

News Release

Everett Public Schools

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H.M. Jackson students excel in national *WordMasters* Challenge

Two teams of students representing Henry M. Jackson High School won high honors in this year's *WordMasters* Challenge, a national competition for high school students requiring close reading and analysis of many different kinds of prose and poetry. Participating with 556 other school teams from all across the country, the school's ninth-graders tied for **13th place in the nation** in the meet held in February, while its 10th-graders tied for **13th place** at their grade level as well. The teams were supervised by Nick Andersen, Craig Bowen and Bev Robertson all Honors English teachers at the school, located in the Everett School District.

Andersen, Bowen and Robertson urged students to participate for the first time this year to determine just how well Honors English students compared nationally to other students going into an Advanced Placement (AP) program. "We are very pleased, but not surprised by how well our students did in this competition," said Principal Terry Cheshire. "We know students here at Jackson are getting a solid education. Kudos for these teachers helping students demonstrate how well they are learning, and kudos to the kids for representing themselves, their families' support of education and this school so well."

Bev Robertson who also teaches AP Psychology as well as Honors English says, "These scores also reflect the solid foundation our feeder elementary and middle school teachers are giving these students."

The students too were enthusiastic about *WordMasters* and about their AP classes this year. Stacia Lee commented that, "*WordMasters* is a quick evaluation that shows how you are prepared for AP Literature and college. It's great for figuring out what to improve on and what you've already learned."

Stephanie Banning liked the challenge from the competition, the nudging she got from the teachers and the academic stretch she experienced in AP classes. "If students go to class to *get it over with*, they find school, teachers, and learning boring, and those students take away nothing from the experience. If students go to class wanting to learn, and they strive to understand their classmates, teachers, curriculum and themselves, they will leave as better, more intelligent people. AP/Honors teachers this year have pushed me to challenge myself and to actually learn."

Lee and Banning were among several Jackson High students who won honors for individual achievement: Sophomores Banning and Cameron Bartok, each of whom made only one mistake in the meet, were among the 11 highest-scoring 10th-graders in the entire country, while their classmate Lee placed among the 82 highest scorers. Freshmen Megan Cooley and Gina Kim were among the 119 highest-scoring ninth-graders at the same time. Sophomore Daniel Yoo earned honorable mention. More than 54,000 students from across the country participated in the meet.

The premise behind the *WordMasters* Challenge is that attentive reading and sensitivity to language are among the most important skills students acquire in school. The texts students must analyze for the Challenge can range from short fiction by Eudora Welty or John Steinbeck to poetry as old as Shakespeare's or as recent as Margaret Atwood's, and to essays as classic as E.B. White's or as current as a *Time* opinion piece by James Poniewozik. Though the texts vary widely in voice, subject, tone, and length, they have one thing in common: style. All use language skillfully to convey layers and shades of meaning not always apparent to students on a first or casual reading.

Like the questions on the verbal SAT I, the SAT II in English Literature, and the AP exams in both English Language and English Literature, the questions posed by the *WordMasters* Challenge ask students both to recognize the emotional and/or rational logic of a piece of writing and to notice the ways in which a writer's style shapes and shades his meaning. Because *WordMasters* Challenge is a classroom activity and not a college-entrance exam, it can be a learning experience, not just a high hurdle. After completing a Challenge, classes are encouraged to talk about the texts and the answers to the multiple-choice questions, and are also given additional topics for open-ended discussion and/or written response.

Robertson notes, "This is the first of the three challenges thus far in which we have participated. We have one more challenge this year. We are able to use the results of these challenges to amend and enrich their curriculum as we prepare our students for the academic rigors of college."

The texts for the third *WordMasters* meet this year were a pair of poems by Robert Hayden and James Meredith (for 9th - and 10th-graders) and a speech by Barack Obama (for 11th - and 12th-graders). The students will participate in one more *WordMasters* meet in the coming months, and medals and certificates will be awarded in June to those who have achieved and/or progressed the most in the course of the year.

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