

Wit & Wisdom is a K–8 English curriculum developed by teachers, for teachers in collaboration with the nonprofit Great Minds.

Wit & Wisdom teachers and students experience the joy of reading, writing, and speaking about excellent texts while meeting the rigor of the standards. With four modules at each grade level, students build content knowledge by delving deeply into significant, high-interest topics in the liberal arts and sciences.

Wit & Wisdom's learning design is based on the premise that texts lead and standards follow. Instead of addressing standards in isolation, *Wit & Wisdom* lessons integrate standards from multiple Common Core State Standards strands based on the demands of the text.

***Wit & Wisdom* Literacy Foundations**

Wit & Wisdom's learning design is based on high-quality academic research. Teacher–writers built on the research highlighted below, bringing years of experience with diverse learners to lesson writing.

Key Elements of Learning Design		Supporting Research
Building Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Each module builds knowledge about a worthy topic in literature, science, history, or visual art. ▪ A module Essential Question guides student inquiry. ▪ Students read carefully chosen literary, informational, and visual art texts. ▪ Topics strategically reoccur across Grades K–8, establishing a foundation of background knowledge. 	Students who usually struggle with reading can outperform those who usually score high—if they possess more knowledge of a text’s topic. ¹ They also acquire vocabulary much more quickly when reading numerous texts focused on one topic rather than a collection on scattered topics. In an effect known as “bootstrapping,” reading increasingly complex texts focused on a single topic allows students to access texts above their typical independent reading level by expanding relevant background knowledge and vocabulary. ²
Rich, Complex Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students read complex, engaging, grade-level texts to build knowledge and develop essential reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and vocabulary skills. ▪ Texts were selected for their literary merit and rich content. 	“Performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not.” ³

Key Elements of Learning Design		Supporting Research
<p>Framework for Reading Complex Texts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students read complex texts using a framework of five Content Stages. ▪ Each lesson has a Content Framing Question, aligned to a Content Stage, to focus students’ exploration of the lesson’s text(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Wonder—What do I notice and wonder about the text? ▫ Organize—What is happening in the text? ▫ Reveal—What does a deeper exploration of a text-specific element reveal about the text? ▫ Distill—What is the essential meaning of this text? ▫ Know—How does the text build my knowledge in a specific content area? ▪ Through repeated application of the Content Stages, students develop and apply habits of mind across texts and content areas. 	<p>Successful readers hold a “standard for coherence,” expecting to understand each aspect of a text.⁴ Repeatedly progressing through a sequence of purposeful, predictable close reading stages⁵ can establish and enable that standard for coherence.</p> <p>To comprehend any text, readers coordinate and execute many complex thinking processes.⁶ Each text’s unique attributes inform the varied questions, tasks, and standards students explore and practice with that text.⁷</p>
<p>Integrated Approach to Literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All work with reading, thinking, speaking, listening, writing, vocabulary, and grammar ties into the module topic. ▪ Academic writing and discourse are based on module texts, leveraging students’ knowledge about the topic. 	<p>Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are interrelated aspects of the same act: communicating ideas through language. When studied together, these strands reinforce one another.⁸ Content integration levels the playing field among students with different types of background knowledge by focusing on information gained through reading rather than through personal experience.⁹</p>

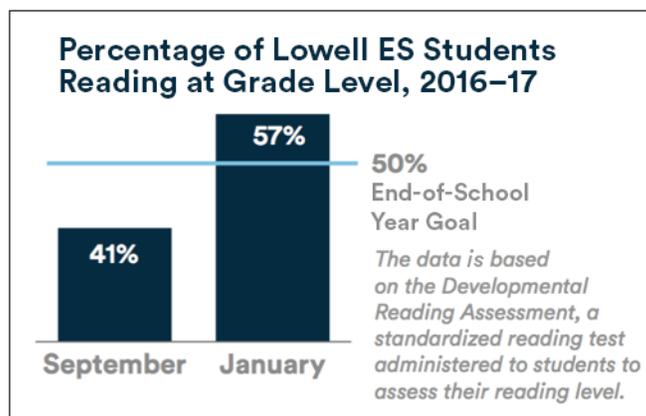
Key Elements of Learning Design		Supporting Research
<p>Explicit Writing and Speaking Instruction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students learn to convey information and express ideas through explicit instruction in the crafts of writing, speaking, and presenting. ▪ A progression of Craft Questions guides students in learning the elements of strong craft: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Examine—Students begin by examining high-quality exemplars. ▫ Experiment—Students practice the target skill in a scaffolded task. ▫ Execute—Students employ the skill in their own text-based work. ▫ Excel—Students revise their own work, and often that of a peer, cultivating mastery of the target skill. 	<p>Effective writing instruction requires that students develop deep knowledge of content and craft. Knowledge of craft flows from direct instruction, including writing models.¹⁰</p>
<p>Meaningful, Frequent, and Varied Assessments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessments occur in every lesson, with both formative and summative assessments throughout the module. ▪ Assessments tie to module and lesson content and build toward a culminating performance task for the module. 	<p>The most powerful type of assessment is the content-based performance task. Tasks should consist of work worth doing, reflecting best instruction.¹¹</p>

Evidence of Efficacy

Wit & Wisdom was launched in the 2016–2017 school year. Accordingly, there has not yet been an opportunity to formally study its effectiveness. However, schools implementing the curriculum report numerous positive student outcomes, suggesting potential for powerful impact. These schools have reported the following:

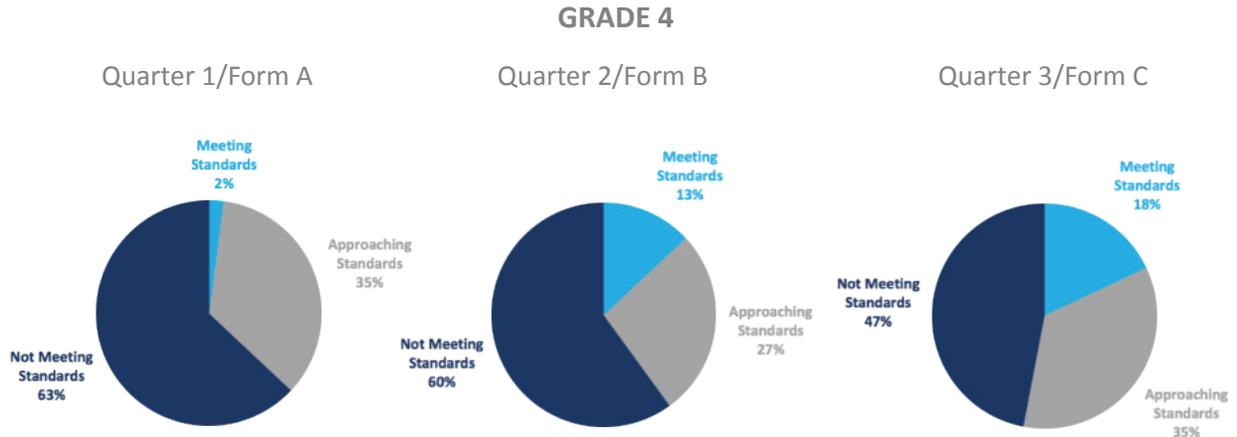
- **Strong classroom discourse.** Educators have observed rich academic conversations in *Wit & Wisdom* classrooms. Many remark upon the power of Socratic Seminars—student-led, collaborative discussions centering on a thought-provoking question related to a module’s content.
- **Heightened use of evidence.** Students regularly support ideas and opinions in writing and speaking with evidence from texts, both when prompted and spontaneously.
- **Growth in student knowledge.** Students develop deep knowledge of and interest in module topics. Many have been inspired to continue learning even after the module ends.
- **High levels of student engagement.** Students are excited about English Language Arts. One principal shared that while eighth-graders previously tried to avoid ELA class, with *Wit & Wisdom* they are now eager to attend.
- **Growth in reading performance by all students, including students with IEPs.** With *Wit & Wisdom*, all students, regardless of their reading level or learning challenges, read the same texts. They learn the same content and develop the same skills. Many schools report that students with individualized educational plans have made especially noteworthy strides in their reading abilities.

In addition, many *Wit & Wisdom* schools see increased reading performance as measured by standardized tests. For example, James R. Lowell Elementary, a Philadelphia school, began implementing *Wit & Wisdom* in the fall of 2016. The school reports that from September to January, the number of students reading at grade level has increased 16%, almost double the school’s end-of-year goal of 9% growth on their administration of the Developmental Reading Assessment.

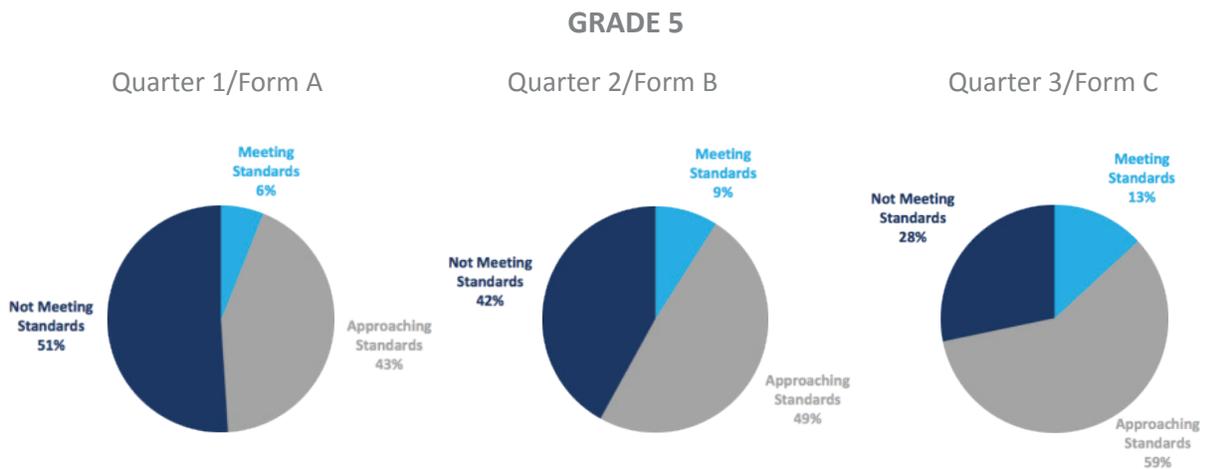


Another school, Fletcher Community School in Aurora, Colorado, has reported similar strong gains and positive results from the first quarter to the third:

- The percentage of Grade 4 students meeting standards has risen from 2% to 18%.
- The percentage of Grade 5 students meeting standards has increased from 6% to 13%.



This data comes from Acuity Benchmarks, given three times a year. Form A, given in August 2016, assesses two-thirds of the previous year's literacy standards and one-third of the current year's literacy standards. Form B, given in November 2016, assesses one-third of the past year's standards and two-thirds of the current year's standards. Form C, given in February 2017, measures 100 percent of current standards.



Similar reports from other early implementers of *Wit & Wisdom* point to the curriculum's tremendous transformational potential.

Professional Development and Implementation Support

As with the curriculum, our approach to implementation support rests on a strong research foundation. We help educators deeply understand *Wit & Wisdom*'s learning design and how to plan, customize, and teach *Wit & Wisdom*. In our sessions, educators learn through collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. In addition, our professional development values and trusts educators' experiences and unique contexts.

We offer a sequence of four professional development sessions, as described in the following table:

Session	Summary
Launch <i>Wit & Wisdom</i>	Introduces participants to the curriculum's learning design; builds knowledge of the learning design, content, and essential module and lesson components
Module Study	Deepens participants' understanding of how module components build knowledge and empower students with tools to write and speak about what they know
Lead <i>Wit & Wisdom</i>	Guides administrators in developing and sustaining successful <i>Wit & Wisdom</i> implementation
Preparation and Customization of a <i>Wit & Wisdom</i> Lesson	Empowers educators to implement the curriculum with integrity and to make strategic decisions when customizing a <i>Wit & Wisdom</i> lesson in response to classroom and student needs

Schools can continue their learning through strengths-based site visits from a *Wit & Wisdom* facilitator. These visits provide educators with opportunities to participate in guided observations to identify collective strengths and develop implementation strategies based on these strengths.

In addition, our curricular materials support embedded professional development. Specifically, schools can use the following materials to build collective understanding of the content and teaching of *Wit & Wisdom*:

- The **Implementation Guide** describes what the program is, why it works, and how to implement it.
- Each **Module Overview** lays out the module's big picture—the knowledge built, the skills taught, the standards addressed, the student learning goals targeted, and the lesson sequence.

Wit & Wisdom's effective pedagogy and deep implementation support is a powerful combination that can lead to lasting, positive change for ELA students.

Notes

1. See Willingham.
2. See Adams 9–10.
3. See ACT 16–17.
4. See Pearson and Liben 1.
5. See Adler and Van Doren 46–48; Liben 1–9.
6. See Fountas and Pinnell 272–273; Frey and Fisher 18.
7. See Shanahan 9–11.
8. See Graham and Perin 20–21; Hawkins et al. 14.
9. See Hawkins et al. 34–36.
10. See Hawkins et al. 10–14.
11. See Frey and Fisher 1–15.

Works Cited

- ACT. *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading*. ACT, 2006, Web. Accessed 1 Aug. 2016. PDF.
- Adams, Marilyn Jager. "Advancing Our Students' Language and Literacy: The Challenge of Complex Texts." *American Educator*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 3–11.
- Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. Touchstone, 1972.
- Fountas, Irene C., and Gay Su Pinnell. "Guided Reading: The Romance and the Reality." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2012, pp. 268–84.
- Frey, Nancy, and Douglas B. Fisher. *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom*. 2nd ed, ASCD, 2014.
- Frey, Nancy, and Douglas B. Fisher. *Rigorous Reading: 5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts*. Corwin, 2013.
- Graham, Steve, and Dolores Perin. *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Alliance for Excellent Education, Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2007, <http://witeng.link/0138>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2016. PDF.
- Hawkins, Joey, et al. *Writing for Understanding: Using Backward Design to Help All Students Write Effectively*. Authentic Education, 2008.
- Liben, David. "Framework for Preparing, Implementing and Assessing Close Reading Lessons." *Achieve the Core*, Student Achievement Partners, 20 May 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- Pearson, P. David, and David Liben. "The Progression of Reading Comprehension." *Achieve the Core*, Student Achievement Partners, 13 Aug. 2013, Web. Accessed 1 Aug. 2016.
- Shanahan, Timothy. "Letting the Text Take Center Stage: How the Common Core State Standards Will Transform English Language Arts Instruction." *American Educator*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 4–11.
- Willingham, Daniel T. "How Knowledge Helps: It Speeds and Strengthens Reading Comprehension, Learning and Thinking." *American Educator*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2006, Web. Accessed 1 Aug. 2016.