Poet immerses teens in verse

By KEN ROSS
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HOLYOKE — Edward Hirsch is talking about loss.
About losing small things such as keys or names you
cannot remember.
As he talks, 30 Holyoke High School students listen intently.
Nothing usual.
Except that Hirsch is talking about something most
teenagers do not usually consider — poetry.
The poem by Worcester's Elizabeth Bishop builds from
losing small things to bigger items.
"You read the poem, and it teaches you how to read it," Hirsch says. "You see the poem is getting things incrementally bigger. It's like mathematics. Things keep getting bigger. The structure of this power keeps getting bigger and bigger."
So, by the time the students get to the last stanza in "One Art," the person in the poem loses the most important thing — another's love.
And Hirsch makes it easy for the students to understand the poem. Then again, the nationally renowned poet knows how to read a poem.
He wrote a popular book on the subject, entitled simply, "How to Read a Poem."
Hirsch said after class, "I think poetry is often taught badly in schools. I like to bring poetry alive for youngsters."
He went to the school on Thursday as part of the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts fall series. Hirsch also will speak on Sunday at 1 p.m. in the Wistariahurst Museum at 238 Cabot St.
After the class, sophomore Vilmari Luna, 16, said she was thrilled to meet Hirsch.
"It's really awesome to meet a living power," she said.
After reading Bishop's poem, the class read Pablo Neruda's poem, "Nothing But Death." The class read the poem twice — first in Spanish and then in English.
As Luna reads the poem aloud in Spanish, someone drags a chair across the floor. Several students say shush, and then silently listen to her read the rest of the poem.
"I find this a completely strange poem," Hirsch says after he reads the poem in English.
Gradually, logically, he explains what he thinks the poem is about.
"Death everywhere," he concludes.
Hirsch then reads one more poem. It is one of his own: "Fast Break."
The poem follows two basketball players racing along a court. The poem is one long sentence — like a beautiful, extended play in a basketball game, with one word flowing into the next until the ball floats "perfectly through the net."
Said Hirsch, "It seemed like a good thing to me, to make a poem mimic a play in basketball."
He then asks if there are any poets in the class. Luna raises her hand, but no one else does.
Yet, before Hirsch leaves, other students quietly approach him, holding poems in their hands.