



WORKING WITH SCHOOLS

- ✓ Identify a school coordinator
- ✓ Distribute the Teacher's Guide
- ✓ Hold a "Teachers' Meeting"
- ✓ Distribute posters, flyers, and entry forms
- ✓ CASE STUDY: How one volunteer gets thousands of teens each year to write about their *laws of life*

"I never thought that taking part in this contest would have such a profound effect on my relationship with my students. I have always told my students that writing is a form of discovery — this time I was the one discovering who my students really are."

— Roger Mahn, English Teacher,
Wayzata High School,
Plymouth, Minnesota

How many young people would you like to involve in your *Laws of Life* Essay Contest? What number of participants would make your program a success? These are two questions to consider as you think about how you will work with your local schools. After all, once you make the commitment to launch a contest, you will want your program to reach as many young people as possible. In this section, you will find the most common techniques that contest organizers have used to engage their local schools in the contest and maximize the number of students who participate in the program. You will also read a case study about how one volunteer in Atlanta, Georgia inspires thousands of Georgia teens each year to reflect and write about their *laws of life*.



IDENTIFY A SCHOOL COORDINATOR

The “school coordinator” may simply be your contact at the school: the principal, English department head, or staff member who has committed his or her support to the contest. He or she can serve as a liaison between the contest committee and the school’s teachers, and is the person to call when you want to give the teachers materials or information. Or the school coordinator may play a more important role, depending on the size of the contest. For example, in cases where more than one school is involved in the contest, each school may have their own coordinator, and each coordinator may be responsible for promoting and implementing the contest within his or her school. As indicated in Sample Budgets B and C (on pages 16 and 18), we suggest you remunerate school coordinators if they are given significant responsibilities.

Regardless of the role the coordinator plays, it is vital that every teacher knows whom to contact at the school with questions about the contest.

DISTRIBUTE THE TEACHER’S GUIDE

The Teacher’s Guide answers many of the questions that teachers, coordinators, and school officials may have about the essay contest. Teachers love the activities in the Guide, and we recommend you provide one copy to each teacher who participates in the contest.

The Teacher’s Guide has been designed specifically for English classes. Co-written by an English teacher, the Guide includes an explicit, well-structured lesson plan that reinforces a process, or multi-draft, approach to writing. These days, teachers at all levels (and not just in English classes!) are working on writing with their students. The essay contest gives them a wonderful opportunity to practice important writing skills using a meaningful and engaging activity. Thanks to the Guide, teachers are able to seamlessly integrate the contest into their existing curriculum without having to do a lot of extra work.

TIP:

When promoting the contest, make sure you mention that the National Association of Secondary School Principals has placed the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest on the NASSP National Advisory List of Student Contests and Activities.





HOLD A “TEACHERS’ MEETING”

Most times, school officials have informed teachers that they will be taking part in the contest before the teachers’ meeting is held. However, the meeting is still very important, because it provides you with an opportunity to meet teachers, give them useful materials and information about the contest (such as the deadline for turning in the essays), and answer their questions about the contest. Most important, it is an opportunity to gain the full support of the people who will be administering the contest. If planned the right way, as teachers learn about the contest they will grow more and more enthusiastic and will be convinced that the contest will greatly benefit their students and themselves.



The way teachers hear about the contest is important! As indicated earlier, a representative from the John Templeton Foundation is available to talk to teachers. If requested, a teacher who is currently involved in the contest may also be able to speak at the teachers’ meeting. Of course, a member of your contest committee should also meet with teachers to answer their questions.

DISTRIBUTE POSTERS, FLYERS, AND ENTRY FORMS

The teachers’ meeting offers you a good opportunity to distribute your contest posters, flyers, and entry forms to school coordinators, officials, and teachers. Posters advertising the contest are often hung in schools, municipal buildings, libraries, churches, etc. A sample contest poster can be found on page 39 of the Appendix.

We have included two sample flyers on page 40 of the Appendix. In some communities, flyers are handed out in schools to every eligible student. In other communities, the contest committee decides to mail flyers directly to parents so that they can learn about the program. Contest flyers are also distributed to community organizations, churches, civic and youth groups, potential sponsors, and local media outlets.



We have included one example of a contest entry form on page 41 of the Appendix. The entry form should be designed to reflect the needs of your contest. You are advised to include a “permission section,” in which students and their parents authorize you to use the essays to promote and publicize the contest.

CASE STUDY: HOW ONE VOLUNTEER GETS THOUSANDS OF TEENS EACH YEAR TO WRITE ABOUT THEIR *LAWS OF LIFE*

Amy Butler has championed two of the largest Laws of Life Essay Contests to date, in Palm Beach County, Florida (10,000 writers in one year) and Atlanta, Georgia (8,900 participants in just the second year of the program). Recently, Amy shared with the John Templeton Foundation her “secrets” for maximizing student participation — even in the first year of the program.

JTF: *How many high schools and students participated in the first two years of the Georgia Contest?*

Amy: For the first year, I had originally targeted 20 high schools and 2,000 essays — about 10% of eligible students. In actuality, 15 high schools and 6,407 students participated in the inaugural contest, which represents a much higher penetration than I had anticipated — about 26% of possible participants. In the second year of the Georgia Contest, 21 high schools and 8,907 kids participated, representing 27% of eligible students.

JTF: *Tell us about your “game plan” for promoting the contest to teachers.*

Amy: I think the key to winning the support of teachers is to hold a well-attended teachers’ meeting. Here is how I hold mine:

Step One: Find the best place in town to hold the teachers’ meeting and luncheon, so teachers will want to come. Once I learn which dates suit everyone, I invite two people from each school I am targeting.



Step Two: Communicate personally with all meeting invitees. Invite teachers well in advance of the teachers' meeting (3 - 4 weeks) and ask them to get a substitute teacher (which I offer to pay for) if necessary. On the invitation, indicate that one representative from the school must attend the orientation in order for the school to participate in the contest. Make sure to get RSVPs.



Amy Butler poses with David Andrews, top finalist in the Year 2000 Contest, his mother, and his English teacher Davey Mills (on right).

Step Three: Secure the speaker and develop the meeting agenda. (Including lunch, the meeting lasts about 2½ hours.) Make folders that include all of the pertinent information to be distributed: contest timeline, your own “contest newsletter” or flyer that advertises the contest, list of prizes and awards, list of sample topics, past essays, entry forms, school tally sheets, and copies of the John Templeton Foundation’s Teacher’s Guide.

Use the teachers’ meeting to: 1) inspire teachers to get involved in the program; 2) share with teachers the incredible benefits that the contest will offer their students; and 3) show teachers how to run the program in their schools. Since the Georgia Contest involves the participation of multiple schools, I ask each school to select one individual as the school’s “contest chair.” This person is responsible for facilitating the program within his/her school and helping to maximize student participation. (The contest chair is given a \$100 honorarium.) Having one contest chair at each school really helps the program to run smoothly and enables schools to take ownership of the contest.

JTF: *Promoting the contest to schools can sometimes be tricky, since teachers are often under pressure with full teaching schedules, state testing standards, etc. How were you able to convince teachers this was a project worth their time?*

Amy: Teachers are inundated with special contests for them to do in class. I tried to reinforce that the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is different because: 1) the program is not an add-on and can be used to reinforce existing lesson material — plus, teachers do not need to read or grade the essays; 2) each school is



guaranteed to have at least one finalist who will be invited with their parents and English teacher to the awards dinner; 3) some students can use their essays for college applications; and 4) the top essays will be published and distributed to schools.

JTF: *Do you think that getting the endorsements of the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Character Education Center made a difference as you promoted the contest to schools and teachers?*

Amy: Absolutely! It is important to get endorsements from prominent organizations prior to approaching schools so that they know you are creditable and approved. That's why I am so excited about the addition of the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest to the list of approved programs by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. I believe in establishing as many coalitions in the community as possible to market the contest and generate support for the program.

JTF: *Many contest organizers ask us, "What is Amy's secret to achieving such phenomenal participation?" While every community is different, what do you think are the key ways that organizers can maximize student participation in the essay contest?*

Amy: **First** and foremost, communicate, communicate, communicate! The initial communication I have with schools consists of a "press kit," which I send out before the teachers' meeting. The kit outlines the benefits of the contest for English department chairs and principals. Also, once I have identified the contest chair in each school, I communicate regularly with him or her to keep updated about the school's progress in promoting the contest and to provide any needed support.

Second, be enthusiastic about the program. Try to make a personal connection with every teacher at the teachers' meeting, sharing with them that this contest is important to kids and has a lot to do with why teachers



Amy Butler emcees the Georgia Laws of Life Awards Banquet.



"My students are always writing for me, but this was one assignment which enabled them to share their thoughts and ideas with the world... The activity reinforced their writing and really offered [them]... an opportunity to grow and to learn about themselves."

— Jeff Stachura, English Teacher,
The Lovett School,
Atlanta, Georgia

became educators in the first place. It helps to have all of the teachers together in one room for the meeting to compare notes and generate interest among their peers.

Third, give lots of recognition and prize money to motivate teachers and students — about 80% of our donor's funds benefit teachers and students via the prize money, awards dinner, publication of the top essays, and the teachers' luncheon. Also, the teacher of the student who writes the grand prizewinning essay receives \$500.

Fourth, treat the teachers with respect and keep them informed so they feel they are part of the process. Ask their opinion, and let those teachers who are very enthusiastic about the contest speak at the teachers' meeting. *Remember, the support of teachers either makes or breaks a successful contest*, which I measure by the number of essays as a percentage of total eligible students.

JTF: What is your goal for year three of the Georgia Contest?

Amy: Our goal for this year is to generate 20,000 essays. With any luck, we'll get there!