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IHS: Poetry Out Loud

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IONIA - Ionia High School will be one of 19 schools to participate in the statewide Poetry Out Loud program March 8.

The winner will be going on to the national finals in Washington D.C. in June.

It's only the second year IHS has been involved with the program, organized by the Michigan Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, but they've already made significant waves in the competition.

"Last year, we finished second in the state. We had only worked on it a couple months," said IHS English teacher Jack Powell.

He also organizes the program at IHS.

"The winners from Holt had worked on it the entire year, so I'd say we did pretty good," he said.

Powell elected to become part of Poetry Out Loud last year.

He was looking for a way to incorporate poetry in the classroom.

In what he said is fast becoming a forgotten art, poetry "always seems to be a struggle to teach in class."

Not anymore.

"Two classes of honors students participate, as well as other students who participate voluntarily," Powell said. "Even if they don't want to compete in the competition, it's still great for them to learn things like public speaking skills. We'll have probably 100 kids participating this year."

One of the participants will be Mike Rux, who won the school-wide competition last year and advanced to finish second overall in the state.

The IHS junior said poetry began as a graded assignment and turned into something much more.

"I barely got into the school competition by the skin of my teeth," said Rux, who recited *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, written originally by Wilfred Owen, a black soldier

during WW II. "I wasn't gunning for it, but then I figured I might as well step it up if I'm going to do it."

Competitors are given one poem to recite for the school competitions and three poems to recite for state or national competition.

Judges grade each competitor on physical presence, voice and articulation, appropriate dramatization, evidence of understanding, overall performance and the level of difficulty of the poem.

"You'll have decent-sized poems, too" Powell said. "Sometimes you'll have 25 lines to memorize per poem. And there is a lot more to it than memorizing."

Rux said memorization is actually the easy part. The hard part, he said, is understanding what the author of each poem wanted to portray to the world.

Simply reciting words without proper body language or tone not only gives false meaning to the poem but also elicits poor scores from judges.

It is a competition, after all.

For most competitors, competing is only part of it. The most rewarding experience is seeing the world - if only for a few stanzas - through someone else's eyes.

"It's not just a bunch of words written by old dead white guys," Rux said. "It's a way to express yourself. It's your being and soul on a piece of paper."