Virtual School Visits
by Alexis O'Neill

One recent technological bandwagon that authors are hopping on shows real promise for both schools and authors: Virtual school visits.

I'm leaving the tech info (software, equipment, set-up costs, connections, etc.) to techies such as Mark London Williams and others (see the SCBWI *Bulletin* July/Aug p. 11)   My focus here is on program format, where to go for advice and support and starter tips from experienced "virtual visit" authors and illustrators.

What is a virtual visit?
In a virtual visit, authors and schools connect via an interactive computer system (e.g. Skype, iChat, WebEx, etc.) through which, ideally, the kids can see the author and the author can see the kids.

Why virtual?
Nothing tops a live author visit for impact. But schools with limited budgets, authors with limited time, and anyone living in remote regions find that virtual visits offer a great interactive option.

How long do visits last?
Sessions range from 15-to-60-minutes, depending on the needs and age of the audience. For longer workshops, some authors offer a multiple-session program of 45 minutes each. In the first visit, the author discusses goals with the teacher. In the second session, the author presents workshop content to students. In the third session the author gives feedback to students on their work. See program examples at http://www2.csd.org/newlinks/programdesc.html

How much do authors charge?
Currently, fees range from free to $500, but the median is about $150 - $200 for a 45-60-minute session. Some authors offer special rates to Title 1 schools. Others have one for small groups and a higher fee if they are addressing many students in an auditorium. Usually, the school sends the check following the session.

What is the right presentation format for a "virtual" program?
First, determine what you want the kids and teachers to learn, understand or do as a result of this interaction.

Gather materials to support your learning goals.

Next, realize that you'll be on camera.   Use the *visual capabilities* of this medium and don't just be a talking head. Physical movements will be limited, but you can use music, photos, video clips, and more, just as in a real classroom.

Author Chris Eboch suggests three basic presentation formats:
1.) *group interview-style*, where pre-selected students ask you questions;
2) individual interview-style, where all participants are welcome to ask you questions;
3) workshop-style, where you teach a skill and provide feedback on results.

Promoting virtual visits:
Author Mona Kirby and Library Media Specialist, Sarah Chauncey, teamed up to create "Skype an Author Network" at
http://skypeanauthor.wetpaint.com/
to provide K-12 teachers and librarians a way to connect authors and young readers through virtual visits. Authors can register without charge for a page outlining their program and fees.

County or cooperative boards of education are another place to promote availability. For example, the Cooperating School Districts of

Greater St. Louis, Inc   http://csd.org/ offers a "distance learning" component featuring children's authors to members under "New Links to Learning" http://www2.csd.org/newlinks/index.html. See if your local county office of education offers this kind of service – or suggest it if they don't.

Finding support.
Start a discussion on your local SCBWI listservs. Organize a tech-support group. Enlist the help of a local library media specialist to do some trial runs. Check YouTube.com for video conferencing tutorials.

Tips for virtual visits:
Science writer Vicki Cobb writes, "[This is] a very different medium from actually being with kids. You need to do a number of them to get a feel for how to do them effectively." Chris Crutcher, who has done over 60 virtual visits, advises, "Ask in advance what the students are hoping to talk and/or hear about."

Kelly Milner Halls says, "It sounds simplistic, but be sure you have the right contact numbers in advance."

And I'd add to this: have a techie on hand to do a run-through and help with glitches.

Have I done any virtual visits myself? I'm planning to! I married my tech support guy, so I'm good to go!

Alexis O'Neill, Ph.D., is the author of THE RECESS QUEEN and other award-winning books for children. She has been an elementary school teacher, a teacher of teachers, and a museum educator. She is a popular school visit presenter and helps other authors create and deliver quality programs. Visit her at www.schoolvisitexperts.com