

2008 FINAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

POETRY OUT LOUD

NATIONAL RECITATION CONTEST

The Power of Language, the Pleasure of Words

Submitted to
The Poetry Foundation
444 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 1850
Chicago, IL 60611

By
Rockman et al

3925 Hagan Street, Suite 301
Bloomington, IN 47401

49 Geary Street, Suite 530
San Francisco, CA 94108

March 19, 2009

2008 FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

POETRY OUT LOUD

NATIONAL RECITATION CONTEST

The Power of Language, the Pleasure of Words

OVERVIEW

In April 2008, students from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands gathered in Washington, D.C., for the third annual *Poetry Out Loud* National Recitation Contest, an initiative of the Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, in partnership with State Arts Agencies across the country. A three-year old program is young compared to other arts or academic competitions, but findings from the *Poetry Out Loud* evaluation, now also in its third year, suggest that the program has built a solid base of enthusiastic supporters and rekindled an interest in poetry recitation. Findings also suggest that what makes the program work is that it negotiates some important balances. *Poetry Out Loud* fits easily into existing curriculum, but also offers fresh ideas for teaching poetry. It introduces students to poems by past and recent masters, but lets them find their own voices. It celebrates a time-honored tradition of learning poems by heart that runs from Homeric competitions to the admonition of Mrs. George Reece in poet Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* to "Memorize some bit of verse of truth or beauty," but also pays tribute to rap and slam.¹

The excitement generated by *Poetry Out Loud* was readily apparent among the fifty-two teenagers and their proud, anxious chaperones, who shuttled back and forth between hotels, national landmarks, Capitol Hill (where two-thirds of the 2008 state champions met their Representatives or Senators), and the National Finals at George Washington University's Lisner Auditorium. The press coverage and slate of judges also reflected a growing interest. National Public Radio covered the 2008 contest in an "All Things Considered" segment, and *USA Today* ran a full-page article and photograph.² Judges for the 2008 contest included Patricia Gray, the coordinator of the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress, Joanne Yatvin, author of books for teachers and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, author and radio host Garrison Keillor, and Pulitzer Prize winning poet Natasha Trethewey.

¹ Edgar Lee Masters, "Mrs. George Reece," from the *Spoon River Anthology*—a connection to *Poetry Out Loud* noted by a participating teacher.

² Greg Toppo, "The Poet's Words Shine from Mouths of Students," *USA Today*, April 29, 2008.

In response to survey questions, the 2008 *Poetry Out Loud* state champions unanimously agreed that they now enjoy poetry more and have found new favorite poems and poets. This year's recitation selections included poets who have been perennial favorites among students—Tony Hoagland, Billy Collins, Allen Ginsberg, and Sylvia Plath—but also poets who have appeared less frequently among students' choices—Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Anne Bradstreet, and George Eliot. The 2008 students talked about how *Poetry Out Loud*, in addition to making them “realize the value of reading poetry aloud,” also made them “better at analysis” and better able to “pick up tone shifts and voice changes.” Like their peers in previous national competitions, these contestants also found a community of students with similar passions. In the words of one inspired state champion:

...what I loved so much about Poetry Out Loud is the connection it brought me to the arts and those who value it as I do. I earned this chance to meet fifty students who had come together, from as close as Connecticut to as far as Alaska, for the appreciation of poetry. Poetry Out Loud broadened my outlook beyond the confines of my small town...[and made me] realize that the arts are perhaps the most noble and wonderful universal influence that humanity shares.

One of the goals of the *Poetry Out Loud* evaluation has been to determine whether the program is as successful with other students as it is with those who make it to state and national contests. Our data, collected through focus groups and surveys of teachers and school coordinators, suggest that it is—that the program is steadily bringing the power of poetry to a wider school audience. We are seeing small but gradual changes in demographics. Each year, not only do more schools, more teachers, and more students join the program, but also different schools, different teachers, and different students. This year we received feedback from teachers in large schools with strong arts programs that include slam events, literary magazines, and on-campus coffee houses, and from teachers—like those quoted below, in alternative schools, small rural schools, and schools with fledgling or struggling arts programs:

Our school has only 180 students. Most have never read or shown any interest in classic or contemporary poetry. This event was well received by our students. They willingly memorized and looked over many poems. It was a very exciting event for an alternative high school. We were glad to be included.

The arts programs in our rural school have been mostly ignored. This program helped us expand them.

I plan to incorporate poetry recitation into my classroom next year, no matter what. My students got so energized when they realized that they were doing POL as part of a bigger picture. Since I teach in a very small school district, it is all too easy to get myopic about lesson choices. The kids loved feeling that they had a "gift," a memorized poem, which they could easily share with others, as well as pull out and think about when the need arises.

Feedback suggests that the program appeals to different kinds of teachers as well as diverse schools. Among the advocates are those who have a full toolbox of strategies to teach poetry, and those who feel underprepared. In the first group are teachers who add *Poetry Out Loud* to special units or year-round activities, or begin all their literature classes “with a poetry unit and continue with daily and weekly poetry readings,” or mix poetry with innovative technologies.

I use the anthology to teach my poetry unit. I plan to add an rss feed to my new website and have kids respond to a poem of their choice each week, or I could feature one poem and have the kids blog in an online discussion of that poem.

In the latter group are teachers who share their misgivings about teaching poetry or recitation and at the same time highlight the benefits of the *Poetry Out Loud* program and resources.

I am just not that strong of a poetry teacher. This is like one-stop shopping. I plan to continue to use it and learn new things!

I learned from the program: I was wary of using recitation and memorization in the classroom, but this program helped me to understand that it is such an important part of poetry that a person is really not doing a poem justice without those two activities. I'm planning to use more recitation and memorization next year....

Some of the most persuasive feedback about *Poetry Out Loud*'s reach and power comes from teachers' descriptions of reluctant students. On this year's surveys, 98% of the teachers agreed—84% strongly—that the program is valuable for *all* students. Asked to elaborate, teachers reported that they saw “students who I would never have thought comfortable with recitation do an amazing job.” They also described the positive experiences of “students who don't otherwise have an outlet” in school. One teacher added, “students who find difficulty in expressing emotions can always find a poem that says it for them.” The following comments further describe successful classroom experiences and enthusiasm that spread to the school as a whole.

I have a student whose classroom performance was dull, her work was dull and she was not engaged. When she stumbled upon the bilingual poem, suddenly her writing took on a spark that was not previously present. If it had not been for Poetry Out Loud, this student would not have found... a voice that spoke to her own.

I have participated in the program all three years. In the past, I have worked with students reading far below grade level. For them, though they felt great trepidation about presenting even in front of their own class, Poetry Out Loud was a novel experience. Their self-confidence soared once they realized that they could present aloud in front of their peers.

EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

Samples and Response Rates

The research design for the Year 3 *Poetry Out Loud* evaluation was similar to the design for Year 2. The major changes were in our efforts to increase response rates from school coordinators and teachers, which would in turn strengthen findings, especially reports on participation figures.

For 2007-08, Rockman used a two-tiered system to invite school coordinators and other teachers to complete surveys. We began, as we had in previous years, by emailing the link to an online survey to all school coordinators and/or teachers on the NEA's master contact list for whom we had valid emails. If email addresses were missing or faulty, we called schools to get contact information for teachers. Emails were sent out in early spring, after state contests but before the national contest. We followed up one month later with a letter via regular mail to 1,000 teachers. Teachers who had completed surveys received a thank you letter and *Poetry Out Loud* magnet provided by the Poetry Foundation; those who had not responded also received a magnet with a reminder letter, copy of the survey, and pre-paid return envelope.

Our efforts resulted in response rates considerably higher than last year (see Table 1) and, based on our master list of 1,503 schools, we received data from 22% of the schools participating in *Poetry Out Loud* in 2008. (It is difficult to calculate response rates for teachers, since we do not always have accurate figures for the numbers of teachers participating in each school.)

Table 1.
Survey Response Rates

	2007	2008	% Increase
School Coordinator Survey	162	337	48%
Teacher Survey	226	462	49%

As in the past two years, our student feedback came from state champions. In early May 2008, we emailed a link to an online survey to all 52 of the state champions who competed in the National Finals in Washington, D.C. Reminder emails were sent approximately one month later. In mid-summer, we sent paper copies and pre-paid return envelopes to non-respondents. Overall, 22 students, mostly seniors, completed surveys, for a response rate of 42%. (See Table 2.)

Table 2.
Grade Levels of Student Survey Respondents

	Number	Percentage
9th	1	4.5%
10th	1	4.5%
11th	5	22.7%
12th	15	68.2%

Research Questions and Instruments

Three different surveys and a series of closed- and open-ended items allowed us to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from school coordinators, teachers, and students. (See Appendix A.) Those findings were supplemented by feedback from teachers who attended focus groups in Washington, D.C., and by informal conversations during the three days with teachers, parents, State Arts Agency representatives, and students. To track growth and changes in the *Poetry Out Loud* program and compare data across years, we have used surveys with items consistent from year to year, guided by the same research questions posed when the evaluation was first designed (revised only to reflect the ongoing, longitudinal nature of the study):

- Who participated in *Poetry Out Loud* in 2007-2008? How are demographics and participation figures changing from year to year, and what do they tell us about the program's reach, expansion, and potential for engaging diverse audiences?
- How are participating schools implementing the program? What attracts teachers and students, and how does *Poetry Out Loud* fit into English curricula, or into other literary, literacy, and arts education programs?
- How useful and adaptable are the *Poetry Out Loud* resources for teachers and students? How and to what extent do teachers incorporate resources into program implementation and classroom instruction?
- Does, or how does *Poetry Out Loud* affect how teachers teach poetry? Does it offer fresh ideas? Does recitation work? In what ways are teachers using the program to supplement or complement existing curricula, and what strategies are they using to engage students in poetry, recitation, and performance?
- How, according to teachers and state champions, are students responding to poetry, memorization, recitation, and the contests? What skills are they gaining and what personal connections are they making? What do they value about the process?

The data for this report were collected through four instruments:

School Survey. Completed by school coordinators, these surveys provide data on how schools implement *Poetry Out Loud* and the characteristics and demographics of students participating in classroom and school contests. As in the past, Rockman supplemented reports with additional demographic data on school enrollments, race and ethnicity, and locale, available online on school websites, the Great Schools site, and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) site.

Teacher Survey. These instruments focus on classroom implementation, asking teachers how, to what extent, and with what success they implemented the program. Teachers also provide data on their use of the *Poetry Out Loud* resources, during the program and at other times during the year. A series of open-ended items asks teachers to elaborate on particular strategies, goals, and successes, and on students' responses.

State Champions' Survey. The survey asked students background questions about their school and extra-curricular interests and previous experience with poetry and recitation. Other items covered students' use of and responses to the *Poetry Out Loud* resources, their preparation for the contests, and their thoughts on the benefits of reciting poems and sharing them with an audience.

Teacher Focus Group. In roundtable discussions devoted to *Poetry Out Loud* at the classroom, school, and state and national contest levels, teachers shared experiences and suggestions about what worked and what didn't. Discussions also addressed what teachers saw as the most important outcomes, anticipated and unanticipated, of participation in *Poetry Out Loud*, the greatest challenges, and the kinds of support or resources that would help teachers.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Following a Summary of Findings, the report begins with participation figures and profiles of schools, students, and teachers taking part in the 2008 *Poetry Out Loud* program. Section 2 shares findings about implementation models and strategies, including those that have proven particularly successful and contributed to the program's growth and sustainability. Section 3 is devoted to teachers' use of and suggestions for the *Poetry Out Loud* resources, and Section 4 to teachers' classroom strategies for introducing students to poetry and poetry recitation and integrating *Poetry Out Loud* into their broader curriculum. The fifth and final section shares responses from state champions about their *Poetry Out Loud* experiences, along with reports from teachers about the program's impact on students. Appendix A is a table of survey responses, by state; Appendix B includes all instruments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- ***Poetry Out Loud* continues to grow, with a third more schools participating in 2007-2008, and a third more students, who now number almost a quarter of a million.** Data show that school participation in *Poetry Out Loud* rose from 1,064 schools in 2006-2007 to 1,503 in 2007-2008, and student participation, from 175,000 to 250,000.³ Schools and students represented all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The student figure of 250,000 includes all those students across the country who participated at the classroom level—browsing the anthology or website, memorizing and reciting poems in English, Theater, or Speech classes, completing assignments, and competing in classroom contests. Further breakdowns show that approximately one-fourth, or 55,611 of these students, advanced to school-wide contests. *[Note: the student demographic data below is reported for the smaller group of students participating in school contests, not the larger population of all students participating in classroom-level activities.]*

Looking at the data by school shows that, overall, an average of 16% of the school populations, or 161 students per school, participated at the classroom level, and that just under a fourth (23%) or 37 of these students, per school, advanced to school-wide contests.

- **Racial and ethnic representation among students participating in school contests indicates that, as in past years, the *Poetry Out Loud* population is diverse and representative of school and national student populations.** This year's figures on race and ethnicity are similar to distributions recorded for the past two years of the program. School coordinators report that, of the students participating in their school's *Poetry Out Loud* contests, 61% are white, 18% are Hispanic, and 15% are African-American. A small percentage of students are Asian (3%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2%), and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (1%). These figures generally reflect the distributions of the overall populations of participating schools and the distribution in the total U.S. student population, although there are somewhat fewer African-American students among the *Poetry Out Loud* contestants than there are in school or overall U.S. student populations, and somewhat more Hispanics.
- ***Poetry Out Loud* appears to be making new and notable inroads into rural schools.** As in the past, in 2007-2008 *Poetry Out Loud* reached students in all locales—urban, suburban, and rural—but this year's data show numbers of rural schools higher than the previous year and higher than the national average. According to reports from school coordinators, just under

³ As in previous years, these figures are based on extrapolations from two sets of figures: the numbers of participating students reported by *POL* school coordinators, and the school population and demographic figures from online sources such as Great Schools, school web sites, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The figures reported are averages: the overall number of students could be as low as 192,384 students, and as high as 293,085 students.

half (46%) of our 2008 sample of schools are rural schools. In 2006, rural schools made up 32% of the sample; in 2007, 39%. It is also considerably higher than the national average of 27%. 2008 representation among suburban schools, at 31%, was approximately 7% lower than the national average; urban representation, at 23%, was about 1% lower.

- ***Poetry Out Loud* has taken root in schools that have several strong arts programs, and it has flourished in schools where it has become one of only a few programs in the arts.** Similar percentages of the 2008 school coordinators described their school as having several active arts programs (45%) and few arts programs (47%). The latter percentage stood at 41% in 2007. This slight increase, along with data on increases in numbers of rural schools, and comments from several school coordinators in small schools about under-funded arts programs, may indicate that *Poetry Out Loud* is gradually meeting the arts education needs of a distinct group of schools.
- ***Poetry Out Loud* is attracting teachers with a range of teaching experience—new, mid-career, and veterans.** Teachers participating in *Poetry Out Loud* reflect the national average of teaching experience. The majority of participating teachers are high school English teachers: 91% of teachers responding to the survey said they teach English; 22% teach Speech; 18% teach Theatre and Drama.
- ***Poetry Out Loud* successfully retains teachers in the program as well as attracts new ones.** Among our survey respondents, almost all teachers who participated in last year's program participated again. Of those who participated in 2007-2008, 42% of teachers had participated previously: 98% participated in 2006-2007, and 37% in 2005-2006. In 2006-07, two-third of teachers responding were new. Even higher percentages—97% of teachers who responded to the survey—agreed that if the program were offered again they would participate.
- **Percentages of returning teachers, and growing levels of interest among teachers, students, and the community, suggest that *Poetry Out Loud* is steadily picking up momentum.** Nearly one-third (30%) of the School Coordinators who had also participated in 2007 said that teacher interest in *Poetry Out Loud* was higher this year than last year; just over half (52%) said the program maintained the previous year's levels. Most coordinators (85%) reported that there is enough teacher interest and involvement to sustain the program. Returning teachers noted the increasing numbers of students who participate in the contests, the popularity of the contests as an annual school event, growing community involvement, and the increasing awareness of the value of poetry recitation as an art.

- **As *Poetry Out Loud* continues to grow, teachers are embracing the opportunities the contests provide to showcase poetry, the arts, and students who don't typically get involved in such activities.** The overwhelming majority—93%—of teachers agreed their students enjoyed participating in the contest. Teachers spent an average of seven class periods on *Poetry Out Loud*, with most of that time dedicated to reading and discussing poetry. Teachers who spent an average of six or more hours on *Poetry Out Loud* spent increasingly more time with their higher grade-level students. The difference was significant for those who spent 10 or more hours doing *Poetry Out Loud*; they spent an average of 15 hours with their 9th grade students and 21 hours with 12th grade students. Years of experience seemed to make a difference in how well teachers felt the contest attracted a wide range of students; teachers who spent 10 or more hours doing *Poetry Out Loud* in the classroom agreed more strongly that the school contest attracted a wide range of students.
- **Poetry recitation is a vital component of *Poetry Out Loud* in the classroom, and a strategy teachers say works.** Almost all (82%) of the participating teachers *require* their students to memorize and recite poetry. Many of those who said they didn't require students to memorize and recite a poem indicated that they will next year. About the same number (78%), or three out of four teachers who participated, said *Poetry Out Loud* changed the way they approach the teaching of poetry, and nearly all teachers (92%) said they learned something from the program. Even if they don't participate in the program next year, more than three-quarters of the teachers (79%) agreed they plan to incorporate poetry recitation in their classes.
- **Teachers value the professional development and services provided by their state arts agency, and praise the structure and support of *Poetry Out Loud*.** Focus group teachers and survey respondents shared examples of SAA efforts that supported their participation. One school coordinator observed that “The organization that was already established by the state arts agency and the constant communication made this entire project almost effortless.” The Montana state teachers convention, for example, included a session in which 18 teachers from all over the state were trained. The Minnesota State Arts Board sponsored four busses to the state competition, and the Colorado State Arts Council and the Oklahoma Council funded teachers to attend the national finals. Suggestions for other state or national support efforts included a request that the NEA “communicate with state professional organizations that teachers subscribe/belong to,” and for state agencies to “work with state ed departments to link [*Poetry Out Loud*] to the state standards,” thus “validating” teachers’ participation.
- **The value of the program resources is indicated in teachers’ use and high ratings of resources, and in their plans to use them beyond *Poetry Out Loud*.** Teachers indicated frequent use and appreciation of the *Poetry Out Loud* resources. On average, teachers used the Judge’s Guide and the website most (both 3.5 and 3.5 on a 4-pt. scale, where 1=not at all,

2=a little, 3=some, and 4= a lot). The anthology also got a lot of use by teachers as a resource with their students (3.4 on the same 4-pt. scale). The Teacher's Guide and CD were used a little less often, although they received high ratings for their quality: 64% of teachers said they would use them at other times during the year or for other units or lessons. Their comments suggested three primary extensions of *Poetry Out Loud*: expanding their use of the *Poetry Out Loud* resources, integrating poetry memorization and recitation more frequently, and incorporating more poetry into the curriculum.

- **A growing interest among teachers in doing more with poetry recitation as well as high rates of returning teachers have created a desire for more lesson ideas.** Teachers have lauded the *Poetry Out Loud* Teacher's Guide for innovative and effective lessons. Those who would like to do more with poetry recitation in their classes, as well as those who are now veteran *Poetry Out Loud* participants, are eager for more teaching ideas. There are also teachers who, due to their *Poetry Out Loud* experience and/or the support of their state arts agencies, have developed lesson plans they are willing to share with others.
- **Confusion and concern about judging criteria and inconsistencies in judging have abated some, but teachers and school coordinators frequently asked for clarification and possible changes in rubrics.** Teachers gave the new Judge's Guide high marks, and felt that it, along with the DVD of the National Finals, made the criteria and expectations for recitation clearer to students and coaches. There is still some concern that judging varies from level to level and that the rubric provides too much room for judging to be subjective. Many suggested that poems be assigned difficulty ratings or that the criteria for assigning the level of difficulty be more clearly articulated. Some teachers also noted that there were differences in the ways certain requirements—length of poems, poems from decades other than the 20th Century—were enforced in various levels of competition.
- **Although support and interest are high, teachers and coordinators still see a need—and are eager—to achieve the same level of interest for *Poetry Out Loud* generated by other school arts programs.** Although about a third (32%) of school coordinators said that, compared to other school arts activities, *Poetry Out Loud* generates about the same level of interest, or more (9.8%), more than half (58%) said it drew less interest than other school arts activities. A number of survey respondents indicated that they intend to recruit colleagues more actively, enlist more administrative support, and make *Poetry Out Loud* a key part of their arts and school curriculum and of their annual event schedule.