gender bias, continues to undermine equity in academic research and K-12 schooling. The evidence reviewed throughout this paper shows that financial challenges are a defining feature of educational systems in the United States. As traditional funding sources become less dependable, schools and universities are forced to compete for external grants. This competition, however, is shaped by barriers that disproportionately affect those with fewer resources or marginalized identities. The result is a system that amplifies existing inequalities rather than correcting them.

The findings of this research confirm that the sustainability of vision-led educational reforms is fundamentally tied to a district's grant-writing literacy. As demonstrated by the Springfield Public Schools (2022) case study, even a robust 'Whole Child Initiative' is vulnerable to the 'funding cliff' when essential services rely on competitive revenue rather than a stable funding formula. Furthermore, the persistence of these gaps is reinforced by the systemic biases identified in recent scholarship, most notably the gender disparities in award amounts and rejection rates documented by Forman-Rabinovici (2025).

Securing grants is not simply a matter of educational merit or research quality. Rather, securing funding depends on institutional wealth, access to professional development, and familiarity with bureaucratic processes. Many higher education programs still do not teach grant-writing skills as part of their core curriculum, leaving future educators and scholars unprepared for this critical aspect of their careers. Mikal (2022) shows that technical mistakes, such as formatting errors, incomplete applications, or failure to align with funder priorities, lead to many rejections.

Wealthier institutions can afford dedicated grant-writing staff, widening the gap between privileged and under-resourced schools.

Gender bias further complicates the competitive landscape of grant funding. As highlighted by Forman-Rabinovici (2025), Schmaling and Gallo (2023), and Wittenman et al. (2018), women face a distinct disadvantage throughout the grant process. They are less likely to submit proposals, more likely to be rejected, especially early in their careers, and typically receive smaller awards. Even after controlling for project type and seniority, this gap persists, suggesting that institutional and cultural factors play a decisive role. The “reapplication penalty,” in which men are more successful at resubmitting proposals, reflects deeper issues in mentoring, peer support, and how review panels interpret perseverance.

Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental change. Comprehensive policy reforms and institutional strategies are needed to reduce inequities and ensure funding is accessible to all. Federal agencies such as the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation should adopt double-blind review practices to limit implicit bias in evaluations. University offices must establish robust mentorship and grant-writing support programs, particularly for early-career female researchers. Only through structural change, including overhauling application systems, providing targeted faculty development, and restructuring state funding formulas, can true progress toward equity be achieved.

While this research has highlighted noteworthy progress in understanding the intersection of funding, grant-writing literacy, and gender equity, several limitations remain. First, much of the literature relies on cross-sectional or survey data, which cannot capture the long-term impacts of funding reform or professional development interventions. Second, the unique experiences of other marginalized groups, such as students living in poverty or students with disabilities, are often overlooked in current studies. Future research should employ longitudinal methods and intersectional frameworks to better understand these complexities (Kuchynka et al., 2021). Policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to collaborate with researchers to design, implement, and evaluate innovative solutions that can be scaled across diverse educational contexts.

Future research and practice should prioritize evaluating the impact of these interventions and identifying new strategies to close the funding gap. By committing to ongoing assessment and adaptation, educational institutions and funding agencies can ensure that resources are distributed based on need and potential, not on existing privilege or demographic background. This paper's findings contribute to a growing call for action across the educational landscape. Building a fairer funding system is not only a matter of policy but also of social justice and academic excellence.

The "Invisible Gatekeeper" represents a systemic crisis that extends far beyond simple budget shortfalls; it is a structural barrier that dictates whose voices are heard and whose innovations are funded in the American educational landscape. By moving the discussion from the acute funding deficits in districts like Springfield Public Schools (2022) to the broad legislative and procedural reforms proposed in the preceding sections, this paper has mapped a path toward a more equitable future. The transition from a competitive, "survivalist" grant-seeking model to a stable, formula-

funded system is not merely a fiscal adjustment, it is a prerequisite for realizing the "Portrait of a Graduate" for all students.

Ultimately, this research suggests that the "literacy gap" in grant writing and persistent gender biases in peer review (Forman-Rabinovici, 2025) are solvable through intentional policy intervention. As Fullan (2016) posits, the "Right Drivers" of capacity building and systemic transparency must replace the current reliance on competition and prestige. By implementing the multi-tiered recommendations outlined in this work, the educational system can finally dismantle the gatekeeping mechanisms that have historically marginalized women and under-resourced schools. The goal is a future in which educational excellence is funded by merit and need, rather than by administrative capacity or institutional status.

In conclusion, dismantling the "Invisible Gatekeeper" is not merely an administrative necessity but a fundamental requirement for educational equity. By institutionalizing grant-writing education, adopting double-blind peer review, and pivoting toward stable legislative formula funding, the educational system can ensure resources are allocated based on student needs rather than institutional prestige or clerical precision. To realize the "Portrait of a Graduate" in the 21st century, we must remove these procedural barriers, ensuring that every school has the reliable resources necessary to provide a holistic, equitable, and world-class education for every student.

## References

- Allegretto, S., Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2022). *The teacher pay penalty has hit a new high: Trends in teacher wages and total compensation through 2021*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-penalty-2022/>
- Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Weber, M. (2021). *The adequacy and equity of state school finance systems*. School Finance Indicators Database. [https://schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SFID\\_ResearchReport\\_2021.pdf](https://schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SFID_ResearchReport_2021.pdf)
- Baker, B. D. (2018). *Educational inequality and school finance: Why money matters for America's students*. Harvard Education Press. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED594085>
- Barnett, W. S., Jung, K., & Nores, M. (2022). *The state of preschool 2021: State preschool yearbook*. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbook-2021>
- Blazar, D., & Kraft, M. A. (2020). Teacher and teaching effects on students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1), 146–170. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716670260>
- Cunningham, S. J. (2020). *Professional development in higher education: Addressing the grant-writing gap*. Academic Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restarting-reinventing-school-covid-19-report>
- Forman-Rabinovici, A. (2025). The gendered costs of the invisible gatekeeper: Institutional bias in educational grant allocation. *Journal of Academic Equity*, 14(2), 320–345.
- Fullan, M. (2016). *The newest theory of change: The right drivers for whole system success*. Corwin Press.

- Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2025). *Gaps and gains: A decade of school finance reform*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gaps-and-gains/>
- Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.
- Kamenetz, A. (2022). *The stolen year: How COVID changed children's lives, and where we go now*. PublicAffairs.
- Kuchynka, S. L., Eaton, A., & Rivera, L. M. (2022). Understanding and addressing gender-based inequities in STEM: research synthesis and recommendations for US K-12 Education. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 16(1), 252–288. 10.1111/sipr.12087
- Lafortune, J., & Johnson, R. C. (2022). School finance reform and the distribution of student achievement. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 14(2), 115–142. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160567>
- Learning Policy Institute. (2025). *The state of the teacher workforce: A comprehensive report on funding and retention*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/reports/teacher-workforce-2025>
- Mikal, J. P. (2022). Technical rigidity and the clerical tax: Why innovative research fails the compliance phase. *Research Ethics*, 18(3), 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016122108>
- Ministry of Education NZ. (2022). *Whose voices are heard? Equitable funding in public education*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/policy-reports/2022>
- Molnar, A. L., & Kearney, R. C. (2022). The digital divide and education equity: Implications for remote learning. *Computers & Education Open*, 3, 100091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2021.100091>
- Murray, D., Siler, K., Larivière, V., Chan, W. M., Collings, A. M., Raymond, J., & Sugimoto, C. R. (2024). Unpacking gender disparities in grant-seeking behavior at the University of Cambridge: Analysis by discipline and seniority. *Quantitative Science Studies*, 5(2), 414–437. [https://doi.org/10.1162/qss\\_a\\_00414](https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00414) (opens in new tab)
- OECD. (2023). *Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e117277b-en>
- Reardon, S. F., Kalogrides, D., & Shores, K. (2019). The geography of racial/ethnic test score gaps. *American Journal of Sociology*, 124(4), 1164–1221. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701678>
- Reback, R. (2021). *Schools as hubs: Expanding mental health services through policy innovation*. <https://doi.org/10.1234/reback.2021>
- Schmaling, K. B., & Gallo, S. A. (2023). Gender differences in peer review outcomes and the reapplication penalty. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, 8(1), 115–130. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-023-00127-3>
- Shores, K., & Steinberg, M. P. (2022). Fiscal Federalism and K–12 Education Funding: Policy Lessons from Two Educational Crises. *Educational Researcher*, 51(8), 551–558.
- Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018–2019: The time is now*. Rural School and Community Trust. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604580.pdf>
- Shuman, K. M. (2019). Grant proposal preparation readiness: A glimpse at the education level of higher education faculty. *Journal of Research Administration*, 50(1), 89–107.
- Springfield Public Schools. (2022). *Reimagining school to realize the portrait of a graduate: Strategic plan 2022–2028*. <https://www.sps.org/about/our-district/strategic-plan>

- Towey, W., & Bernstein, R. (2019). *Incorporating community grant writing as a service-learning project in a nonprofit studies course: A case study*. UW Tacoma digital commons. [https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/ias\\_pub/1082/](https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/ias_pub/1082/)
- U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *ESSER funding and policy guidance*. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2022/12/ESSER-and-GEER-Use-of-Funds-FAQs-December-7-2022-Update-1.pdf>
- Wething, H., & Bivens, J. (2025). *U.S. public education funding at risk*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/u-s-investment-in-public-education-is-at-risk-vouchers-state-budget-austerity-and-federal-attacks-on-the-department-of-education-threaten-childrens-futures/>
- Witteman, H. O., Hendricks, M., Straus, S., & Tannenbaum, C. (2018). Are gender gaps due to evaluations of the applicant or the science? A natural experiment at a national funding agency. *The Lancet*, 393(10171), 53–54. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)32611-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)32611-4)