

A close-up photograph of a woman with light brown hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a black and white checkered shirt. She has a stressed expression, with furrowed brows and wide, anxious eyes. Her hands are positioned over a black laptop keyboard, with her fingers resting on the keys. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

COORDINATOR HELP GUIDE

BY: **SCHEER
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ASSEMBLY SHOWS

Hello!

Thanks for checking out this help guide. If you're looking for the **COUPON** I promised, it's on the last page. But there is some good stuff between here and there, so check this all out then give me a call when you're ready to set up an assembly show at your school.

Thanks,

Doug Scheer

Coordinator Help Guide

Yikes! You're in charge of your school's enrichment curriculum now, and someone just handed you the assembly folder. It's six inches thick, packed with brochures and postcards. Stuff's falling out of it onto the floor. And you have no idea what to do with any of it!

Don't worry, help is here! We've created this guide as a step-by-step guide to help you plan and implement your school enrichment programs. While it's intended to be comprehensive, we welcome your suggestions on how we can improve it. So let's get started!



In this guide, we'll discuss:

- ✓ Budget
- ✓ Choosing the Best Show
- ✓ Calendar Considerations
- ✓ Contacting Presenters
- ✓ Scheduling Tips
- ✓ Contracts and Deposits
- ✓ Negotiating Prices and Discounts
- ✓ Day-of-Show Details
- ✓ Show Evaluation and Feedback

Budget

Planning your school's enrichment curriculum starts with the bottom line—money. The amount of money available to you and the average cost of each paid assembly play important parts in determining the number of assemblies your school can afford.



But you need to consider the following factors as well:

- ✓ The size of your school's student body
- ✓ The size of the performance room
- ✓ Do you need one, two or even three performances of a particular program?

The size of your school's student body, the size of the performance room, and that room's acoustics are all factors that you'll need to consider. And the more presentations that are required, of course, the deeper a particular program will cut into your budget.

Under most circumstances, the ideal audience size for an all-school assembly is **no larger than 350 students**. Why?

1. Larger groups are more difficult to manage.
2. If the audience is too large, younger students are likely to get restless, both because of the length of time that it takes to seat a big group and because they're less able to see and hear the presenter. While most touring companies travel with modest sound systems that can easily reach 300 to 400 people, the acoustics of the performance room play a big part in the ability of the audience to understand dialogue and songs.

If your school's assembly budget allows you to split the student body into smaller groups, most companies will recommend two shows, regardless of the size of the room.

However, **the second show shouldn't cost you as much as the first.** In fact, it should only add 30 to 40 percent to your tab. If the fee is any higher, it's time to negotiate. (See Negotiating Prices & Discounts below.)

Past performances at your school can be a good indicator of whether you need to split your audience. In the past, could all the students see and hear the presenter? Would they have benefited from being in smaller groups? When the environment's more intimate, it's often easier for students to grasp the educational message. Talk to the previous assembly coordinator or the school principal for more input on this subject.

Choosing the Best Show

To choose the best programs for your school's students, you need to know what to expect from an assembly show. The best assembly shows should:

- ✓ provide both educational value and entertainment value
- ✓ appeal to students of all grade levels (unless your budget allows for grade-specific shows)
- ✓ be performed by artists who can manage the audience and control the level of excitement
- ✓ last no longer than 45–50 minutes
- ✓ not consume an unreasonable percentage of your total budget (see Negotiating Prices & Discounts below for tips to stretch your funds)

Next, you need to choose the topic.

Choosing the Topic

"There may be times when we want to emphasize an art form, so we'll bring in an assembly to do just that. But most often, we book programs based on the topic that's being developed, and the art form used to convey that message is secondary."

- Bill Fox, Karshner Elementary, Puyallup, WA

To get the most out of your school's assembly dollars and to make the time the students spend outside of the classroom count, interview your school's teachers and principal. Find out what topics they'd like to see presented.

Is there a need to emphasize a particular subject? Do the students need exposure to the arts, like music, dance or theater? Or is there a need for curriculum-based programs in math, history, science or democratic values? If your school is lacking or is under-funded in any area, such as in science or music education, consider shows that address those areas.

But once you choose a topic, how do you find the best show?

Finding the Best Show

"I've seen too many programs where the performers are not good teachers and they really don't know how to manage students."

- Jim Eisenhardt, Principal, Yelps Elementary, Dayton, OH

Nobody likes to waste money. And teachers don't want to give up their valuable classroom time for assemblies that turn out to be a waste of time.

You can start protecting yourself from assembly disasters as soon as you start sorting through the brochures in your



assembly folder. Although the quality of a brochure or website can reflect the quality of an assembly program, it's important to remember that glossy paper and color photographs don't always mean slick productions. Instead, you should consider the following when selecting a show:

a. Presenter Enthusiasm

When you buy an assembly show, you're really investing in the personality and skills of the presenter(s). An initial phone call to the presenter can be a big help.

"I can read a lot about a performer with a short telephone conversation. They are usually as we 'see' them over the phone. Strange ones on the phone have proven to be just the same on assembly days."

- Teresa Holmes, assembly coordinator for St. John School, Jackson, MI

Because an unenthusiastic presenter can ruin an otherwise great show, it's best to find exceptional presenters and stick with their offerings. To do this, ask around. Get recommendations from other schools and teachers who may have seen the show that you're considering.

Also, browse through that fat assembly folder to find the assemblies that received the best reviews in previous years. (See more about teacher reviews below.) Chances are good that an outstanding presenter from a previous year can return with a completely different program.



b. Production Quality

Outstanding assembly programs achieve two main goals: **they hold student interest** and **they teach effectively**.



Production quality is important because students remember a message more when they see it and hear it. For that reason, **an effective educational assembly program should be a show, not just a lecture.**

Audience involvement and appropriate pacing are keys to holding the interest of your school's students, while props, sound effects, colorful sets, costumes and comedy help make the messages memorable. The photos in a brochure can give you valuable clues about the visual aids and learning tools used by the presenter.

"My main concern is that the program be of sufficient interest and move at a quick enough pace that it holds the students' interest. It's surprising [that] it isn't necessarily the stuff with a lot of glitz that holds their attention; it's the involvement of the students and the pace of the presentation rather than the pyrotechnics."

- Tim O'Brien, Valley Elementary, Issaquah, WA

References vs. Repeats

Return engagements mean more than references. Face it: no presenter is going to give you references of schools that were unhappy with his or her assembly show. Your best bet is to inquire about the presenter's percentage of repeat engagements. Top presenters are often asked to return to the same school year after year, so it's smart to ask about encore engagements.

And if you do ask for references, keep in mind that the best programs are performed frequently, so the references should be no more than six months old. If your schedule permits, ask for a copy of the presenter's calendar so that you can preview the program at another school in your area.

Research

Scour your local newspaper or websites for stories about presenters who have appeared at neighboring schools. You'll avoid marketing hype and get ideas for assembly shows along with recent feedback by calling the hosting school.

Calendar Considerations

Before you call a presenter to book a show, you'll need to get a copy of your school's master calendar from the school secretary. This calendar should include the dates of all vacations and holidays, conferences, testing periods and special events (like field trips, school picture day and in-service days). Avoid these dates when scheduling your assemblies.

Next, figure out which days of the week are best for assembly presentations. Assemblies are often held in the school gym or cafeteria. If your school uses the gym every day for instruction, consider staggering assemblies on different days of the week. That way, the same students won't always miss gym class.

If your school has both morning and afternoon kindergarten classes, alternate morning and afternoon assemblies. Doing this ensures that each kindergartner will have the chance to attend at least half of the assemblies. This is less expensive than booking two performances and having one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Consider teacher prep time, too. Although teachers hate to miss their specials (times when their students are with the music, gym or art teacher), coordinating assemblies around those class times can be a nightmare. Remember, you may not make everybody happy with the assembly schedule, but you can do your best.

Finally, be flexible. Unless you book long in advance, specific dates may not be available. Have a number of dates in mind when booking assemblies.

Contacting Presenters

Earlier is always better. You'll get the first choice of available dates by contacting the assembly presenter three to six months in advance. Sometimes that means booking shows before summer vacation starts. And that can be tricky because master calendars aren't usually prepared until July.

Under those circumstances, you're best off reserving a date and keeping your fingers crossed. If a conflict arises, notify the presenter as soon as possible to reschedule the assembly.



Scheduling Tips

Assembly presenters will generally arrive at your school 30–60 minutes before the first show to set up. Let the presenter know if the morning bus schedule or parent traffic is likely to cause delay in unloading equipment.

When scheduling show times, **don't forget to consider how long it will take to get your school's students into the assembly room.** Many presenters are forced to end assemblies 40–50 minutes after the agreed-upon start time because they have other commitments. And if your school's assembly doesn't start on time because you're still seating your students, you'll miss part of the performance you paid for.

To avoid this problem, it's smart to tell teachers when to bring their classes to the assembly instead of telling them when the show starts. Ten minutes early is usually sufficient.

If your school requires two presentations of an assembly program, **it's usually less expensive to schedule them back-to-back** (that is, 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.) **than to split the shows over lunch.** If you do decide to split multiple presentations over lunch, be sure to consider the time it takes to set up and clean the lunchroom. It's also best to avoid scheduling shows during regular recess times.

Contracts and Deposits

Once you schedule a date for your assembly, the presenter or the presenter's agency will prepare the necessary paperwork and email it to you. Some companies still require signed documents so they will be mailed to you the old-fashioned way.

You can expect to receive a contract and an invoice within one week. Read them carefully to verify all dates, fees, performance times and addresses. Mark any changes on the paperwork and initial them, then sign the paperwork and promptly return a copy to the presenter or agency. To verify that the changes have been made, make a quick call to the presenter or agency.

If a deposit is required, photocopy the deposit check and staple it to your copy of the contract. This is not only good record keeping; it's also evidence of advance payment.

Master Calendar

To avoid conflicts with other events, mark the assembly date and time on the school's master calendar. Then forward a note or a copy of the contract to the school principal and secretary (and the treasurer and committee chair as well, if necessary) to ensure that everyone knows about the assembly.

If the assembly is to take place in the gym, then it is very courteous to email the physical education teacher a few days in advance to let him or her know that the gym will be used. A simple note to the custodian is always appreciated since he or she may need to prepare the room prior to the presenter's arrival.

Directions and Special Entry Instructions

With the use of GPS systems nowadays, maps are not usually required unless you're in a very remote area or if your school complex is confusing. If there are copies of maps with directions to your school in the assembly folder, send one to the presenter. If there isn't any, create one (or get one off the Internet) and make copies of it. This will save you time later and will help ensure that the assembly presenter doesn't get lost.

Make sure also that the presenter has the address of the physical building, and not just a PO box where the mail is sent. Presenters always check into the school's office upon arrival. If advance clearance, background checks, insurance documents, or special identification is required to enter the building, then let the presenter know in advance.

Negotiating Prices and Discounts

You can get a better price on your assembly, but you'll need to be prepared to offer something in exchange. The more effort you're willing to expend, the greater the potential discount. (Please note that the dollar amounts shown below are only estimates.)

To save \$25

Be flexible when scheduling your assembly. Travel costs are the biggest expense of any assembly company. If other schools in your area have already booked an assembly, reserving the other half of that same day will garner a modest discount.

Also, every assembly company has slow times when schools typically avoid scheduling assemblies. If you're willing to schedule an assembly during the first week of school, the week before a break, a testing week, or a day or two after a vacation, ask for a price break.

Spread the word. If your district's schools work together on assembly programs, there are many ways to save. The next time you call to book an assembly, try saying this: "We have a district-wide PTA meeting next week. I know how good your shows are, and I'd like to help you get work by passing out your brochures. Would you be willing to offer any school in our district a \$25 discount if they book you this year?" Chances are good that the presenter will agree.

Try block booking. Team up with another school in your area. Then when you call to book the show, you can schedule for both schools and ask for a discount for each performance.

To save \$50

Turn your school's assembly into an audition. Assembly companies want to parlay your booking into additional jobs. You can use that fact to your advantage. Invite assembly coordinators from other schools to "audition" the assembly at your school. If you can promise the presenter that two or three

other schools will be represented at the performance, ask him or her for a \$50 to \$75 discount. Just be sure to follow through with your promise. If your end of the bargain falls apart, you'll have to pay up.

You can also try asking for a \$25 rebate for each school that books an assembly as a result of the "audition." This could add up to even bigger savings for your school.



To save \$75

Most assembly companies offer more than one show. Book an additional assembly later in the same school year and ask for a price break on the second engagement. You'll get it.

To save \$200–\$250

Yes, discounts this big are possible, but you'll have to write a grant proposal. For some people, this is a daunting task. If grant writing is new to you, plan on allotting three to four hours of your time for your first attempt on the task.

Here's a bit of good news: Some assembly companies offer assistance or grant help sheets that can make proposal writing easier for you. Or you can consider hiring a professional proposal writer who will do the work for you for a small fee.

*For more information on grants that are available to Michigan schools, go to www.michiganhumanities.org.

To save 100%

Get a sponsor. Many community organizations (like the local Lions Club or Rotary Club) and businesses may be willing to help you, since sponsoring an assembly could mean tax deductions and publicity for them. Just like Joe's Pizzeria that is willing to buy uniforms for the Little League team, there may be a local business that's willing to sponsor your anti-violence assembly.

Once you secure sponsorship, send press releases to your local newspapers. If a story appears, you'll have an easier time finding sponsors next year. (Sample press releases are available from www.assemblyshows.com.)

Seek state funding. Some states will provide schools with money to pay for certain types of enrichment programs. For example, you're likely to be able to tap into state dollars that are available for drug prevention/violence prevention programs, or you may look into Title 1 money for family night events. Call the Board of Education or the Superintendent's Office for possible leads.

Watch out for free shows. Dow Chemical, DTE Energy, Lincoln-Mercury and McDonald's are just a few of the companies that send speakers to schools free of charge. Also, consider inviting a high school choir or theater department to perform at your school.

Day-of-Show Details

Plan to attend the assembly yourself, or have a representative on hand to greet the presenter, handle last-minute details and help out when needed.

Last-minute details

Consider sending a note and/or visiting the gym teacher (if the assembly is to be held in the gym) and school custodian personally before the assembly. Don't assume that they have read the daily event calendar or

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remember the show times. Remind the gym teacher that a portion of the gym may not be available during preparation times as well. The custodian will need to set up chairs for teachers and may need to speed up lunch set-up or clean-up if the assembly is to be held in the cafeteria. Also, recruit two or three student volunteers to help or pitch in yourself. The custodian will appreciate it.

Have the balance of the presenter's payment available on the day of the show. Give it to the school secretary in advance or arrange to have the checkbook at the performance. A call to the treasurer the night before the assembly will prevent last-minute panic.

Take note also that some assembly companies prefer to have the balance mailed to them after the show. The contract should indicate the preferred method.

Staging the Show

Many assembly presenters prefer to work on the gym floor instead of on a stage. This creates a more intimate environment and encourages audience participation. Should the presenter prefer to perform onstage, don't assume that your school's stage is large enough to accommodate his or her props or set.

Ask about the presenter's stage preference when booking.

Seating Your Students

Schools typically seat their students on the floor of the performance room with the youngest students in front and the oldest and tallest students at the back. Since the youngest students are quick to get restless, save enough room for them at the front of the audience and bring them in last. Also leave a four-foot wide



center aisle as this will make the older students accessible for audience participation activities.

If your school has a preschool program, make sure that the show is appropriate for them. Mood music, fast movements or surprises can easily frighten the timid.

Encouraging Good Behavior

One goal of assemblies is to teach students how to behave when they're in an audience. It's always a good idea to provide them with a gentle reminder of appropriate behavior before the assembly. (Some teachers may need a private reminder that they're role models for their students. Doing paperwork during programs is disrespectful to the presenter and sets a bad example for students.)

If formal introductions aren't possible, be sure to tell the presenter when he or she may begin.

"I would recommend having a short line or two written down ahead of time. Then anybody could give the introduction with little notice. This sounds basic, but once our principal introduced a company with the wrong name! It was really my fault for not having something prepared for him to look at right before he walked into the gym."

- Teresa Holmes, assembly coordinator, St. John School, Jackson, Michigan

Show Evaluation and Feedback

The presenter shouldn't have to dismiss the students. Make sure an administrator, teacher or assembly coordinator will handle this task.

Getting Feedback

"I have found that I get a lot of immediate feedback from the teachers and students as they leave the gym. If I wasn't there, I would miss all that information."

- Jane Weinberger, assembly coordinator,
Hamilton Elementary, Troy



Asking teachers and students to evaluate an assembly can be tricky, since each group has its own standards of excellence. Students want to have fun; teachers want their students to learn. Before you evaluate an assembly, review its objectives. Was the performance supposed to be all fun? Did the presenters deliver what they promised or what you expected? Was the message designed to reach all grades or only a select few? The bottom line is, **did you get what you paid for?**

Here are some suggestions for gathering feedback:

Use review sheets. Many schools distribute evaluation forms to teachers and ask them to rate assemblies. These forms can be valuable tools if they're kept short and simple. Most teachers are overwhelmed with their responsibilities in the classroom and have little time for extensive evaluations.

Talk to the teachers. Stop by the teachers' lounge during lunch and ask about the assembly. Ask them: "Would your students benefit from seeing this show or presenter again?"

Share reviews with other schools. Was the assembly a big success or a bomb? Do everyone a favor and share this information with the other schools in your district. Many school enrichment committees coordinate district- wide meetings to share information on past performances and schedule block bookings. This makes assembly coordination easier for everyone and helps each school avoid costly mistakes.

Share feedback with assembly companies. Professional presenters always appreciate constructive feedback. It's the only way they can improve.

Well, that's it. We hope this information makes your job a little easier. But remember, we welcome your suggestions and ideas on how this guide can be improved. And be sure to forward this info to the others on the enrichment committee and pass it on to your successor.

If you have a few shortcuts or booking tips you'd like to share, please send them to us through our website, www.assemblyshows.com. If we decide to publish your ideas, we'll send you a \$25 coupon that's good on any of the 12 Scheer Genius Productions shows.

I look forward to meeting you.

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(Compiled by AssemblyShows.com and Scheer Genius Productions)

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