



WestEd 

December 11, 2025

Proposals 101 Series for School and District Leaders

Session 4: Telling Your Compelling Story:
Blending Data and Narrative



Welcome!

This session is hosted by the California Stronger Connections Technical Assistance Center.

We provide support to local educational agencies to foster safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments.



Meet Today's WestEd Team



Jenny Betz



Lora Markel



**Shannon
McCullough**

Reflection

Recall

- Where were you?
- Who else was there?
- What shifted for you because of that moment?

Share

- What's the opening moment?
- Where is the tension or challenge?
- What is the turning point or meaning?

In the chat, please answer:

What feeling best describes the story you just remembered?

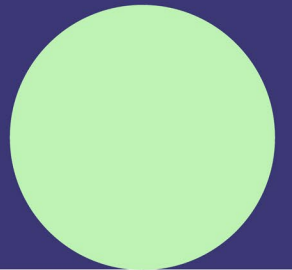
Proposals 101 for School and District Leaders: Turning Strong Ideas Into Funded Projects

- A 5-part interactive learning series on proposal writing, offering flexible participation and follow-up discussion opportunities.
 - **Session 1: Understanding the Landscape: Insights from CDE Proposal Reviewers**
(November 13, 2025)
 - **Session 2: Getting Started and Setting Yourself Up for Success**
(November 20, 2025)
 - **Session 3: Designing With Impact: Logic Models and Data Tools**
(December 4, 2025: 1:00-2:00 p.m. PT)
 - • **Session 4: Telling Your Compelling Story: Blending Data and Narrative**
(December 11, 2025: 1:00-2:00 p.m. PT) ←
 - **Session 5: Pulling It All Together: Case Studies, Feedback, and Final Review**
(January 15, 2026: 1:00-2:00 p.m. PT)

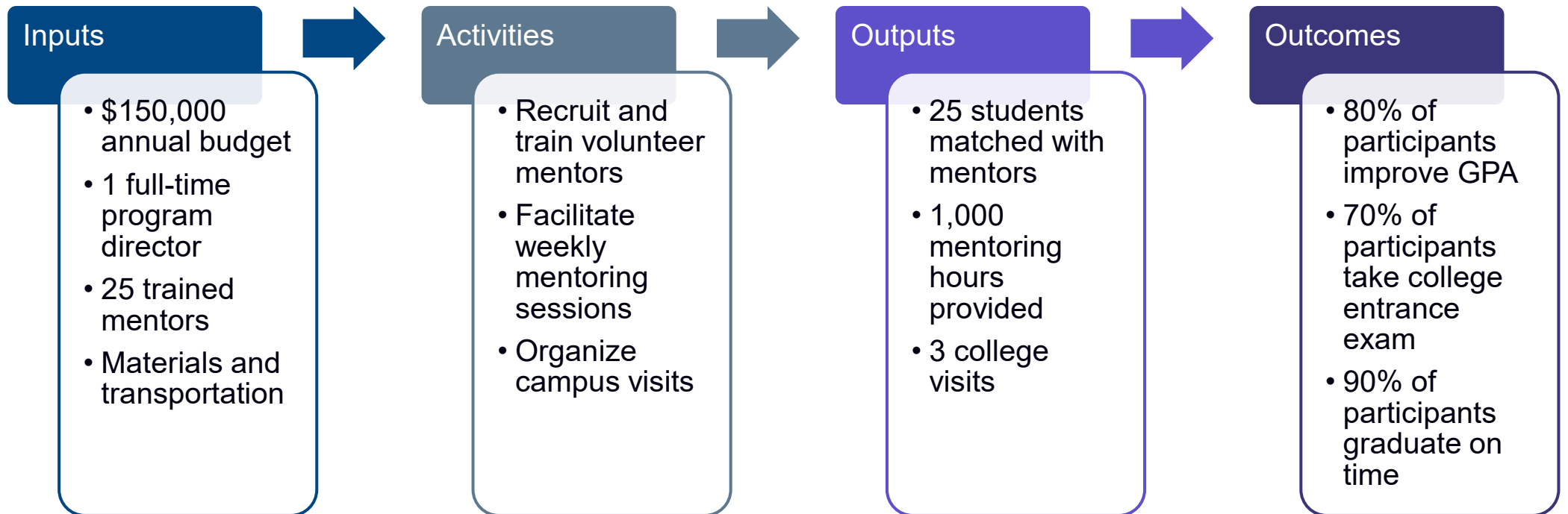
Today's Objectives

- Learn how to balance numbers and stories in your proposal.
- Align your narrative with both funder priorities and school and district goals.
- Explore storytelling strategies that inspire reviewers and make your proposal stand out.

**Data tells us what is
happening. Stories tell us
why it matters.**



What Are the Storytelling Opportunities?





Balancing Numbers and Stories in Your Proposal

Quantitative Methods



Qualitative Methods



Why Mixed Methods Matter for Proposal Writing

- Funders expect evidence **and** human experience.
- Mixed methods help you answer
 - What is happening? (quantitative data)
 - Why is it happening? (qualitative data)
 - What does your project aim to change? (blended insight)
- Blending data types increases clarity, credibility, and emotional resonance, which are the ingredients of a compelling story.

Convergent Approach (Parallel)

- Collect and present quantitative and qualitative data together to show a unified finding.

Example

- A school climate survey reveals that 48% of students report feeling unsafe at school (quantitative).
- Students are telling teachers about bullying hotspots in hallways (qualitative).

Blended insight for proposal

- “Students reported feeling unsafe and identified bullying hotspots in hallways. This parallel data highlights the need for targeted climate and supervision strategies.”

Explanatory Sequential Approach (Numbers → Story)

- Start with numbers then explain them with voices and experiences.

Example

- Absenteeism increased from 12% to 20% (quantitative).
- Listening sessions with caregivers reveal gaps in transportation (qualitative).

Blended insight for proposal

- “Listening sessions with caregivers revealed gaps in transportation as one of the root causes of increased absenteeism.”

Exploratory Sequential Approach (Story → Numbers)

- Start with stories to uncover issues then use numbers to measure scale.

Example

- Teachers describe rising anxiety among students (qualitative).
- A mental health screener reveals 32% of students meet at-risk indicators (quantitative).

Blended insight for proposal

- “Teacher observations pointed to rising anxiety and screening data confirmed the scope of the issue, validating the need for targeted mental health supports.”

Collecting and Blending Data for Our Example

- Riverside High School is applying for grant funding to launch a targeted mentoring program for students at risk of not graduating on time.
- Recognizing that many of these students lack access to guidance and exposure to postsecondary pathways, the school aims to pair them with trained community mentors who will provide consistent support, academic encouragement, and opportunities to explore college and career options.
- Through structured weekly mentoring sessions and organized campus visits, the program seeks to increase students' engagement, strengthen their sense of belonging, and expand their awareness of future possibilities.

External Evidence in Your Proposal Story

- How can external evidence strengthen your proposal?
 - Demonstrates that your approach is grounded in proven strategies, not just good intentions.
 - Shows alignment with research-based practices.
 - External studies help validate that the problem you're describing is real, widespread, and solvable.

Using External Evidence Effectively

- Cite research to explain **why** your proposed strategy works.
 - Mentoring programs improve graduation rates for students at risk (Citation).
- Use evidence selectively and choose high-quality sources.
 - Prioritize meta-analyses, federal clearinghouses, or well-designed studies.
- You can use evidence to support **both** the need and the solution.
 - Need: Studies showing guidance gaps disproportionately affect first-generation students
 - Solution: Research on mentoring improving belonging, engagement, persistence



Aligning Your Narrative with Funder Priorities and District Goals

Tips & Tricks: Language Alignment

Program Outcome	Funder Language It Aligns To
Improved attendance	Student engagement, student achievement, chronic absenteeism
Improved sense of belonging	Equity, school climate, student engagement, wellness/well-being
Stronger relationships with caring adults	Social-emotional learning, school climate
More consistent family communication	Family engagement, school-family partnerships
Increased assignment completion	Academic engagement, student achievement

Tips & Tricks: District Goals

- Mission and Vision Statements
- District "Values" or Other Guiding Frameworks
- LCAP and SPSA



Storytelling Strategies to Make Your Proposal Stand Out

Teri's Tip

Write to the rubric,
not just the narrative

Lisa's Tip

Pay attention to
the language and
the organization of
the RFA

Hilva's Tip

Check that all the
required information
is included, in a
logical order



Teri's Tip

Behind every data
point is a student, a
classroom, and a
community with a
story to tell

Hilva's Tip

Consider how you
use space in your
application to meet
the scoring
requirements



Lisa's Tip

Be sure the data
you are sharing
relates to the story
you are trying to
tell

Lisa's Tip

Set a realistic and
clear budget



Teri's Tip

The strongest
applications are
those that reflect the
authentic voice of the
school and its
community

Lisa's Tip

Consider
sustainability
beyond the funding
you are applying
for



Teri's Tip

Include perspectives
and feedback from
the implementation
team for authenticity

Grant Writing Tips From CDE Reviewers



Tips & Tricks: Storytelling 101



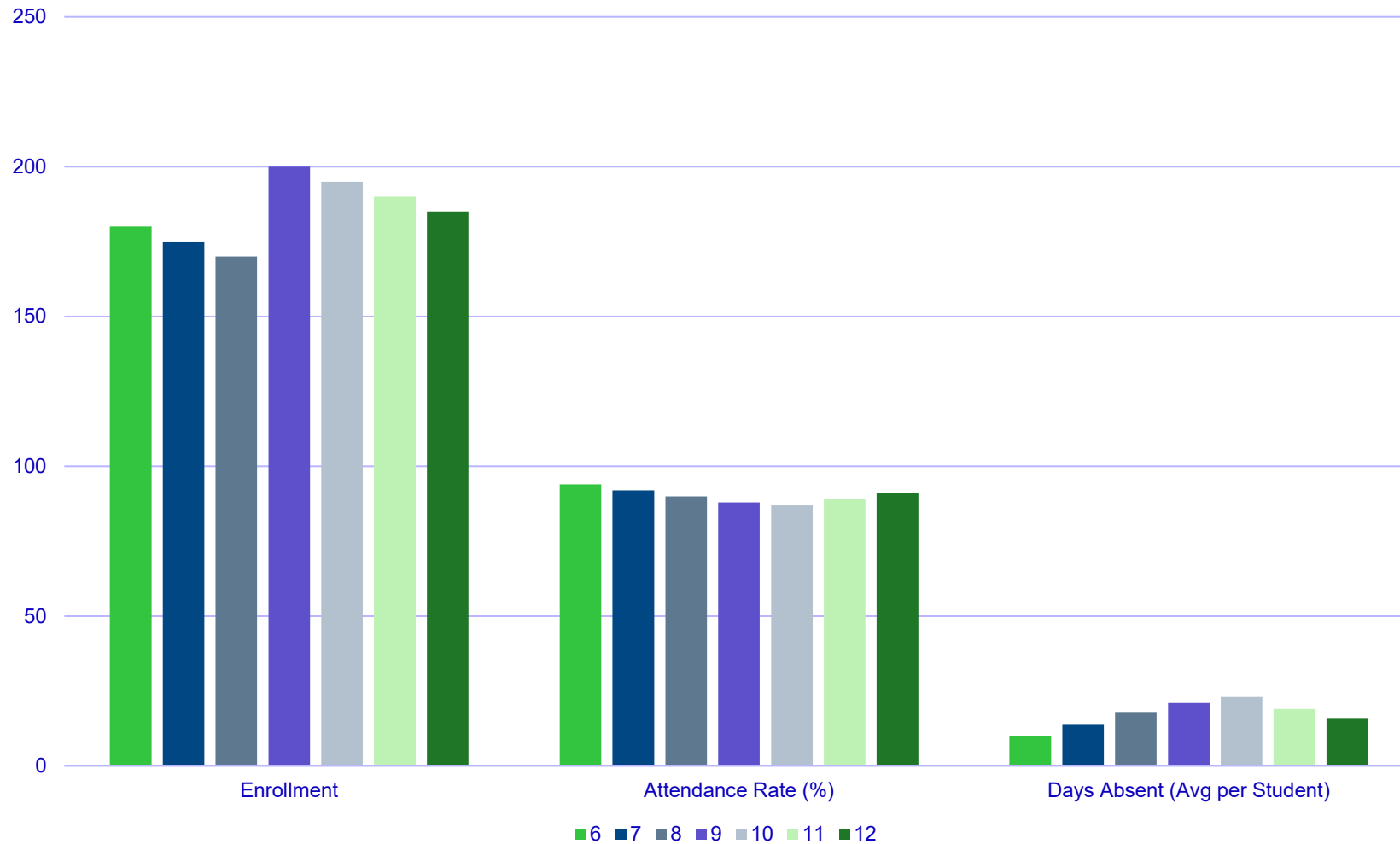
Using Simple Data Visualizations Effectively

- **Effective visuals can**
 - Make key points instantly visible for reviewers.
 - Highlight trends and disparities more clearly than text.
 - Strengthen mixed-methods storytelling when paired with quotes or context.
- **Creating an effective visualization**
 - Choose the simplest visual to communicate your data.
 - Use clear and consistent titles, labels, and scales.
 - Keep color minimal and purposeful.
 - Highlight ONE big message per visual.

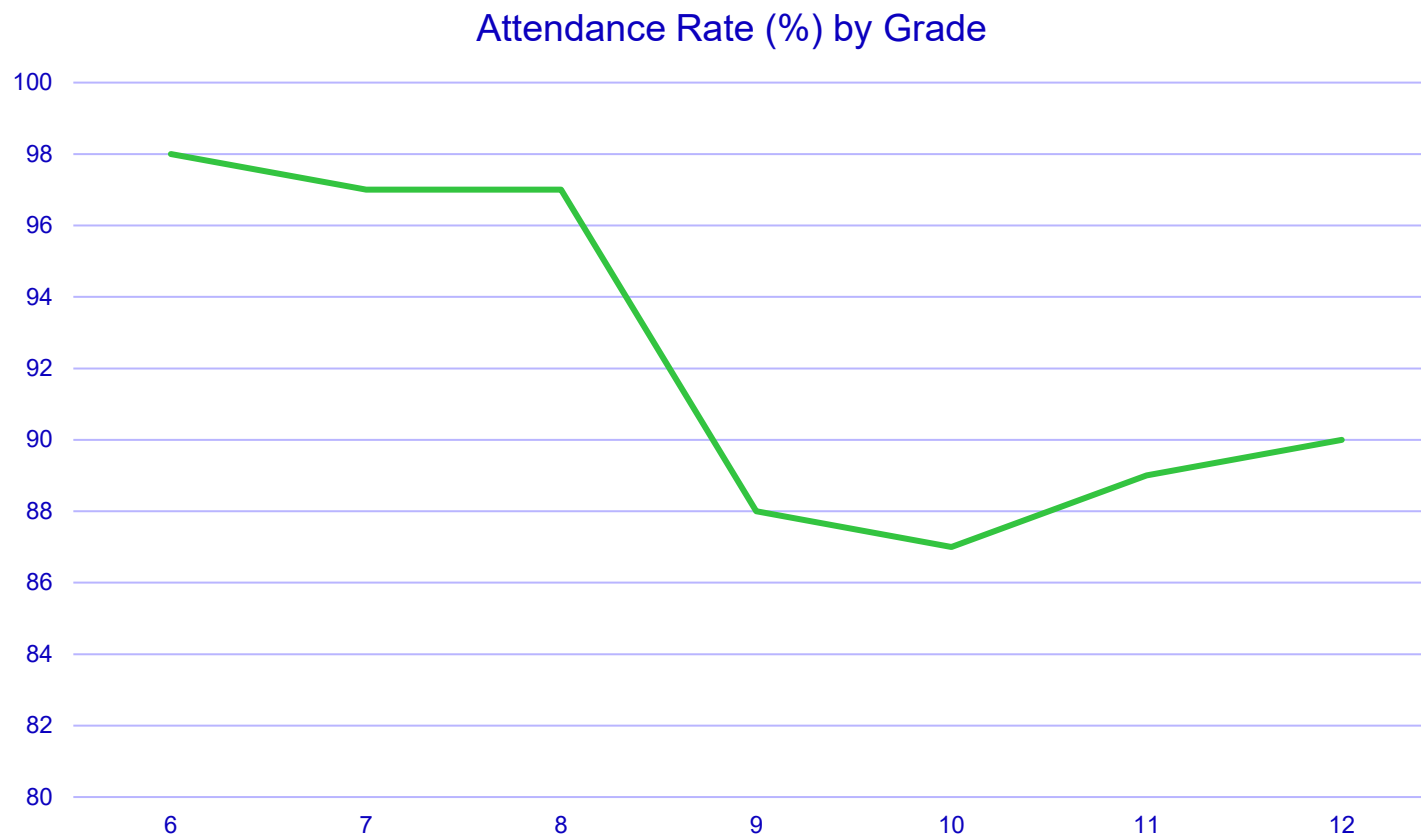
Common Data Visualization Mistakes

- Overly complex visuals (3D charts, too many colors).
- Unlabeled axes, unclear units, or misleading scales.
- Visuals overloaded with text or data (you don't need to include all your data in the visualization!)
- Charts that don't match or support the narrative.
- If a visual needs explanation before it makes sense, don't use it!

Creating Effective Data Visualizations



Creating Effective Data Visualizations



What are the stories about your work that you think are compelling?

Key Takeaways

Blend numbers and stories to create a compelling, credible proposal.

Choose the right mixed-methods approach to strengthen your message.

Align your story and data with funder priorities and district goals.

Use stories to illuminate the need and connect emotionally.

Keep visuals and data presentation simple, clear, and purposeful.

More Opportunities for Learning and Connection



Learn more at strongerconnections.wested.org



WestEd 

Thank you!

Contact Us:
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