

# Hosting authors in the school library learning commons

*By Carol Koechlin*

## Snapshot

Carol Koechlin brings us some first-hand insights into how teacher librarians can make the most out of visiting authors in schools.

Teacher-librarians are literacy leaders in their schools by definition of their roles as teachers and librarians. Transliteracy skills are woven into the varied learning experience designed by these information experts in collaboration with their teaching partners in the LLC. Students grow as proficient researchers, wise users of information, adept users of technology, deep thinkers and joyful learners during these carefully crafted experiences. At the same time another critical literacy goal is being achieved as students learn to love independent reading and develop life-long reading habits. Achieving this goal is a complex undercurrent of all work in the LLC from curating diverse collections, to engaging displays, open circulation, participatory clubs, and so much more. For this article we want to concentrate on one promotional activity that is always popular and usually a highlight of the year for students. Hosting author visits can be a very rich experience for students. How do you make sure to get the most out of an author visit?

We decided that the best way to find out was to ask a librarian. We started by contacting Meredith Tutching, Director, Forest of Reading® asking for the names of school library professionals who authors have recommended as great hosts to their school visits. We also checked social media for author hosting stories. We have collated the stories and expert advice to share with you.



*Author Rukhsana Khan visits Sunnybrook School*

## Our Experts

We are very pleased to introduce our experts, recommended by some of your favourite authors.

Leigh Borden, Teacher-librarian, Holy Trinity Elementary School, Torbay, NL

Wendy Burch Jones, Teacher-librarian, Dixon Grove Junior Middle School, Toronto DSB

Kristen Huitema, Saint Patrick's School, London Catholic DSB

Jen Mactaggart, Teacher-librarian, Sunnybrook School, Toronto

Melanie Mulaster, Teacher-librarian, Brisdale Public School, Peel DSB

Jonelle St. Aubyn, Teacher-librarian, Louise Arbour Secondary School, Peel DSB

Wendy Burch Jones, Teacher-librarian, Dixon Grove Junior Middle School, Toronto DSB

# Tips from Our Experts

## 1. Planning is key to a successful author/illustrator/poet school LLC visit.

- Reach out to your local public library about authors and/or illustrators who may be visiting your area. Local children's librarians are often the point of contact for touring authors or major programs like Canadian Children's Book Week and help coordinate visits with schools in an area (especially ones like ours, little-visited by major authors and illustrators). (Leigh)
- Always ask up front before the visit what their booking fees are to ensure that you have enough in your budget to cover the cost. (Jonelle)
- Never haggle on their price. If you can't afford to host that particular author, try to share costs with another department or school or you may have to ask someone else within your price range. (Jonelle)
- Invite the author well in advance of your planned date. Authors are busy people and there will be times when a visit will not work in their schedule, especially if they are in the process of finishing a book or going on a book tour. (Jonelle)
- Travel costs are usually charged for visits, so with a limited budget, look for relatively local authors. If they are travelling from a distance, see if you can interest colleagues in also booking them and sharing the travel costs. Some authors will travel to certain areas and book multiple schools, spreading out travel and hotel costs. (Kristen)
- Find out what equipment they need, such as a microphone or projector. For a full day, ask about lunch. I've taken authors out, they've come to the staff room, and they've brought lunch, enjoying some down time in the library. Knowing preferences in advance will make your visit run smoothly. (Kristen)
- Vary authors and illustrators invited – the kinds of books they create; their roles; the way they present; the insights they bring! (Jen)
- Vary audience size (single class to full school) to build audience skills and experiences with different levels of interaction with presenters. (Jen)
- Don't be afraid of Zoom! It can work well and extend reach (and budget!). (Jen)
- If hosting a virtual author event, consider hosting the Zoom/Teams/Google Meet in individual classrooms rather than having a very large group in the library. On a Smartboard in a classroom, a presenter seems very close and it is easy to see and interact. In a larger group, the intimacy is lessened. We ensure that each classroom has a functioning webcam and a comfortable viewing area for the kids. If the guest plans to have students write or draw, have the necessary supplies in the kids' hands before the event begins. This was a huge success in 2022 when we had a virtual visit from Dom Pelletier, creator of The Lunch Club series, who taught



*Soyeon Kim visits students via Zoom.*

the students several drawing techniques. Bonuses of virtual events: more kids get to ask questions, everyone can hear, and any inappropriate behaviour is not a distraction to the guest! (Leigh)

- Invite parent associations to subsidize the author visit. (Jen)

## 2. Prepare students and your school learning community to get the most out of the experience.

- Establish teaching and learning goals. (Melanie)
  - ◇ **Identity and Joy:** How might an author visit reflect, honour and value the identities and lived experiences of the learners you serve? How might author visits serve as “windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors” to build empathy and joy in the communities we serve?
  - ◇ **Skills:** How might we prepare the learners we serve for a successful author’s visit? What cultural norms might we need to respect? What strategies or activities might we put into place before, during or after the visit to extend learning?
  - ◇ **Intellect:** What story or life lessons is this author sharing? What might we learn and apply to our everyday interactions?
  - ◇ **Criticality:** What intersectionality does an author visit represent? How has this affected the stories they share?



*Author Emil Sher visits Gr. 1 students at Holy Trinity School in Torbay, NL.*

- Prepare students in advance for the visit. Chances are some of them may not have read the book and that is not a requirement for a successful author visit. It is important that students know some information about the author, the kinds of books that they write and why they have been chosen to visit their school. This will go a long way in terms of student engagement during the visit. (Jonelle)
- Prior to the visit, purchase and introduce the author’s or illustrator’s work. In some cases, I have lots of books to share by an author, while in others, I emphasize different connections to our school community. For example, in advance of Emil Sher’s visit to my grade 1s last year, we engaged in a major author-illustrator study of Barbara Reid’s work, then connected Emil to Barbara through their collaboration on *I Love You More*. When introducing Kevin’s books this year, I read the first chapters of *The Fabulous Zed Watson* and *Apartment 713* with my grade 4s, getting them excited to meet the author and read the books. (Leigh)
- Get the students excited! Make a bulletin board and/or share their books beforehand with students and teachers (Jen)

- Try to have students prepare questions for the author in advance of the visit. This can be done anonymously using a Google Form. Teenagers can be shy or uncomfortable asking a question in front of their peers. If students submit questions in advance, they can get the answers they want without feeling embarrassed when asking. (Jonelle)

### 3. Pay attention to your students' needs and the visitor's needs.

- Choose authors that are representative of your student population. It's important for students to see people who look like themselves as writers to help them see themselves as becoming an author one day too. (Jonelle)
- If your author is working with various age groups, work with the author to tailor each presentation to the various class ages and learning needs. (Wendy)
- During the visit, either in person or online, support the author or illustrator in discussing their writing process, artistic inspirations, and the importance of creativity in storytelling. Manage student behaviour appropriately to ensure that the author's limited and valuable time is respected, and help students plan pertinent and meaningful questions. (Leigh)



*Preparing for a visit from Kevin Sylvester at Holy Trinity School.*

### 4. Plan for follow up experiences.

- Purchase a copy of the author/illustrator/poets books for the LLC collection and invite the author to sign them. (Jen)
- If possible, offer book sales, to support the author/illustrator, a local bookstore AND student home libraries. (Jen)
- Invite a student(s) to thank the author in person and also have students follow up with thank you letters.
- Design follow up activities based on the books shared (design bookmarks, create art pieces, design maker activities, create book trailers, write a new ending etc.)
- After your event, have a plan for managing increased demand for the presenter's books at your school library. Reflect on the visit with fellow educators and your students. Share pictures and author-inspired work with your guest – they really appreciate teacher and student feedback. (Leigh)

### 5. Make it a joyful experience.

- Prepare a welcome sign for the author/illustrator/poet.
- Prepare a special display of the guest's work.



- Take photos with the author's permission so you can celebrate the visit for days to come in newsletters, and displays in the LLC.
- Create a page on your virtual LLC celebrating the author visit and connecting students to the authors website, other books by the author, reviews etc.
- Invite administration and/or trustees, board officials to the author visit.



*Andrew Larsen signing copies of his book for students at Sunnybrook School, Toronto.*

## Success Stories

"Over the years, I've had the pleasure of inviting and hosting poets, illustrators, authors and graphic novelists. We've hosted fiction writers and non-fiction writers. We have had authors sing, lead us in movement, draw for us, draw WITH us, read to us, listen to us, challenge us, create with us, laugh with us, and even cry with us. We've had high tech interactions, and low tech ones. Is it extra work to dream up and pull off, each year? Yes. Is it worth it? Again, yes. Always, yes!" (Jen)

"The visits are also chosen in order to build a community of readers both in school and at home. This, for me, means always reaching out to our local independent bookstore (we are lucky to be situated within walking distance of the brilliant children's bookstore Mabel's Fables) to see if they can offer books for sale, should families want to purchase the visiting author/illustrator's books for their own home libraries. This outreach offers a three-fold bonus: it is good for the author, good for the local bookstore, and good for the home library! While most of our families might not purchase books, ALL are persistently reminded of a wonderful bookstore resource in our community. And I have yet to have invited an author/illustrator who didn't enjoy signing books for students who brought them, a deeply personal interaction that builds long-lasting memories. I also always ask the author/illustrator to sign our school library copies of their book(s) as well, for posterity." (Jen)

"Louise Arbour Secondary School had the pleasure of hosting Kern Carter, author of Boys and Girls Screaming and And Then There Was Us, for three visits during the 2022-2023 school year. After winning our first visit for I Read Canadian Day, we invited Kern back two more times to speak to our senior English classes and to conduct an after school workshop with our creative writing club. Given that Kern's most recent novels were written for a young adult audience, he was a good fit for our school and students. ....Author visits are an integral part of any library learning commons programming and can help increase student engagement with reading and writing. Proper planning and preparation can ensure a smooth and successful visit with local authors in your area." (Jonelle)



*Author Kern Carter speaking to students at Louise Arbour Secondary School.*

"On December 1, 2023 about 150 students at Dixon Grove Jr. Middle School learned how to really

party.... like a snail. It was perhaps clever foreshadowing on my part that saw Naseem Hrab delighting our Kindergarten through Grade 5 classes that day in three separate workshops – each carefully modified to suit the audience in attendance. This was, of course, by design. The previous spring I applied for a grant with the Writers in the School program (through The Writer’s Union of Canada) and was smart enough to pick Naseem. Now, six months later, students were “shhoomp”-ing through the 2024 Forest of Reading Blue Spruce nominated book *How to Party Like A Snail* (created with her creative partner, illustrator Kelly Collier) and seemingly more engaged with every turn of the page. One of the keys to making this author visit successful was communicating clearly with the author. Naseem and I had several conversations ahead of time to work out the details of her visit. The Writers in the School grant covered one presentation. So I worked with my administrative team to help ensure we could find the budget to extend her visit to cover more classes. Then I worked with Naseem to work out the details.....It was a day full of #SchoolLibraryJoy.” (Wendy)

“I have held many fabulous author visits in my over twenty years with the LDSCB, the most recent being Vicki VanSickle. This visit was particularly exciting for our students as Vicki grew up in Woodstock, the city where our school is located. Inspired by her book *Teddy Bear of the Year*, we held a pajama and stuffed animal day. There were two larger group presentations in the gym, then we moved to the library for smaller and shorter sessions for the kindergartens. All grades attended these presentations, which was wonderful, as Vicki’s body of work includes picture books to young adult novels. The day was capped off with an evening parent engagement presentation that involved snacks and hot chocolate. It was a fantastic day with a school full of excited and engaged students.” (Kristen)

“On April 30, 2024, I hosted a successful virtual author visit with Kevin Sylvester, the renowned children’s author and illustrator, at my Kindergarten to grade 4 elementary school. Canadian Children’s Book Week always brings us exciting author interactions, and this year was no exception. Kevin’s visit was the most recent of a number of extremely positive author-illustrator visits we have had at Holy Trinity Elementary in the last few years, thanks to the Canadian Children’s Book Centre.....Don’t dismiss the virtual author visit! I have been amazed by the effectiveness of this medium for student-author connections, and you will be, too! By embracing innovative approaches to author-illustrator connections, teacher librarians can inspire a lifelong love of reading and learning among their students.” (Leigh)



*Author Naseem Hrab was a big hit at Martin Grove, thanks to the extensive prep by the school's teacher-librarian.*

## Contacts

Canadian Book Centre: <https://bookcentre.ca/>

The Writer's Union of Canada (Writers in the Schools Programs): <https://www.writersunion.ca/>

Author's Booking Service: <https://authorsbooking.com/tag/canadian/>

Forest of Reading: <https://forestofreading.com/virtual-visits/>

CANSCAIP School Library Visits: <https://canscaip.wildapricot.org/School/LibraryVisits>

League of Canadian Poets: <https://poets.ca/offerings/programs/>

Toronto Poetry Slam: <https://www.torontopoetryslam.ca/>

Poetry in Voice: <https://poetryinvoice.ca/>

CanLit for Little Canadians Links to Canadian author sites and publishers): <https://canlitforlittlecanadians.blogspot.com/>

## Other Resources

I Read Canadian: <https://ireadcanadian.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hosting-an-Author-Visit-EN-Nov2019.pdf>

An Author's Perspective on Author Visits: <https://journal.canadianschoollibraries.ca/an-authors-perspective-on-author-visits/>

**Editor's Note:** This article first appeared in *The Canadian School Libraries Journal*, May 2024, and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the editor and author. The article which follows in this section of the journal was supplied by a Melbourne school offering a local perspective and author to complement the Canadian experience.

**Carol Koechlin** is an experienced educator who has contributed to the field of information literacy and school librarianship writing professional books, articles for professional journals, facilitating on-line courses, and presenting workshops in Canada, United States and Australia. Working with Dr. David V.Loertscher, the team has developed foundations for the transformation of school libraries and computer labs into a Physical and Virtual participatory Learning Commons. Explore their work at [\*The School Library Learning Commons – Future Forward\*](#). Carol is a founding member of [\*Treasure Mountain Canada\*](#) (TMC) and has co-chaired TMC Symposiums since 2010. Carol was a contributing writer for [\*Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons\*](#) and writing coordinator for [\*Leading Learning: Standards Of Practice For School Library Learning Commons In Canada\*](#) (Canadian Library Association, 2014). She is currently a director of [\*Canadian School Libraries\*](#) (CSL). Carol's favourite saying, "Empower students to own the question."