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## Live Poets in School Series Stir Students

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Garrison Keillor sat cross-legged on the teacher's desk, reading his poetry to a class of students.

He told the students not to bother taking notes, just to listen and to enjoy.

They did. For most, it was their first exposure to a poet.

For those students and hundreds of others in the Minneapolis public schools who heard poets in the classroom for the first time this year, it was an exciting experience.

Even though the students didn't seem to understand all of Keillor's poetry, they were attentive and obviously impressed.

As he read his poetry, he told the students "to trust your own judgment" about its quality and to remember that "what you hear may be different from what I read."

Keillor is one of eight young poets, six of whom are from the Twin Cities area who read to Minneapolis students through a program financed by a \$1,000 federal grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and Sciences through the American Academy of Poets and a matching grant from an anonymous local donor.

Eight other poets of national stature talked and read poetry to the students' teachers in a co-ordinated program.

The program has been a success and will continue next year if funds are available, Seymour Yesser, school English consultant, said.

The program certainly has been a success with students as measured on written comments they turned in after a poet had visited their classes. The students were impressed that the poets brought "new" poetry to them and treated them as adults by asking them to trust their own impressions.

After poet Peter Welver visited Anthony Junior High School, one seventh-grader wrote:

"Why don't we do this more often? What he read was real and alive now, instead of dead and full of fancy words like 'Evangeline' that we don't understand or care to?"

Another student wrote: "He didn't read down to us. You know, like little kids. We maybe didn't get it all, but we can get some."

The poet corps brought differing reactions among teachers, some of whom were delighted. One teacher was offended at a curse word in a poem and another said one of the poets "had a rather rustic appearance."

Five of the poets got a laugh out of the teacher's comment when they met recently with Yesser for an evaluation of the program.

The poets — Keillor, Welver, John Cady, Keith Gusterson and Richard Shaw — enjoyed the program and their only complaint was logistical ones of mixed-up appointments, interruptions and noisy places to read.

The other young poets were Jane Meyer, Richard First, John Beecher and A. B. The Spelman Spelman and Meyer, both Negroes, were of 15 popular with both Negro and white students, Yesser said.

Keillor said his reading at one high school was interrupted twice — once by an announcement of a physical and another of a locker inspection.

Yesser said that the poets are "a wedge into our locked schools." Some of the poets did indeed read poems that had curse words in them, but Yesser said he had only three parental complaints.

Gusterson said, "In other words, don't let them hear in the classroom what they talk about in the talk."

The poets found the students receptive and generally were impressed by their intelligence. "Even the elementary students seemed to like some of the more sophisticated poems," Gusterson said.

At Minnehaha Elementary School, students asked him to write a poem on the spot. He did and said, "It was a little terrible poem, but they loved it." The poets mostly read to junior high and high school students.

Many of the students were as interested in the poets themselves as in the poetry. The poets drew questions like "how intelligent do you have to be to write?" and "why do you wear blue jeans with a sport coat?"

Some of the poets felt the lack of response on occasion was perhaps due to teachers. Gusterson said, "I had the feeling that the teachers wanted to impress me with how well the kids behave and chose only to hear him" those who were sure to behave.

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**GARRISON KEILLOR**  
Live poetry in class

