

# LEARNING FROM THE PROS

*Young Author Conferences boost writing and reading skills*

BY MARGRIET RUURS

**"W**ow! Do you know that you are world famous in Kamloops?" A young student stares, wide-eyed, at her favorite author: Ann Walsh, author of *Flower Power*. Writer and reader are brought together by the Kamloops Young Author Conference.

"Can I shake your hand?"

"Can you autograph my book?"

"I want to be an author, too, when I grow up!"

These are just a few of the comments heard at Young Author Conferences around North America.

How is a Young Author Conference (YAC) organized, and do they make a difference to a student's desire and skills to read and write? That is a question I asked several coordinators of such events.

Young Author Conferences may vary in size and length, but most have several

things in common: They are co-ordinated by dedicated volunteers, attended by eager students, and embraced by teach-

Roberta Long Medal for Distinguished Contributions to Literature, which celebrates the cultural diversity of children. The medal is presented on the night before the conference, enabling speakers and teachers to meet at a reception.

Alabama's YAC has been held for 21 years. The event is coordinated and hosted by the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and several university faculty members serve on the steering committee as volunteers. Elementary and high school students attend the conference, which is held in buildings across the campus.

A local college campus is a popular venue for a YAC. A campus offers lots of space for workshops and general sessions, and the facility is usually, on a Saturday, made available to local schools at no charge.

## Who speaks at a YAC?

A YAC offers a terrific way for elemen-

tary, middle, and high school students to meet published authors and illustrators, to listen to presentations

writers of books for all age ranges as well as various genres. They review published works, presenters' websites, and available promotional and review materials before making their selections.

## How are YACs funded?

At the Alabama YAC, participants from Grades 1–8 pay a modest \$4.00 fee to register. With an audience range of between 3,500 and 4,500, this provides the conference with a workable budget. "We invite the best speakers we can afford," says longtime coordinator Maryann Manning. "This past year our speakers included Ashley Bryan, Eloise Greenfield, David Harrison, and others." Parents bring their students to the Saturday event and are invited to attend

Parents bring their students to the Saturday event and are invited to attend their own, separate session. Other YACs allow parents to attend a session if accompanied by a child, while still others do not involve parents at all because the event is held at school during school



Margriet Ruurs autographs books for participants at Nanaimo's Young Author Conference.

tial discount, to host out-of-town speakers. It may be worthwhile to approach business about sponsorship for that will boost children's reading and writing skills.

Funding from the Canada Council for the Arts helps to bring speakers across the country to the YAC. The YAC in Fort St. John, British Columbia, is entirely funded by the Superintendent's office—a great example to administrators everywhere.

In some cases funding also comes from the sale of books. If the conference





ers and parents as a valuable asset.

## Overviews of two conferences

In 1986, a group of local teachers from School District #68 in Nanaimo, British Columbia, together with local booksellers and librarians from the Vancouver Island Regional Library, organized the first Vancouver Island Children's Book Festival in Nanaimo. The following year, Malaspina College joined as a sponsor, providing a central site for the festival. Today, the first Saturday in May still marks Bookfest day, bringing hundreds of K-8 children to campus to meet their favorite authors and illustrators. The festival's mission is as follows:

- to promote literacy and a love of literature in the central Vancouver Island region by introducing children to high-quality works by Canadian authors and illustrators,
- to stimulate children's creativity by bringing them together with professional authors and illustrators who share their creative processes,
- to celebrate excellence in Canadian children's literature and book illustration by showcasing both well-established and notable new authors and illustrators.

The Alabama Young Authors' Conference is coupled with presentation of the

about writing and drawing, and to learn "the

hours.

In Whitehorse, Yukon, the Young Authors event is held at the high school two days during a weeklong, community-wide Yukon Writers Festival. Teachers work as volunteers, together with one library resource person, to coordinate the day. To select authors, Joyce Sward, an English teacher and department head at F.H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse, depends on her own and others' knowledge of good books as well as recommendations from others who have heard certain authors speak.

The Whitehorse festival is funded through the Writers Union of Canada, which makes grants available to cover authors' fees and travel expenses, along with the Department of Education, the Yukon Science Institute, and local businesses. Sometimes a local hotel will donate rooms, or at least offer a substan-

coordinators choose to do so, they order books by participating speakers discount from the publisher. The price, sometimes as much as 40%, will help strengthen the YAC budget.

## Selecting participants

While almost all coordinators seek to avoid a "contest" approach, selection of participants varies. In some districts, students are invited to submit a manuscript if they wish to be considered. Stories are selected on merit and effort, and the young authors invited to participate in other areas, classroom teachers select students, or students simply volunteer. Some YACs publish an anthology of students' stories and poems to share with the school library.

## What impact does a YAC have?

Classroom teachers, district staff, and parents agree that a Young Authors Conference gets kids excited about writing. Students get to meet published authors



Young authors work on their writing.

story behind the book." Often, the participating students actually get to write during a workshop as well.

Speakers at a YAC often include a variety of both nationally known and local authors and illustrators. Some conferences have only one or two speakers: an author for one group and an illustrator for the other. Then both groups rotate, allowing the speakers to present twice and the entire audience to hear both speakers. Other YACs host up to 10 speakers, including picture book writers, illustrators, a poet, a nonfiction writer, a local broadcaster or news reporter, and so on.

In Nanaimo, a special committee consisting of the festival coordinator; representatives from the library, school district, and bookstore; and the school visit coordinator select each year's speakers. They balance the program to include

## For further information

Here are some websites that provide useful information about Young Author Conferences.

- Alabama Young Authors' Conference: [www.youngauthors.info/](http://www.youngauthors.info/)
- Bookfest, the Vancouver Island Children's Festival: [www.bookfest.ca/about.htm](http://www.bookfest.ca/about.htm)
- McLean County (Illinois) Unit District 5 Young Author's Program: [www.unit5.org/youngauthors/index.htm](http://www.unit5.org/youngauthors/index.htm)