

SCHOOL ASSEMBLY HANDBOOK

A Guide to Planning, Promoting and Producing
Your School's Next Blockbuster Assembly

By Jeff Evans

This *Handbook* is Designed to Accompany
**The Seven Habits of Highly Effective
ASSEMBLY COORDINATORS**
A Seminar by Rick Hartman and Jeff Evans

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Assembly programs and special school presentations are important. Live performance is an art. It can inspire, motivate, entertain. At its best, it can transform lives.

Planning assembly programs is an art itself! Read on and discover tips that will make it easier to plan, produce, and pay for your next school assembly. *Pick and choose what works best for you.*

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Choose an Assembly that is a Good Fit for your School

There are some very cool assembly programs available, ranging from motivational dog sled mushers to high-flying BMX stunt shows. Prices range from very little (possibly a local celebrity) to very expensive (travel/lodging/expenses for a troupe of performers from out of the area).

If money is no object and teachers have no problem letting students out of class for anything, you can skip this section. However, reality is that you're working with limited resources and teachers are stingy about letting students out of class for non-academic activities.

Do a poll and find out what subjects are important to your school. Here are some popular issues:

- Literature Night
- Diversity/Black History Month
- Science Fair
- Math Night
- Bully Prevention
- Health and Nutrition
- and many more

Once you've highlighted a few subjects that are important to your school, start your search.



Research Quality Assembly Programs

What programs have worked well for your school in the past? If you're new to planning assembly programs, talk with other PTA members who have been involved for a while. Ask teachers and staff for names and recommendations of quality presenters.

Look for presenters who are experienced, age-appropriate, and have a proven track record of doing great work for schools like yours.

Search online. Google, Bing, or use your favorite search engine to get some ideas. A good website is a great resource and should be at the top of your list for doing research, but it's not the final word. Choose quality of content over a "flashy" website.

Tip: Narrow your search a bit by specifying the city or state you're in. No point in calling a presenter on the east coast if you're in Washington!

Tip: It's best to talk with the assembly presenter rather than a booking agency. This minimizes confusion and insures that your questions and requests reach the person that matters most; the one who will be visiting your school.

Attend a booking conference in your area. Visit www.assemblyshowcase.com for information about performers in Washington state and the Pacific Northwest. Each September a conference is held in the Seattle area featuring a live performance showcase. It's an ideal opportunity for you to meet and talk with potential assembly presenters.

Experienced. Be wary of someone who doesn't have much experience performing for schools. Holding the attention of five hundred kids of varying ages is difficult. Make sure you're getting a polished presenter.

Age-appropriate. There's a huge difference between what a 3rd grader will find fascinating and what will hold the attention of an 8th grader. Be sure that your presenter is experienced and has a message and program specific for your school.

Part-time vs. Full-time Pros. Dealing with a full-time pro gives you confidence knowing that you're working with someone who has a quality program. "Show business" has two words, and the *business* side of things is every bit as important as the show when it comes to being easy to work with.

At the same time, part-time presenters can be every bit as good as their full-time counterparts. It simply emphasizes the importance of doing research.

Research online reviews. Go through the performer's website. Look for testimonials that address the issues that are important to you. ("Bob did a great show" is not specific enough. Look for comments that reflect on the quality of the information as well as how easy and professional the person was to work with.)

Even better, look for online reviews posted on an independent site. Places like www.yahoo.com,

www.yelp.com, yellow page directories, and other sites give people a chance to give feedback on all kinds of services.



Watch the video. I love videos! Online video is a great way to see what you'll experience at your school... *or is it?* Look for video that is more than a series of quick edits and still photos done to music. Be sure that you can get a feel of the presenter's personality and their presentation .

Demo videos can be deceptive. Anyone can look good in slickly edited takes of five seconds here and five seconds there. Look for quality of program rather than production quality of the video. Ideally they'll have both a professional video and a quality program, but content always trumps appearance.

Who are you booking? "The guy (or gal) on their website!" *Or are you?* Find out if you're working with a franchise or organization that hires other presenters to work for them. Ask for the name of the specific person who will be visiting your school. It can be a rude surprise to book "the person on the video" and then have someone else arrive at your school. It's always best to talk directly with the presenter to reduce the chance of a misunderstanding.

Speak with a client. Even better than reviews, ask for a client who you can speak with. Ideally you want to talk with an assembly coordinator at another school who had the same program that you are interested in. Any presenter who is a professional and working on a regular basis will be happy to give you references. If they don't, run away, fast.

See if for yourself. There is also a chance that you may be able to preview the performer's show. Ask if they are performing a show in your area that you can visit.



Booking your Presenter

Almost there! You chose the perfect topic for your school, found a great presenter, and are ready to schedule your date.

Questions to ask your Presenter

- Do you need a stage or platform or do you work at ground level?
- Do you have special requirements (i.e., high ceiling for a juggler)?
- Do you use fire or live animals in your performance?
- Do you carry insurance? (This may or may not be an issue for you, as schools have their own insurance as well.)
- What sort of sound system requirements do you have?
- How early will you arrive to set up?
- How long does it take to break down afterwards?

Tip: Get your presenter's cell phone and give them yours... just in case.

Give your presenter special information that is specific for your school.

- Load in information
- Parking tips
- Road construction or detours in the area

Alert your presenter about students with special needs.

- Peanut allergies
- Phobias of loud noises (i.e., a balloon popping)
- Allergic reaction to latex (i.e., gloves or balloons)
- Hearing impaired (ASL interpreter on stage with you, wearing a microphone for assistive-listening devices)



Negotiating the Best Assembly Rates

This is what you've been waiting for: the secret techniques to unlock discounted rates...

Ask if your presenter offers discounts. It's worth a try! They may have ideas and suggestions that you never would have thought of.

Inquire about [block-booking discounts](#). You save money if another school in your area that would like to book the same program on the same day.

Not all presenters are the same. Some won't offer a discount like this, others will provide more. However, in talking with many performers, most are happy to give you a price break if they can do more work.

Bundle services. If you're having a science assembly to kick off your Science Fair, ask the presenter to see if they also host workshops or classroom visits. If they're already at your school, the cost to add additional services may be more reasonable than hiring a specialist to come out separately.

Daytime & Family Night Show Discount. If the presenter can offer a different show during the day and evening, they may be willing to give you a special rate for the additional program. This can also insure good attendance, as kids go home that afternoon talking about the fun assembly program and literally drag their mom or dad back for the evening show.

We have never had so many people attend one of our Family Enrichment Nights! I think doing the assembly during the day really boosted our attendance in the evening. The kids obviously loved your performance!... he said his friends think I am a cool Mom because I brought you to the school. I am so glad we had you come."

-Shelly Smith, Cedar Valley PTA

Credit for Product sales. Some presenters have programs where they will sell product (i.e., yo-yos) in exchange for a lower performance fee. This can be a touchy subject as there are families who don't have extra money for these sort of items. You'll know whether this is an option for your school or not.

Some performers will charge admission for evening Family Night programs and sell items afterward in return for doing a free or discounted show.

Inquire about fundraising options. Fundraising companies aren't the only ones who offer money-making opportunities. Some performers also can show you ways to creatively raise money to help offset the cost of their program.

Creative Assembly Fundraising Ideas

- Sell raffle tickets for an item that is donated by one of your PTA members. It doesn't need to be a physical "item"; it could be that the winning child gets to eat lunch with the principal or move to the front of the lunch line for the entire week. Kids dig this stuff, and it costs you nothing!
- Host a Family Night show and sell refreshments and concessions.

- Combine a Family Night show with a fundraiser that you are currently doing. I.e., host Literature Night while having your annual book sale. These activities complement each other and get families (with money) into the school to celebrate reading.
- Find a sponsor. Local businesses, service organizations, and retailers will occasionally pay for a program. They receive recognition and build goodwill. Of course, encourage one of your classrooms to write the business a thank-you.
- Apply for grants. Businesses and organizations occasionally give back to the community.

While we're on the subject of money, here are a few other questions to ask:

- Do you have a contract? (Get your agreement in writing.)
- Will you send me an invoice? (Always.)
- When do you need to be paid?*
- Who should the check be made to?

*If payment is made through the school district they may pay with a Purchase Order. Frequently these cannot be processed and paid until after the service is rendered. Let your presenter know this in advance.

Current law requires that you receive a W-9 for independent contractors that you hire and pay \$600 or more during the year. (Check with your accountant for more details.) Assembly pros will be able to furnish this along with any other documentation you need (UBI number, etc.).



Staging Your Assembly

This is where the rubber meets the road! You chose the right program and booked the right presenter at the right price. These are the details that will play a big part in how pleasant the experience is, both for your presenter as well as your students.

What do you have to work with? Schools range from "cafe-toriums" where everything happens somewhere at ground level to beautiful auditoriums with full stages. Assembly performances also vary. Some presenters have an interactive style where children help throughout the program. Others don't involve this sort of audience participation. Some programs are more visual, while others are more audible. Jugglers have their own special requirements.

Obviously, you need to take your space and your artist into consideration as you plan. Here are a few general guidelines that will put you on the right track.

Leave an Aisle. An aisle is really a necessity, whether the performer asks for it or not. A child may need to get up and leave during the program. Or, a teacher may need to talk with a student about behavior or re-arrange the seating for students. They need a way to get to these children.

Tip: An aisle is as easy as a two rows of cones in the center of the seating area. If you want to label seating areas, use dowels with laminated paper "flags" with teacher's names. Drop the dowel into the top of the cone to make it easy for teachers to find their section.

Stage. If your school has a stage it's a huge plus. Many stages are used for music rooms. This makes it tricky working to get the space available for an assembly, but it's great to have the option available. A stage elevates the performer, making it easier for kids at the back to see.

Tip: If there is a basketball hoop lurking in front of the stage, ask the custodian if it can be raised to improve sight lines.

Tip: Older stages (and platforms) don't have built-in steps. If you have steps that can be slid into place at the front it's easier and faster to get people on and off stage (as opposed to taking steps at the far wings). If you don't have portable steps, you may be able to use a stack of gym mats to create a "step".



Bleachers. Bleachers are more common at middle and high schools and at older elementary schools. The plus: sight lines are good for students even at the back. The minus: bleachers are loud. Hundreds of little feet moving around on wood with space beneath them are noisy.

If you have bleachers be sure that students understand that stomping their feet is not acceptable. This is a cultural program indoors, not a sporting event at the stadium.

Timing Your Assembly. If the assembly is scheduled to begin at 10:00 am, teachers should be moving towards the gym five+ minutes before the program begins. Start on time, end on time, and get the maximum value from your assembly program.

Delaying the start of an assembly for one class that forgot to come is no fun and everyone loses. Announcements by intercom calling students by grades for seating are a great way to get the process started in an organized way.

Sound Systems. This is a can of worms, as a whole book could be written on how to set up and use microphones and sound systems. Let's keep it simple here: your music teacher, principal, custodian, or PE teacher can show you how to work your sound system.

Tip: have a handheld microphone (either wired or wireless) on a stand set up regardless of whether your presenter needs it or not. A microphone is a huge help for introductions and announcements. It's also great insurance in the event that something happens to the performer's microphone, they can simply reach over and have a microphone that is set up and ready to go.

Tip: Feedback is the terrible squeal that happens when you place a microphone too close to a speaker or have the volume too high on a speaker. It happens most often when someone unknowingly walks in front of a speaker with a microphone. The solution is simple: know where your speakers are located and avoid walking in front of them with a live microphone.

Tip: If you need to adjust the volume of music or a microphone, adjust the control for that one channel only. Don't change the master control, as doing so immediately changes the volume on every other input.

Here's a sample situation: a student is speaking into a microphone on channel #1. The presenter has their microphone plugged into channel #2. The student is soft-spoken and hard to hear, so you move the master level up. Your presenter begins speaking and -AAGH - feedback! Adjust the individual channel levels rather than the master level.

Lighting. You may or may not have much control over lighting. If you have a stage of any kind there is likely special stage lighting. Sometimes there are light switches or dimmers that control these lights. Other times they are controlled by breakers in a (possibly locked) electrical panel. Sometimes special lighting boards must be plugged in before any of the lights can be turned on.

Your music teacher, principal, or custodian will likely be able to help you here. In general, the more light on the performance area, the better. (Exceptions: projection screens, shadow art - you get the picture.)

Before the Assembly: Establishing Expectations

Establish your good behavior expectations in advance. When teachers, administrators, and *you* set the expectation of excellent assembly behavior, students rise to the occasion. When the principal, PTA leader, or teacher takes control of the room from the moment that students begin filing in, presenters smile because they know that you understand the importance of expecting good behavior. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Students should also know that if they are disruptive during the program that they will be removed. This is the teacher's responsibility and not the presenter's job.

Prepare the students. This isn't your responsibility as a PTA leader, but is included here for completeness. It's important for young students (kindergarten and first grade) and before the first school assembly of the year when kids may not be familiar with the behavior expectations.

Students should keep their hands to themselves, focus on the speaker or presenter, and be quiet unless called upon. Sit cross-legged so that their friends and class-mates behind them can see.

Explain the difference between polite applause to show appreciation and enjoyment as opposed to chanting, whistling, or foot stomping (bleachers only). Mention that some students will be invited to take part in the program. Students who are seated quietly with their hand raised will have the best chance of being chosen.

Promote the special event. Some presenters will mail posters or fliers for you to post. Put them on doors and bulletin boards to let students know about the program in advance.

"The pre-made fliers were wonderful! They made my job advertising so simple. I really liked the personal touches that were added by naming our PTA and Family Enrichment."

-Melissa Santiago, Cedar Valley Elementary P. T. A.

Get the word out.

- Publish info about your assembly on the school's website.
- Include it on printed and online calendars.
- Post fliers or posters where students (and parents) will see them.
- Include information in the school newsletter.
- Publicize the assembly on your outdoor reader board.
- Get everyone pumped up about the special program!



During the Assembly: Keep Things Moving Smoothly

Introduce your presenter. Pros normally either have an introduction for you or the principal to read or introduce themselves. Ask them in advance so there's no surprise at the last moment. (This may be the role of your principal or a teacher who runs assemblies.)

Discipline problems. Although it's not your job as a PTA leader to act as duty teacher during assembly programs, sometimes it falls into your lap. The most common problems are evening programs that you're running without assistance from school teachers or staff. Kids are sitting with their friends rather than with their class. Parents are typically seated in chairs towards the back of the room and aren't always right there to keep an eye on their child.

Good presenters know how to take control of an audience and keep them focused. At the same time, there are times when action needs to be taken. If a student is causing problems that prevent others around them from being able to enjoy the program, don't hesitate to step in and move the student to a different location or ask them to sit with their parent or guardian.

Enjoy the show. A plus of being the assembly coordinator is that you can encourage the school to book assemblies that you want to see! Yep, when you've done your homework you should be able to sit back and enjoy the program yourself.



After the Assembly: Follow-Up

Congratulations, you had a great show! Teachers were buzzing excitedly in the staff room. The principal had nothing but praise for the assembly. And of course, the kids had a blast. You receive well-deserved appreciation and look like a hero. *(Even your child is happy to point out that you made it all possible.)*

Maximize the value from the assembly with class discussions. Encourage students to talk about what they have seen and learned in their classrooms. Begin with one student and go around the room asking each student to name something they learned from the show, what they liked, what surprised them, what message the presenter was trying to get across, etc. This is a good way to benefit from the program.

Draw Pictures. Younger students and artistic older ones can draw pictures of what they liked or remembered about the program.

Write About The Show. Older students can write a couple of paragraphs or a story about the show. Or, they can write letters to the presenter with their thoughts from the program.



Pass it on to the Next Generation

Now you're the assembly pro! Keep a notebook of what you learn along the way.

- What worked well?
- Who was enjoyable to do business with as a presenter?
- What would you change if you were doing it again?

Create a resource folder for the person who will handle activities after you. It's your turn to be a mentor and share your nuggets of wisdom with the next generation of assembly coordinators.



About the Author



Jeff Evans' career in magic began twenty five years ago from a book on coin tricks at his grandparents' house. Today he works extensively throughout Washington state and the Pacific Northwest, bringing the experience of over 250 shows per year when he visits your school.

Each of Jeff's educational and motivational-themed assembly programs is developed from the ground up to meet educational objectives in a fun way. Subjects include science, reading, bully prevention, and just-for-fun evening shows.

Learn more about his programs at <http://www.edumazement.com/blog>, send e-mail to jeff@edumazement.com, or call toll-free (877) 412-5064.

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