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Poetry Out Loud: Two Perspectives

Overview

by Julie Richard

Poetry Out Loud is a national poetry recitation contest begun by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation in 2006. The Maine Arts Commission administers the program in partnership with both of these national organizations for the state of Maine. Poetry Out Loud encourages students to learn about great poetry through memorization and recitation. Students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary heritage through their participation in Poetry Out Loud.

After successful pilot programs in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, Poetry Out Loud was launched in high schools nationwide in the spring of 2006 and has grown to involve millions of students across the country. All 50 states and the U.S. territories of Guam and Puerto Rico participate in the contest.

Poetry Out Loud follows a pyramid structure that starts at the classroom level. Winners advance to a school-wide competition, then to a regional final, held in 2015 in Maine at the City Theater in Biddeford and at Hampden Academy in Hampden. Five winners from each of the regional finals advanced to the state final held at the Waterville Opera House in Waterville, Maine. The state Poetry Out Loud champion receives \$200 and an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C., to compete for the national championship. The state winner's school receives \$500 for the purchase of poetry books. The first runner-up in each state receives \$100, with \$200 for the school library. A total of \$50,000 in awards and school stipends is awarded annually at the national finals.

It is estimated that more than 50,000 high school students have competed in Poetry Out Loud in Maine since its inception, one of the highest participation rates in the country. In 2015, 53 schools and more than 10,000 students participated in the contest, which sets a new record for the total number of schools and students taking part in the state.

Each year, Maine's Poet Laureate Wesley McNair offers training for teachers and students through the Maine Arts Commission. This training greatly assists

both students and teachers in learning how to properly deliver a poem.

Students select poems from a list provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, which includes both classic and contemporary works. Each student must prepare three poems for competition. Students repeat those poems at each level of the contest, and they are judged on the difficulty of the poems they choose, as well as physical presence, voice and articulation, dramatic appropriateness, evidence of understanding, overall performance, and accuracy.

Participation in Poetry Out Loud has inspired students to pursue further studies in theater and creative writing and has instilled in each of them an appreciation for poetry they would not otherwise experience. 🐟



Julie Richard has been executive director of the Maine Arts Commission since 2012 and has held similar positions with regional arts councils in Arizona and South Carolina. She has authored several articles on arts

policy and arts education and was a feature columnist for the *Arizona Republic* from 2004 to 2007.