

Finding Funding

BY ALEXIS O'NEILL

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN a school says they'd love to have you visit, but they just don't have the funds?

In today's economic climate, it may seem that the traditional wells – PTA, Boosters Clubs, Title 1 Funding – are running dry. So what can schools do?

Schools shouldn't assume that they have to fund an author or illustrator visit alone. The answer rests in partnerships with local community organizations. Here is information you can pass along to schools who say they want you, but can't afford you.

Partnerships

In a partnership, both parties have a goal and agree on what each will contribute. I urge schools to partner with a local community organization to bring in an author or illustrator. This is usually very successful, but it can't be done at the last minute.

For example, in my greater community, service clubs (especially those committed to literacy programs such as Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Assistance League, Friends of the Library, etc.) have helped to sponsor authors or literacy programs. The more specific and reasonable the request, the more likely the school is to get a positive response. These organizations want to serve. They also want good PR. Partnering is a great way to get mutual PR.

Getting the funding ball rolling

Here's what you can encourage the school administrator to do –

- » Assign a teacher, librarian or parent to be in charge of writing the funding requests. (For a Sample Letter of Request, go to

<http://www.scbwicencal.org/authorvisits>)

- » Estimate the cost (honorarium, transportation, lodging, food, books)
- » Write a short letter on school letterhead, bulleted with clear headers, describing:
 - The need. (What educational objective will be addressed? Also include a statement from the heart about what you see as the short-term and long-term effect on kids.)
 - How the school would like to fill that need (i.e., author/illustrator visit).
 - The specific request. (Money? Time? Promotion?)
 - What the school will contribute as a partner. (Share expense? Promote the organization? Take photos? Offer volunteer opportunities to the organization's staff or members?)
 - The expected outcome? (Include how many or what kind of students will be served by this program.)

Once an organization becomes a partner, it is highly likely that they will partner with the school again. (For an author program in Simi Valley, CA, the Friends of the Library, Target, Wal-Mart and Rotary have been major author visit partners for over 10 years.)

The key is to be absolutely specific about what you want. For example, people don't want to contribute to reduce poverty in Third World countries – they want to buy a goat to help one village. (You can make your own leap from here!) Think, too, about the kinds of service organizations or social clubs that are in your community. For example, our town has a garden club. If a school wants a visit from an author who has written garden books – or books on ecology, etc. – why not ask the garden club to contribute?



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The main challenge for the school

Finding someone to draft a Letter of Request to organizations can be tough. It may take some coaxing to do this the first time around. But funding is always easier in subsequent years because you're already on the funders' "books."

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This is not a one-way street – the schools asking, the organization giving. It's about mutual benefit. The organizations gain stature in their association with the schools in helping meet a need. They are contributing to the growth of students' reading and writing skills. The schools are actually giving the organizations a chance to do good in their very own community in a very specific and beneficial way.

I've posted some valuable resources here that you are welcome to pass along to schools: <http://www.scbwicencal.org/authorvisits/>

I know what works in my part of California (and trust me, schools are really in a pickle here!) I'd love to know what has worked in your part of the country. Write to me at info2@schoolvisiteexperts.com. I'll compile suggestions and report back in a later column.

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