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## Giving voice to poetry

*The statewide contest was created to promote poetry, public-speaking skills and self-confidence.*

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Backstage, it was tense.

Sarah Murphy, a student from Cabool High School, bounced her legs, crossed her hands, and quickly mouthed her poem.

Danielle Romay, a junior at Nixa High School, faced a corner wall and recited her piece.

And Central High School senior Grace Statwick said, being a senior, this was her only chance to win.

Eleven students from four high schools faced-off at The Poetry Out Loud Missouri Regional Contest at Missouri State University last week. The goal of this movement is to promote poetry, which students learned through memorization and performance. Those 11 students were whittled down from about 1,600, said Sandra CH Smith, executive director of the Springfield Regional Arts Council.

"This is a great program," said contender Foster Alley, a sophomore at Waynesville High School. "I am on a college campus, just being here blows my mind."

Poetry Out Loud is a collaboration between the Springfield Regional Arts Council, Missouri Arts Council, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Missouri Association of Community Arts Agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts and Poetry Foundation.

The event promotes poetry, but also builds public-speaking skills and confidence. The winner progresses to the state competition, and the victor there will compete nationally with a chance to win \$20,000 in scholarship money.

When Patrick Vining heard there was potentially money involved, he was in.

"I did it and then I found out it was really fun," said Vining, a sophomore at Waynesville High School.

Students selected their poems out of an anthology, and could chose a classic, contemporary or theatrical piece, said Addy McCord, education director for the Springfield Regional Arts Council.

Statwick read the entire anthology before selecting her poems.

"It really exposed me to a lot of new poets," Statwick said.

She believes more students would read poetry if they found the right poets. Statwick selected her poems to reflect three aspects of her personality.

Emily Senf, a Cabool sophomore, competed for her mother.

"I didn't want to do it and then I came home and told my mom I didn't want to do it, and she was so disappointed. So I went back to school and told them I'd do it," Senf said.

It has been a "crazy" experience, but a positive one.

"I made me realize I can do whatever I want as long as I try," Senf said.

Tasha Massman, a sophomore in Cabool, entered as part of a class project, but enjoys poetry.

"I love the rhythm. It's kind of like a song if you listen closely," she said.

Last year eight Missouri schools participated, but this year 70 high schools in Missouri were involved.

Central's Vernon Meidlinger-Chin said if they continue to build on this, it would be a great way to expose students to poetry.

Meidlinger-Chin enjoys poetry, although he went through a phase where he stopped reading it.

"It's nice to be back at this," he said.

Statwick entered the contest with her sister and a bunch of friends.

She placed third at Central, and thought she did not make the cut for regionals. She was thrilled when she found out she could compete.

"I am very competitive and I got into this contest to win," Statwick said early in the evening.

Ultimately Statwick won the regional competition.

Organizers believe this poetry awareness movements has been a success.

They've already achieved a new perspective on poetry, Smith said.

"I hope the kids see this as another art form," McCord said. "Poetry and literature as an art form that's tangible to them."



Vernon Meidlinger-Chin of Central High School participated in Poetry Out Loud on Thursday evening at the Plaster Student Union Theater.



J.T. Dick of Nixa High competed in Poetry Out Loud Thursday.



Grace Statwick of Central High School won the regional Poetry Out Loud contest.