

NASAA NOTES

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Executive Director's Column

Poetry Out Loud: Collaborating for Student Success

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On May 15, the final round of Poetry Out Loud recitations took place at Sidney Harman Hall in Washington, D.C. From a field of 53 state champions, 9 finalists and 3 top champions delivered riveting recitations that demonstrated the power of both poetry and partnership. Poetry Out Loud has become a model of what can be accomplished by a collaboration between a federal agency, a foundation, a network of state agencies and a regional arts organization.



At the 2012 Poetry Out Loud national finals in Washington, D.C., left to right, were NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman; third-place winner MarKaye Hassan (Utah state champion); National Champion Kristen Dupard (Mississippi state champion); second-place winner Claude Mumbere (Vermont state champion); Poetry Foundation President John Barr; and National Assembly of State Arts Agencies CEO Jonathan Katz. Photo by James Kegley

On behalf of the state arts agencies, I had the honor of being introduced by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chairman Rocco Landesman and addressing the audience: "The state arts agencies in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands work all year round to extend the reach of Poetry Out Loud. We are grateful to the National Endowment

for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation for your national leadership—and support—and we want to acknowledge our partners, educators and public officials at the state and local levels, as well as the parents, relatives and friends who make this fantastic experience available to so many young people. Thanks to you all!"

Acknowledging that the Poetry Foundation's sponsorship and the special contributions of a unique national team have helped the NEA take this initiative to an extraordinary scale, Chairman Landesman was most gracious: "Thanks, Jonathan, and thanks to all of the state art agencies for your incredible work. Without your dedication, we would not be here celebrating Poetry Out Loud's seventh anniversary tonight. All of us at the NEA, everyone at the Poetry Foundation, and some 365,000 participants are all in your debt."

It's worthwhile to reflect for a moment that each of those 365,000 students read many poems, perhaps most or all of the more than 600 in the annual anthology, to select the ones loved enough to be memorized, rehearsed, criticized, performed and judged. It's important to acknowledge the wide circle of supporters that encourages and makes possible the participation of each student. And it's impressive to note that the process begins with each school year in September and engages participants all the way through mid-May. So many schools and students now participate that most states coordinate regional competitions in order to have a manageable number at the state finals.

There can be no doubt that the Poetry Out Loud experience is life-changing for many young people, fostering presentation skills, teaching persistence and the pursuit of excellence, building communication and language abilities, immersing them in great works of literary art, and nourishing the most constructive kinds of relationships with peers, families and mentors.

For those of us in public service, Poetry Out Loud offers many lessons about how to build a productive, cost-effective partnership. The partners each bring unique assets and are respectful of each others' expertise, tasks and needs for accountability. Opportunities for the partners to learn how to improve the Poetry Out Loud experience are built into the initiative. The coordinators of the state recitations gather at the time of the national finals to share their successes, and to identify and discuss their challenges. That gathering is an open, frank and mutually supportive dialogue with both NEA and Poetry Foundation staff. I have attended these over the years as the field improved methods for engaging charter schools, private schools, home schoolers, students who use sign language, and students whose schools aren't participating; for managing large numbers of students, training judges and ensuring judging is consistent; and for eliciting the right balance of attention to the text and individual interpretation. This year, discussion focused on the difficult issue of how best, and whether or not, to assign poems a degree of difficulty. The partners entered their working relationship committed to a multiyear experiment. The vision was always large and the partners were dedicated not only to sustaining the quality of the enterprise but to testing ways to increase the numbers of schools, communities and students involved.

From NASAA's perspective, we have always wanted Poetry Out Loud to succeed and bring recognition to our partners because we view it as a demonstration project for the benefits that can be provided by shared planning, shared investment, shared learning and shared decision making.

In the words of this year's winner, "I love this program and all the people involved; this is such a blessing." I couldn't agree more.