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“One Day I Want to Be Like You”: The Basics of a Stellar Author Visit

by Debbie Gonzales

Dynamic school visits presented by notable authors and illustrators inspire kids on a level few daily lesson plans can aspire to. Their messages of perseverance in writing and love of reading can be life-altering. Students craft testimonials such as, “You did, truly, inspire me,” “You showed me that reading can be more fun than you think,” and “I was so inspired by you that I’m thinking about writing my own book,” after experiencing such events (Herzog, 2018). However, without a communal sense of commitment, preparedness, and content consideration, the program will fall short of greatness. With planning and thoughtful role designation, any school can present an author/illustrator visit that is informative, entertaining, and transformational.

A top priority in putting together a fabulous school visit event is to make certain that everyone involved in the process is informed and committed to its success. Surprisingly, my research revealed that, oftentimes, pre-paid, pre-scheduled presenters experience a disconnect between program organizers and school administrators. Situations such as these can be avoided when there is clear communication and coordination with all parties involved. Get the event prominently posted on the academic calendar, then have great fun promoting it. Read the presenter’s books in class beforehand. Encourage students to create a welcome banner. Invite students to analyze book trailers. Young adult author Maria E. Andreu recalls a time when the entire school bought into the success of her visit. In addition to obtaining a grant to purchase a copy of her book for all the students, she says the faculty and staff “... prepped students by having them write questions ahead of time, planned a breakfast and a reception, and involved their school media team in an on-camera interview with me. The kids were so excited and engaged because they’d been so involved in the planning and execution of the event” (Hart, 2017, “Preparation is key,” para. 2). Generating enthusiasm such as this is well-worth the effort required to make it happen.



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Preparedness is key to producing a phenomenal program. Much like thinking through aspects of a well-executed lesson or project, planners must anticipate any unforeseen issues that might arise. Listed below are some suggestions to assist in preparing for a memorable school visit program.

- Designate a contact person and supportive committee members to oversee all aspects of the visit, from contract to conclusion.
- Clarify the type of presentation desired. Will your students best be served in an assembly for hundreds of students, a classroom workshop, or an intimate book talk?
- Solidify the presenter’s honorarium, travel arrangements and expense terms, and payment policies well before the event takes place.
- Establish and distribute the schedule for the day weeks before the event, followed by a series of friendly reminders.
- Clearly define book purchasing and distribution

procedures. For the most part, presenters prefer for schools to arrange for their books to be available onsite for signings. However, some authors opt to take care of book distribution independently.

- Designate an individual to introduce the speaker before their presentation and, if audio-visual equipment is needed, plan for a tech-savvy individual to remain present throughout the entire program.
- Lastly, make certain that the presenter's needs are cared for throughout the day. Arrange for someone to greet them upon arrival, assist with their equipment, direct them to the appropriate rooms, and join them for their scheduled lunch break.

A key aspect to producing an unforgettable school visit experience is to decide upon suitable programming content. Educators can find a wealth of information regarding a potential presenter's proposed programming on their author or illustrator website. Oftentimes, program descriptions are aligned with academic standards. Many websites include video samples of the speakers in action. Most prospective presenters offer free, downloadable teacher guides packed with pre-event and post-event activities and lessons that are easily adaptable to instructional plans. Prospective presenters sincerely desire to partner with educators in this way.

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is the cost of inviting authors into your school or classroom. An effective way to offer inspirational and affordable school visits is to schedule a Skype visit. Many author and illustrators offer free or reduced-rate presentations online. The equipment required is a computer, the Internet, a web camera, a digital projector, a screen, and Skype software, which is available as a free download. Familiarize students with the presenter's work by reading books beforehand, visiting their websites, and engaging in the educational content made available there. Skype visits flow best when students have prepared questions prior to the visit. Pre-select students to ask their questions by speaking directly into the web camera. With good planning, online school visits can be as motivational and memorable as those that are live and in person.

Finding the perfect author or illustrator to contract as a presenter can also pose a challenge. One wonders where these extraordinary individuals reside. There are booking agents such as The Booking Biz (www.bookingbiz.com), who specialize in connecting schools with talented individuals on a national level. Better yet, there is a professional organization dedicated to serving the literary needs of local authors, illustrators, schools, and students: the Michigan chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (www.michigan.scbwi.org). The SCBWI-MI leadership is skilled in helping schools find that extraordinary presenter to entertain, inspire, and inform the deserving students of Michigan through their speaker's bureau (www.scbwi.org/speakers-bureau/).

Author visits, in person or virtual, can be a great way to inspire young readers and writers. When carefully planned, the possibilities for learning are nearly endless!

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