

Students Gain with Engaging Content

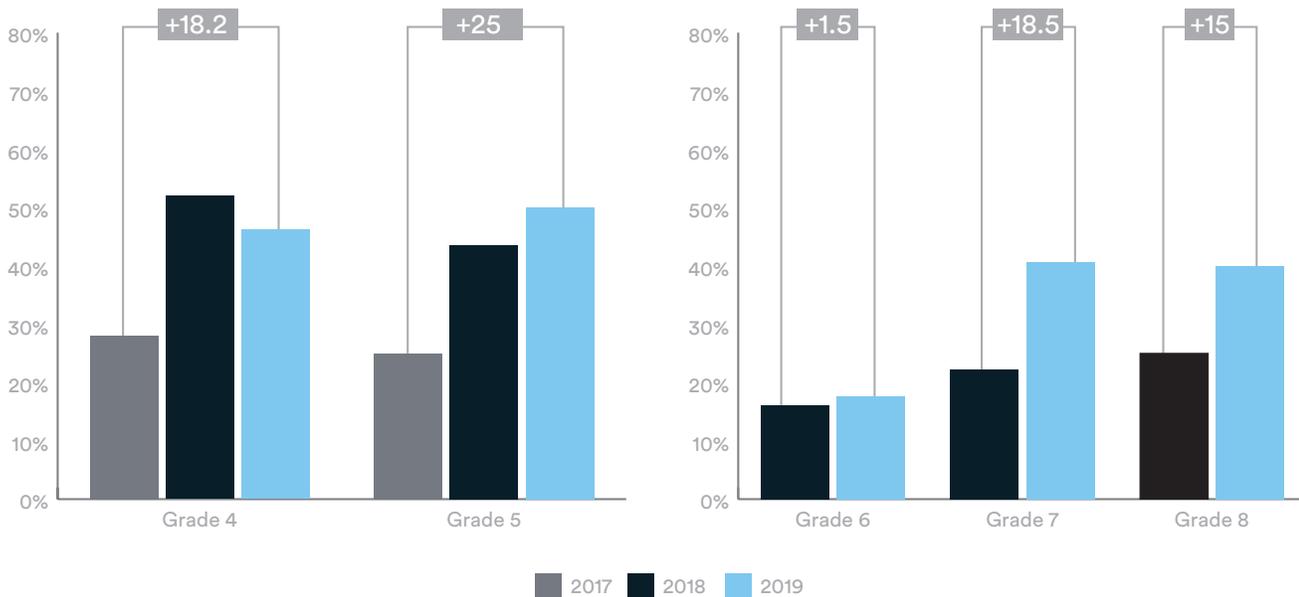
Center City Public Charter Schools (PCS) opened in 2008 as the first Catholic-to-charter school conversion in the United States. It is unaffiliated with the archdiocese, though Center City’s small schools are still in the same buildings where students have been educated for more than a century.

Kate Merrill, director of curriculum and instruction at Center City, is a huge *Wit & Wisdom*® fan. “I love this curriculum,” she says.

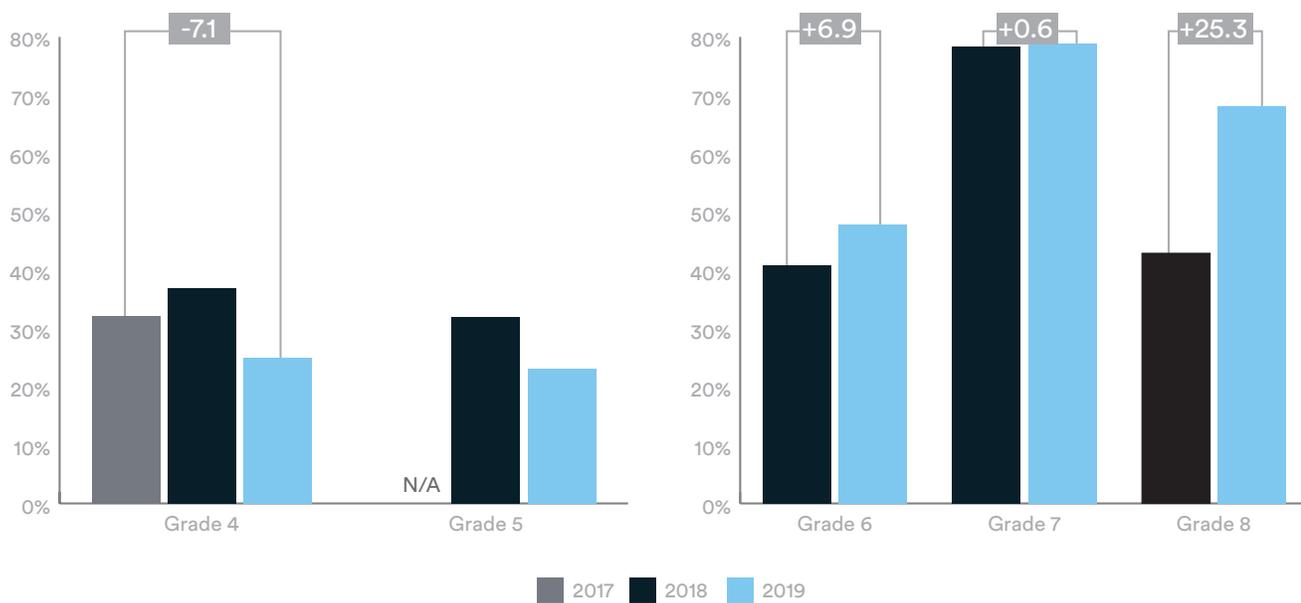
The six schools in the Center City system began teaching the curriculum in Grades 4 and 5 in 2017–2018, and then they expanded to Grades 6–8 in 2018–2019 and to Grade 3 this year. In that time, the schools have seen encouraging gains in reading achievement. For example, in the last year alone, the performance of Grade 8 students improved more than 13 percentage points on the PARCC end-of-year test. These improvements have been particularly noticeable on the two campuses with the least student and teacher turnover: Brightwood and Congress Heights (see charts).

SCHOOLS PROFILE
Six schools serving
PK through Grade 8
1,493 students

Congress Heights, Percentage of students scoring Level 4 or 5 ELA



Brightwood, Percentage of students scoring Level 4 or 5 ELA



More striking for Merrill than these assessment gains has been the reaction the middle schoolers at Brightwood campus had to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. A staple of American middle schools for decades, the novel is not exactly a page-turner or obviously relevant to modern adolescents a century after World War I ended.

“The students *loved* it. It was their favorite module last year,” Merrill says. She credits part of its success to the extensive content knowledge that accompanied the novel. “Studying World War I opened their eyes to someone else’s reality. And the module builds background in such a way that students begin to understand the human story that accompanied the war through their study of literature and art.” She says the videos, historical documents, and additional readings helped make the novel come to life. “They left with more knowledge and interest in World War I than any of us would have expected from your run-of-the-mill history class.”

INTEGRATING ELA AND SOCIAL STUDIES

Indeed, Center City’s top priority this school year is to more systematically integrate social studies and English language arts in all classrooms. “*Wit & Wisdom* allows us to do that. The research is so clear. It doesn’t make sense to teach these subjects separately,” she says.

Thus, in Grades 7 and 8, two teachers (one an ELA specialist, the other a social studies specialist) coteach classes, which have been expanded from 90 minutes to two hours to accommodate the added instruction. With *Wit & Wisdom* as the foundation, the teachers systematically build additional lessons that extend students’ background knowledge. In Grades 3–6, teachers and curriculum specialists will spend this year closely identifying the social studies–related content already included in *Wit & Wisdom* and determining how they might expand on it, perhaps in different sessions such as morning meetings or enrichment classes.

APPEAL OF INTEGRATED WRITING

In seeking a new ELA curriculum, Center City leaders were drawn to *Wit & Wisdom*’s emphasis on writing, especially its integration into the lessons; *Wit & Wisdom* doesn’t teach writing as a stand-alone unit as *Expeditionary Learning* and other curricula do. Merrill says students write a lot more—“whole paragraphs and not just a sentence or two.” They also edit their own work and have become much more comfortable allowing others to critique it.

Many teachers initially chafed at having to learn a new curriculum, feared losing their instructional autonomy, and worried that their students would not be able to handle the increased rigor. “But teachers loved what was happening with their students,” Merrill says, citing students’ increased engagement and interest and deeper classroom discussions.

CHANGING TEACHERS’ PRACTICE

“*Wit & Wisdom* has changed how teachers think of their practice,” Merrill says. “It has been pushing teachers to believe that they and their students can do more than they thought, that even struggling readers can understand advanced content.”

Center City provides extensive professional support, including seven professional development days a year and one or two professional learning communities a month, when teachers across schools can work on module studies, lesson studies, video sharing, and data reviews. Because the schools are so small (only one class for each grade per school), the teachers meet as teams—Grades 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8.

Merrill and her small team of specialists also provide onsite coaching throughout the year, supplemented this year by Great Minds® Fellow Shannon Nuzzelillo, who works closely with the curriculum specialists to provide professional development to teachers. [Great Minds is the nonprofit publisher of *Wit & Wisdom*, *Eureka Math*, and *PhD Science*.]

Also important, Center City has taken advantage of all of the professional development Great Minds offers, such as training on how to launch the curriculum, customize the modules, and build reading fluency.

“I really encourage others to take advantage of all of Great Minds’ PD. Really pay attention to what they offer,” Merrill advises. “Trust the curriculum. Don’t give up. It will be a struggle at first,” she says, adding that Center City did not even get all the way through three of the four modules in year one. “We are still working on pacing, but we are getting better each year. Year two was better than year one. As we get better at customizing and as we know the curriculum better, we are better able to stay on pace.”

“You really have to trust that kids can do this level of work,” Merrill says. “It’s a mindset shift. Your students are capable—if you engage them with strong content.”

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