

Understanding the Impact of Poetry Out Loud: Findings from a National Study



What is Poetry Out Loud?

- Poetry Out Loud (POL) is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with participating state and jurisdictional arts agencies and managed by Mid Atlantic Arts. The program encourages high school students to learn about great poetry by offering free educational materials and a dynamic recitation competition. Students select, memorize, and recite classic poems, helping them to master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history.

How do students benefit from participating in Poetry Out Loud?

Higher Academic Performance

- POL students said the process of deeply analyzing, memorizing, and interpreting poetry challenged them and fostered skills they applied in their English Language Arts courses as well as other subjects (e.g. history and even science), such as improved writing and analytical skills.
- Students and teachers likened poetry study to “resistance training with analyzing.” Students reported that while they find poetry challenging and complex, its short form helps to build critical stamina, allowing students take more time for deeper analysis.
- Participating POL students were 1.7 times more likely to have 4-year college or graduate school aspirations than non-participants, even after researchers controlled for other factors.

Building Self-Confidence and Social Awareness

- POL students reported having more confidence in group discussions than their peers, as measured by differences in growth over the course of a school year.
- Several students found that reading and listening to poetry helped them think about situations from perspectives other than their own. POL participation also helped students seek emotional connections through their understanding of the world and others who inhabit it.
- POL students were 1.5 times more likely than non-POL participants to engage in community service and volunteering, even after researchers controlled for other factors.

Poetry Appreciation and Engagement

- Poetry reveals new ways to see world, fosters connection and empathy, and helps us reach a greater understanding of ourselves, our past, and others. Most students had limited exposure to poetry prior to POL participation. Through POL, students were given the opportunity to explore a wide and eclectic range of compelling poems. The study reports largely positive outcomes related to poetry appreciation and engagement.
- POL participants showed growth in poetry appreciation from pre- to post-survey. By contrast, among students who did not participate in the program, poetry appreciation declined from pre- to post-survey.
- POL gave students an opportunity to grapple with their positive and negative feelings toward poetry. Through multiple modes of engagement (i.e. reading, analyzing, memorizing, reciting, listening), POL gave students a wide variety of ways to connect with poems—and with each other.

The National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation commissioned a study with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to understand how POL impacted students in: (1) Academic Engagement, (2) Social-Emotional Development, and (3) Poetry Appreciation and Engagement. SPR partnered with ten schools across the nation that were identified for their strong implementation of the POL program. At each of these ten schools, SPR collected data from a school-wide survey and administrative records and interviewed a sample of students, teachers, and administrators.

How can Poetry Out Loud play a positive role in schools?

Study findings show that participation in POL can help schools become vibrant learning spaces and support students in their academic, literary, and social-emotional development.

- POL can have a positive influence on school culture by providing more avenues for self-expression.
- POL competitions can enhance school reputations and serve as a community-builder.
- Participation in POL can forge stronger connections between teachers and students.
- POL permits teachers to contribute to the school outside their usual formats; it nurtures teachers' own creativity.
- Through their shared experience, POL can bring together students who may not have otherwise formed connections.

POL Students:

"I think I gained a lot of self-confidence doing [POL], because you're up there and you're exposing yourself to all these people. You're showing them the real you, and the deeper part of you, and a lot of times that's really hard, especially in high school to do that."

"Poetry, and being graded on the theme of emotion that you can convey to a group of peers, is a really good skill to have and also pushes kids outside of their comfort zones in a really cool and healthy way."

POL Teachers:

"I think the kids are going to have an ethic of valuing poetry when they go out there or valuing the arts in general. They're more likely to go to an artistic performance in the community. I really believe that we are preparing them for a lifetime of arts, not just in a career, but just as human beings."

"When students feel confident that they have the ability to understand something and to express [themselves], it makes it easier for them to interact in classroom discussion and they make better editors of each other's work and they just feel braver, more courageous about interacting."

For more information on how to participate in Poetry Out Loud, including free educational materials, visit poetryoutloud.org.

