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Real Stories uses stories written by teens for their peers and excerpts from young adult novels to engage teens in discussions and activities about issues that are important to them.

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By Sarah Jonas and Eric Gurna

Engagement key for successful teen literacy programs

Youth programs that seek to engage adolescents in activities that can strengthen their literacy skills can be successful only if they are knowledgeable about the research on adolescents’ physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral development and intentional about designing literacy programs that are aligned with teens’ developmental stages.

For programs to be responsive and attractive to teens, they need to embody the basics of positive youth development — give plenty of voice and choice, make the content relevant, create a safe space in which teens can explore and express their identities, provide opportunities for teens to design and lead activities, and, perhaps most important for literacy enrichment, to start with what they care about and are already involved in.

While the need for programs that engage teens in reading is clear, the literacy enrichment resources available to after-school and summer programs for adolescents are few and far between. For programs that approach things from a strong perspective of positive youth development, resources need to do more than simply get young people to practice reading as a skill, but also need to engage their minds, inspire them and serve as bridges to things they are interested in.

The Aim High Program in San Francisco is a summer program that balances academic classes and enrichment activities generated by the staff and ideas from youth participants. Sandra Corison Lee, Aim High’s director of special projects, said that youth engagement is key. “Developmentally, in middle school, kids are focused on themselves, and they want to see reflections of themselves in literature,” she said. “We find that what is most important is to use compelling and relevant literature in our classes so that students have compelling and relevant reasons to read.”

In some cases, programs use young people’s interests as a motivator. After School Matters, which runs more than 450 apprenticeship programs in Chicago, doesn’t have a specific focus on literacy, but many of their practitioners encourage participants to read up on the subject of their work. Ray Legler, director of research and evaluation, refers to this approach as, “A subversive way to push reading, by getting them really interested in something, and then slowly start giving them books that are relevant to that content. Then they can see for themselves, ‘Oh, I’m interested in this topic, and I can learn more about it by reading.’ ”

Shawn Petty, regional coordinator for the Cooperative for After-School Enrichment in Houston, said his group finds a “homegrown, book-club” atmosphere in their 144 schools. After-school staff members introduce books they think the kids will like and initiate discussions about the stories they read, apply the lessons learned or go over new vocabulary.

Real Stories Real Teens recently won the Distinguished Achievement Award for Best Curriculum Package for a Specialized Audience (Grades 9-12) from the Association of Educational Publishers.

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Passion necessary component of Quest for Excellence award

In 2005, Robin Korson had been working in the after-school field for 13 years. She loved working with the children and knew that she was aiding in their development.

But winning the first School-Age NOTES Foundation's Quest for Excellence award reinforced in her that what she did every day was important.

"When I won, I said, 'That's it. That's recognition.' "

The recognition, though, was secondary to how she felt accepting the award in front of her peers at that year's National AfterSchool Association annual convention.

"It wasn't just for me," she said. "It was for everybody. It shows that this is what you can do. It's another step forward for the after-school field."

Kathleen Hermes, president of the School-Age NOTES Foundation, agrees that the award, now in its fourth year, seeks to promote — and laud — excellence in school-age care.

In addition to the award itself, the winner receives a one-year subscription to School-Age NOTES, a one-year membership to the National After-School Association, paid registration and airfare to the annual convention and hotel accommodations for three nights, Hermes said.

Hermes works with a small committee to select the annual winner, but as Foundation president, has the pleasure of visiting with the winner in his or her program during the taping of a film that is shown at the award presentation.

"It's very poignant to see the way the person interacts with kids," Hermes said. "You can tell that this person is very special to the kids."

Korson, who has since served on the selection committee, said she looked for that connection when reviewing nominations.

Awarded only to frontline staff members, "I was looking for the ones who are actually getting in and doing the work," Korson said. "I looked for passion in the nomination that reflects the passion in the school-age provider's work."

AfterSchool Professional Network sponsors award

The School-Age NOTES Foundation Quest for Excellence award — sponsored this year by AfterSchool Professional Network — is exclusively for frontline staff members who work directly with children daily in an after-school program. Nominees must have been employed in an after-school program for at least two years and work a minimum of 10 hours a week for a school-age-care program that meets five days a week. The application must be submitted by a supervisor, parent, board member or fellow teacher.

To download a nomination form, go to <http://www.schoolagenotesfoundation.org>. Nominations are due Nov. 1. Contact Kathleen Hermes at khermes@schoolagenotesfoundation.org with any questions.

To join AfterSchool Professional Network, go to <http://www.after-schoolpro.net/> and click on "join the network."

Passion is a key component in the after-school field. Vicki Carr, president of the AfterSchool Professional Network, embodies that passion as a supporter of the field.

AfterSchool Professional Network is a no-dues online network for after-school professionals, providing information and solutions to its members. This year, Carr's association chose to sponsor of the Quest for Excellence award, seeking to join the School-Age NOTES Foundation in recognizing excellence.

"Working with youth after the regular school hours requires multiple skills and large amounts of imagination and understanding," Carr said. "It takes a special person to be successful in the field and an even more special person to be successful over many years."

After-school professionals, Carr said, "are balancing the key components of informal learning, physical fitness, social and community development — while making it fun and engaging for the youngsters and satisfying other stakeholders in their setting.

"Past winners have continued to excel in the field and lead others to excellence. It's one of those gifts that keeps giving."

Korson — who has spent her career at Nature's Nursery at Green Chimneys in Brewster, New York, agrees with Carr and credits winning the award with instilling in her the drive to continue doing more and, in turn, to achieve more.

Named director at Nature's Nursery in January, Korson said winning the School-Age NOTES Foundation's Quest for Excellence award contributed to her exploring and getting her current position. In addition, she's pursuing an associate's degree for her New York state administrative credentials. She's also become very involved in collecting donations for prizes to give out at the NAA convention.

But her favorite role will take place this fall when she returns to working directly with children at her program site two nights a week.

"I'm really excited about being with the kids again and they are, too."

Erika Konowalow is managing editor for School-Age Notes.



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The Well Director

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How do you stack up as a director? Is your performance finely honed, vibrant and robust? Or is it displaying symptoms of frailty?

To help you evaluate your performance as a director, I have identified ten vital attributes of a well director. Compare your performance against these attributes. View this as a set of goals to strive toward, rather than as a do or die checklist.

The well director has a vision for her organization.

The well director sees herself involved in more than a nine-to-five job. According to Charles Garfield, truly effective leaders have "a sense of being involved in a creative mission that matters." They have a vision for their organization that gives their work meaning and inspires them to act. This vision not only inspires the leader, it also infects all those in the organization. Warren Bennis reports "leaders' visions are compelling and pull people toward them. Intensity coupled with commitment is magnetic."

The well director achieves results through directing people to accomplish the goals of the organization.

The well director is more than a dreamer. He can translate an inspiring vision into achievable goals.

"In almost every successful performance of a group task," observes Theodore Caplow, "goals and standards must be set clearly in advance, clearly communicated, kept constantly in view and dramatized along the way." Such goals provide the road map that all staff members can use to guide their day-to-day efforts.

By clearly communicating organizational and curriculum goals, the director focuses the resources and efforts of the center. By concentrating efforts beyond some minimum point of intensity and continuity, there is likely to be a worthwhile payoff (Hostrop). On the other hand, when there are no clear goals in place, the efforts of staff members are dispersed in countless directions, with little if any lasting impact.

The well director is continually assessing the performance of the organization.

The well director keeps a finger on the pulse of the organization. She is continually monitoring the progress of the organization toward accomplishing its goals.

To track center performance, the director has a control system in place. For each center goal, the director has identified what information should be collected, and how it should be collected, to determine if the center is making progress toward its accomplishment.

From experience, the well director has learned to keep her control system simple and operational (Drucker). To determine if the center is achieving its financial objectives, for example, the director no longer pours over every invoice and receipt, but carefully analyzes monthly income and expense statements and balance sheets.



Image by Marilyn McKinley

To determine if the center is achieving its curriculum goals, the director does not bring in outside consultants to do a major study, but sets up periodic focused classroom observations and random parent interviews. The well director recognizes that she cannot rely totally on formal controls. She knows that much can be learned by walking around the center on a regular basis and through informal discussions with all staff members (Garfield).

The well director keeps in touch with changes in the world outside the center.

The well director keeps an eye on the environment in which the organization is operating. He is attuned to changes occurring outside the center that may require center goals to be modified or abandoned.

He continually reassesses the relevance of the center's program and directions by keeping in touch with current and potential users of the center (Peters). He stays close to the customer by regularly talking to parents on an informal basis about what's on their minds, as well as by surveying them in a more organized way in terms of their wants, their needs, their means and their reactions to the center.

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October Activities

The October Activities and Ideas were written by Debra J. Riek, a program director at the YWCA of York in York, Pa.

Feelings

Feelings can be hard for some school-age children to talk about. Some have a limited vocabulary, making it hard to talk about their feelings. Even older school-age children can get stuck in mad, sad and glad land. Brainstorm a list of feeling words with the children in your program. This will help them to do a number of the feeling activities on the next page. Leave the list up so students can be specific about how they feel.

Fire prevention

Oct. 5-11 is National Fire Prevention Week. What a great time to conduct a fire drill in your program and discuss safety and emergency planning. Take a tour of your program space pointing out extinguishers, alarms and smoke detectors. Have students design evacuation maps for your space and posters highlighting safe procedures. Use this opportunity to discuss positive and negative uses of fire.

Daily News

On Oct. 3 we celebrate the birthday of Charlie Brown! Look at some of Charles Schultz's work while enjoying the other activities in the Daily News section on the next page.



Sandwich anyone?

On Oct. 14, 1744, the Earl of Sandwich took two pieces of bread and put some meat in between. Voila! The first sandwich was created. Have a creative sandwich-making contest. Use construction paper "bread" and a variety of collage materials to create "sandwiches." Have students list their "recipes" and then vote for their favorites.

Paper recycling

On the next page, we highlight trees and leaves. What a great time to discuss the value of paper and the importance of recycling. Try some of these activities to reduce, reuse and recycle!

Visit http://www.funsci.com/fun3_en/paper/paper.htm for clear directions with pictures on how to make paper. This is an amazing process for children to participate in and thoroughly enjoyable. Feel free to adapt the tools, trying what you have available.

Make paper beads. Cut paper into thin strips or triangles. The sizes and shapes of paper determine the sizes and shapes of the beads so students should experiment to see what they like best. Wrap the paper strip tightly around a pencil, toothpick or nail depending on how wide you want the opening inside the bead to be. Secure the end of the strip with a dab of glue. Remove the pencil, nail or toothpick and let dry. When dry, beads can be painted and then strung. You can also use magazines for the paper, which will have different colors already on them.

Design wrapping paper by decorating large sheets of paper. Dampen paper with a cotton ball and water and then spritz on liquid watercolors or watered-down paint with a spray bottle to make swirled designs in the paper.

Have families save envelopes from junk mail and create a "writing" center in your program with envelopes, paper, stamps, stickers, tape and lots of things with which to write. Students can write notes to each other or pretend to run a post office.

Use scrap paper to challenge your students to build the tallest tower using paper and paper clips.

Lights On Afterschool

On Oct. 16, we will celebrate the ninth annual Lights On Afterschool event. Go to <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org> to get children involved in ways to get attention focused on your after-school program!

House of cards

Provide several decks of cards to students. Have them create structures using the cards as building blocks. Cut slits one-inch deep in the middle of all the sides of each card. Now create structures. Discuss the differences between the buildings you could make and which you liked better. Go to <http://www.usplayingcard.com/gamerules/briefhistory.html> to learn the history of playing cards.

October Calendar of Ideas

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
What's In a Name?	Create an autograph book by stapling or using a hole punch and yarn to bind half sheets of construction paper together. Decorate the cover, then have friends sign the book.	Fold a piece of art paper in half. On one half, write your name in paint, then re-fold the paper together and the mirror image will be printed on the other side.	Write your name on a large sheet of paper and then trace it using liquid glue. Adhere small collage items — beads, shells or popcorn, for example — over the glue.	Challenge students to write their name as many times as they can in a minute. Then have them switch hands and repeat. Which hand helped them write more? Why?	Write the names of people the children would recognize on index cards. Tape a card to each child's back and have each ask yes or no questions to figure out the name on his or her card.
Marbles	Make a marble maze with a shirt gift-box lid and construction-paper tubes of varying sizes. Staple the tubes anyway you like in the lid and then drop the marbles and tilt the box.	Tape a piece of paper inside a box lid. Dip marbles into paint with a spoon and drop them into the box lid. Tilt the box lid causing the marble to roll and leave paint designs on your paper.	Go to http://landofmarbles.com/marbles-play.html for real marble rules and teach this classic game to children in your program.	Make a marble racetrack. Use rolls from wrapping paper, toiler paper and paper towels. Cut some in half and leave some whole. Staple or glue together to make a track and race your marbles.	Make your own marbles using clay and decorate with paint or markers. (Remember that marbles are a choking hazard, so supervise closely and only use with older children.)
Feelings	Play feelings charades. Write different kinds of feelings such as “frustrated,” “happy,” “confused,” etc., on note cards and have children act them out and guess.	Create a feelings poetry book. Ask children to choose a feeling and write about a time they felt that way. Bind into a book for your program's book area.	Make a feelings poster. Using a disposable camera, have children express lots of feelings. Take pictures and display as a poster with the feeling words beneath the image.	Make journals by creating covers with construction paper and stapling lined paper inside. Decorate and encourage children to write about how they are feeling inside their journal.	Play Duck, Duck Goose, only have children say Happy, Happy _____. Substitute a feeling word for “goose” when tagging. Tagged children act out that feeling while playing the game.
Daily News	Give students a newspaper and have them find the comics, the sports section, the want ads, etc. If they could write for a section, what would they want to write?	Create a headline page. Ask students to draw or paint a picture and give it a newspaper headline.	Invite a reporter (or photographer or copy editor) from your local newspaper to speak to the children about his or her job.	Look at some comic strips. Design comic strips by dividing a sentence strip into four parts and creating a story.	Create a program-wide newspaper that features recipes, program news and articles written by your ace reporters.
Trees	Gather tree branches or provide some if none are available. Use them to make a mobile of things found outside.	Make leaf prints. Paint on a leaf and then turn it over and press on paper to make a print. As a variation, use the leaf as a reverse stencil to create the leaf outline.	Provide leaves or gather leaves outside. Use the leaf shape as the base shape in a design. Can you turn it into a car? A butterfly?	Paint using the unconventional tool of a piece of evergreen. Is it harder or easier than a paintbrush? What different designs can you make?	Create a tree sketchbook. Provide several pieces of paper stapled together and go on a walk so children can sketch the different trees in your program's neighborhood.
How Does It Work?	Seek donated materials such as old phones or cameras that children can take apart. Employ proper safety precautions when disassembling and never disassemble a TV or computer monitor.	Provide loose parts and recycled materials so children can create robots.	Have children create a story about what their robots can do and then create a class book of their ideas.	Add tubes, masking tape, aluminum foil and boxes to the dramatic play area in your program so children can build robot costumes.	Check out http://www.energyquest.ca.gov/how_it_works/index.html . This site explains how toasters and other machines work. Some sections provide video links.

Engagement key for successful teen literacy programs

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When these types of do-it-yourself activities are successful, they can be shining examples of positive youth development, with practitioners really connecting to the needs and interests of the kids they work with. But finding books that the kids like isn't enough, not if programs want to reach the reluctant or resistant readers. The staff of out-of-school time programs are typically young and inexperienced, and even gifted youth workers need support in creating literacy-oriented activities that teens connect to.

Corison Lee of Aim High said that while, "No one textbook or program contains the magic bullet for every student, curriculum is valuable as a springboard and as guidelines. Having a framework for teachers and students is important so everyone's on the same page."

Even relevant curriculum is not enough: Youth practitioners need professional development that helps them understand how to successfully use the resources, and to facilitate activities that inspire and engage teens, get them wanting to read and write, and still feel distinct from school. That is a tricky balance to strike and there are many strategies and practices that staff can learn.

The Real Stories Real Teens program, co-developed by Youth Communication and Development Without Limits, is an example of a resource available to after-school and summer programs that fulfills literacy and youth development goals. Real Stories uses stories written by teens for their peers and excerpts from young adult novels to engage teens in discussions and activities about issues that are important to them — identity, relationships, family, race and culture, sexuality, social justice and more. In Real Stories, the workshop-oriented activities and rich discussions are the highlight, and youth participants get hooked on the stories, sometimes in spite of themselves.

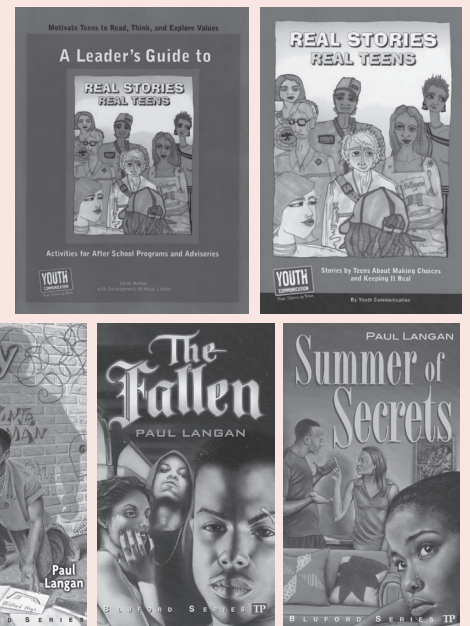
The Children's Aid Society began using the Real Stories program because staff members said they felt the curriculum was developmentally appropriate for adolescents and would help them develop literacy and life skills (particularly in the social, moral and emotional domains). CAS is running the program at four middle schools. The staff members who are implementing the program consist of college students and one social-work intern.

Staff members report that youth who might otherwise be turned off by reading in an after-school program are engaged because "the stories cover a range of topics that really speak to the young people's interests, concerns and vision of the world — and themselves."

The program also helps teens connect to their peers. As one staff member explains, "Real Stories has helped our students to learn about each other and realize that their issues, feelings and emotions are not theirs alone." For example, after reading a story about a young person who loses a family member she loved, a young man in one of the Real Stories groups wrote his own story about losing his mother when he was six years old. This, according to one RS leader, "facilitates a healing process that's very important to finding your own identity."

Youth have responded enthusiastically to being given the chance to voice their own ideas and opinions through the curriculum's writing prompts. For example, they enjoyed an exercise in which they were

To order *Real Teens Real Stories*, *A Leader's Guide to Real Teens Real Stories* or the Real Stories Real Teens Bluford High School 3-Pak, call School-Age NOTES at 1-800-410-8780.



asked to describe their ideal school. One young man shared that in his ideal school he would teach urban art to his classmates. The Real Stories facilitator capitalized on the teen having shared this aspect of himself by offering to let the boy lead a Real Stories session on graffiti art, which included helping him create a written lesson plan.

While it's true that youth enjoy the stories once they've read them, CAS found that one of the best ways to introduce teens to Real Stories was by connecting it to a high interest activity they were involved in. At one site, where many youth participants are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the director tied Real Stories to the World Savvy initiative, a program in which youth explore issues of immigration and identity. At another site, Real Stories was successfully integrated with an existing "rites of passage" program for young men. Another key component of successful implementation of Real Stories has been finding the right staff person to facilitate it. Besides the basic requirement that facilitators be fully literate themselves, and openly enjoy reading and writing, directors emphasized that "any staff member implementing this curriculum should have an interest in — if not knowledge of — broad-reaching social issues, and be perceptive and sensitive enough to help students navigate their thoughts and emotions."

It's also essential that the Real Stories facilitator be someone who young people feel they can relate to. While staff members must be aware of boundaries in terms of how much they say about themselves, several CAS staff report it has been useful to share experiences from their own lives that mirror the experiences of the teen authors and teen participants in the program. As Aim High's Corison Lee said, when engaging adolescents in literacy, "It's really about making connections."

Sarah Jonas is director of education services with Children's Aid Society in New York. Eric Gurna is executive director of Development Without Limits.

The Well Director

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The well director also keeps an eye on developments in the broader environment. He follows relevant trends in research, technology, advocacy, business and society in general.

Most important, the well director takes time to think strategically. Periodically, he forces himself to step back from the daily crush of activities to consider where the organization is heading. This is a time to ponder all the information and impressions he has been collecting and to see if any new directions or strategies are needed.

The well director focuses her attention on areas where superior performance on her part will have the most impact.

The well director knows that her success will be determined less by how hard she works than by how astute she is in selecting what to work on. Just as an investor shops around for an opportunity that will provide her with the highest return on her investment, the well director invests her time on tasks that will yield the greatest benefits for her center.

Focusing one's limited time on high impact tasks also requires perseverance. Once the day starts and a myriad of telephone calls, visitors, letters and unexpected crises compete for the attention of the director, sticking to one's agenda may seem next to impossible. The well director is effective in maintaining control over how she uses her time.

The well director is continually working to develop an effective management team.

The well director extends his effectiveness by accomplishing results through others. He is not obsessed with the notion that he has to do everything himself. He is able to let go, to turn responsibility over to other talented individuals on his staff (Brandt).

The well director recognizes that the development of an effective managerial team takes time and patience. He is continually on the lookout for talented staff members who have a high level of commitment. By giving them some modest one-shot management tasks, he can test if they have an interest and a capacity for higher responsibilities.

Once team members have been identified, the director develops their skills by providing them with growth opportunities.

The well director doesn't work to make people love her, but makes people love to work for her.

The well director recognizes that it would be a mistake to try to make people obey her and work hard for her because they love her. Not only would this be unachievable, but it is also an unstable base for performance. Employees' willingness to work hard will ebb and flow depending upon their current attitude about the director (McClellan).

Instead, the well director strives to make staff members work hard because they are excited about achieving the goals of the center. To build this commitment, she involves staff in setting center goals. By participating in the goal-setting process, employees help shape goals that they personally care about. As a result, they have a stake in their accomplishment (McGregor).

The well director constructs a stimulating, yet secure, working environment for staff members.

After the well director succeeds in exciting staff members about achieving the goals of the center, she works to create a work environment that will foster the success of their efforts. She does this by:

- having high expectations;
- respecting employees' autonomy;
- arranging growth opportunities;
- providing feedback;
- applauding achievement;
- encouraging collaboration;
- fostering creativity;
- being a problem solver of last resort.

The well director is an effective decision maker.

The well director has a good understanding of the logic and the emotion of making decisions. He is able to act decisively when he sees that an opportunity or a looming crisis requires it; yet he knows how to avoid making unnecessary decisions.

He reaches out for help when the input of others will strengthen a decision; he delegates decisions to those who have the expertise to act on their own, yet he knows when he, and he alone, must shoulder the responsibility.

He knows when to reverse a decision and when to insist upon its implementation in the face of strong opposition. He knows he will make many mistakes, but hopes that he will learn from his mistakes.

The well director keeps her work life in its proper perspective.

The well director is not a workaholic. She gives her all at the office and then leaves it all at the office. She has hobbies, chores, interests, relatives and favorite television shows just like real people.

Most important, the well director has a sense of humor. She can ease a tense confrontation with a parent by telling a joke on herself. She can look back at a difficult week and laugh. She enjoys what she's doing and shares this joy with her staff.

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Resources

School-Age NOTES monthly newsletter

For nearly 30 years, School-Age NOTES has been providing after-school professionals with timely and practical articles, plus easy-to-implement activities and ideas in every monthly newsletter.

This month, the price of a yearly U.S. subscription will increase to \$33.95.

However, during September, School-Age NOTES subscribers can renew their subscription at the previous price of \$31.95. Regardless of when your subscription expires, by renewing this month, you'll lock in your next subscription at the current price and save \$2.

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Upcoming Conference Dates*

Sept. 17-19, 2008

**National Conference on Science & Technology
in Out-of-School Time**

Navy Pier, Chicago
www.scienceafterschoolconference.org

Oct. 16, 2008

Lights On Afterschool

Nationwide
www.afterschoolalliance.org/lights_on/index.cfm

Oct. 24, 2008

Vermont Afterschool Conference

Killington Grand Resort Hotel and Conference Center, Killington, VT
www.vtafterschool.org

Oct. 24-25, 2008

**Virginia School-Age Child Care Association
DISCOVER Conference**

Sheraton Richmond West, Richmond, VA
www.vsacca.org

* for a comprehensive list of conferences, go to www.afterschoolpro.net