



THE TRUTH ABOUT SCHOOL VISITS: The Value of an Author Visit

by Alexis O'Neill

Here's the reality. Colleagues across the country, even the most dynamic presenters, are reporting fewer school visit invitations this year.

Schools say that they don't have the money. But even more report that they can't afford to take the time from the instructional day to spend time on an author or illustrator assembly.

So, when these objections are raised, what can you do?

The Money Issue

Recently, I was invited to present at an out-of-state conference for private school teachers. The host mentioned that students of these schools were "privileged." When we talked about my fee, she expressed concern about having to add expenses (flight, hotel) to it. I said, "Can you get one of your parents to donate a flight? And how about a having a parent donate Marriott points for my hotel?" Suddenly, the tone lightened. She hadn't thought of these creative ways to fund a visit.

When a school says they don't have enough money to hire, usually our knee-jerk reaction is to lower our fee -- sometimes to the point that it actually costs us money to do a presentation. While some good-faith negotiation is standard, lowering your event fee to "free" diminishes your standing as a professional who is deserving of earning a living.

The Time Issue

Administrators and teachers are under the gun to raise test scores. Curriculum demands are tight. Educators want uninterrupted time to work with students. As much as some would like to have an author assembly, they feel they can't

squeeze out the time.

However, schools have a set number of assemblies that they conduct each year, often through support of their parent groups. How can you appeal to them? Design a presentation that has solid, curriculum-related content in it. Address writing (or drawing) strategies in your assemblies. Give students and teachers information or skills that they can apply directly in the classroom. This will help the host justify bringing you in.

And here's a phrase you can use in your promotional materials to schools: *"If you're conducting assemblies this year, why not make one an Author Visit!"*

Value

The real issue however is not about scarcity of time or money. These objections can be addressed. The real issue is about perceived value. Do schools value author visits?

An author visit is not a material product. It's difficult to quantify the exact effect and reach resulting from authors interacting with students. In today's climate, talking about "motivating" students and "inspiring" students is not impressive to bean-counters and those who obsess over ROI (Return On Investment). Will they see an immediate dollar-for-dollar (or minute-for-minute) correlation between the author's assembly and student achievement on test scores? It's unlikely -- because the effect of an author's in-person meeting with students percolates for years -- in a dawning of the type of books children choose; in the volume of books children read; in the validation of children's own creativity, in writing and drawing; in the choosing

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of future careers; in the modeling of positive behaviors. But no one, to my knowledge, has done a longitudinal study on the effect of these visits on children.

Librarians across the country have told me that their library circulation increases dramatically after an author visit -- not only of that author's books, but across the board. One librarian actually compared circulation data for the same months over two years, showing that circulation rose significantly after the visit. This data provided her with facts and figures for her arsenal of "convincers" to satisfy those swayed only by numbers.

We need to stay strong in this wobbly economy. And we need to know that while we can address money and time issues, we still need to make sure that educators see and value the lasting effects that an author visit has on children.



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