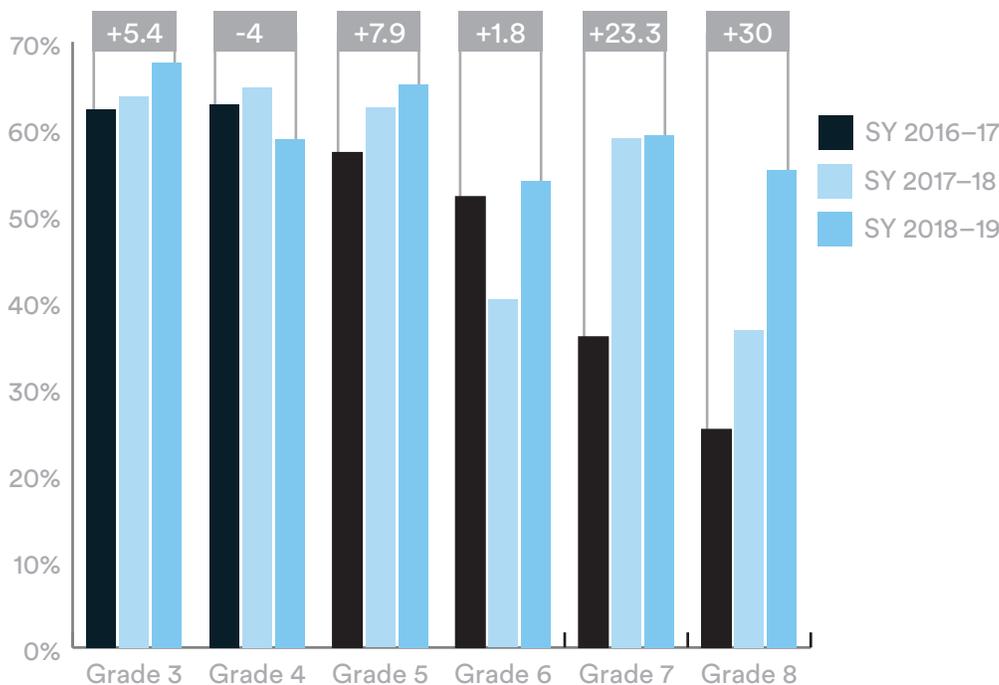


MAD RIVER LOCAL SCHOOLS, RIVERSIDE, OHIO

Early Adopter Continues to Make Progress with *Wit & Wisdom*®

Mad River Local Schools was one of the first districts to adopt *Wit & Wisdom*®, the English language arts curriculum from Great Minds®. Now in its third year of implementation in all of its schools, Mad River continues to succeed with *Wit & Wisdom*. Proficiency scores on the Ohio state test continue to rise in all but one grade.

Percentage of students scoring proficient or above, Ohio's state test in ELA



This story updates a previous [article](#) on Mad River, published in March 2019, featuring teacher voices. For more about Mad River's experience, read this CenterPoint [article](#), coauthored by Amy Holbrook, Becky Parker, and Mandy Polen. Or watch this [video](#).

DISTRICT PROFILE
 1,600 students in Kindergarten through Grade 8
 Adopted *Wit & Wisdom*® in School Year 2017-2018

District leaders cite three keys to their success: belief that all children can learn at high levels, strong support from colleagues inside and outside the district, and hard work.

“Everybody from the top down has to be committed to the proposition that, as Great Minds says, every child is capable of greatness—the belief that all kids can handle the challenging material and deserve it. And that when you begin to doubt, which is inevitable for classroom teachers, you want administrators and others reminding you that the students can do this,” says Instructional Coach Becky Parker.

Her colleague Mandy Polen adds: “For teachers, this work is a journey, a huge shift from how they previously taught. This and other knowledge-building curricula are challenging to implement. As educators, we need to acknowledge and be okay with that.”

She quickly notes, “It’s hard work worth doing.”

Both instructional coaches underscore the value of having extensive support. Mad River benefited from having three Great Minds *Wit & Wisdom* summer associates in 2019: Polen, Parker, and Ashley Wittmer. (Summer associates deliver professional development during the summer, sharing their expertise, experiences, and best practices with fellow *Wit & Wisdom* teachers around the country.) That experience helped district educators offer deep professional development to their colleagues, including teachers of English learners and speech teachers, in the summer and fall.

EXTENSIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Key offerings focused on launching lessons, writing, and helping new and veteran teachers better understand the importance of having a language arts curriculum that explicitly builds student knowledge. Professional days throughout the school year help teachers customize lessons and deliberately help their students do more of the “heavy lifting” required to learn in class.

Some 30 student teachers also participated in Mad River’s *Wit & Wisdom* training this year. “Ed schools aren’t typically preparing graduates to teach this level of rigor,” says Polen.

Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers continue to focus on learning to use *Geodes*[™], the Great Minds library of wonderfully rich books for budding readers that couple specific decoding strategies with content and vocabulary knowledge. “Before, students weren’t really decoding words; they were memorizing the pictures. With *Geodes*, they can use the texts to practice decoding. It’s a great bridge between *Wilson Foundations*[®], a foundational reading program for Grades K through 3, and *Wit & Wisdom*,” says Parker.

Polen, Parker, and their colleagues also benefit from having supportive networks outside the district, especially on Twitter. “A lot of school districts are implementing *Wit & Wisdom* now,” says Parker. “There are always implementation challenges, and all of us are using Twitter to connect with so many educators across the country.”

Mad River educators are especially pleased that Cincinnati Public Schools and some schools in Cleveland are now using the curriculum. The educators praised Great Minds for promoting such connections and for the increased implementation support being provided. “We have to be in this together,” Parker says.

NATALIE WEXLER PROFILES MAD RIVER

Natalie Wexler’s recent book on literacy, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—and How to Fix It*, profiles the success educator Sarah Webb and her Mad River colleagues have had in using *Wit & Wisdom*. One excerpt describes the experience of a student named Matt.

“Matt was a sweet, blond kid from a military family who had been in a different school every year since kindergarten. At the beginning of the year, Matt’s mother took Webb aside and confessed she was worried about his reading. He was one of those kids, Webb says, who thought he was ‘in the dumb group.’ But it turned out that Matt was keenly interested in everything the class was studying. During the ‘great heart’ module, Matt wrote an entire paragraph about Clara Barton—more than he’d ever written before—which he proudly read to his parents.”

He soon became a leader, participating eagerly in discussions. Webb found him delightful, and his mother said she'd never seen him so enthusiastic about school. At the end of the year, Matt wrote Webb a thank-you note telling her reading was 'not a struggle anymore.'

"How much of that, I ask her, was because of you as a teacher, and how much was because of the curriculum?"

"Some of it was me," she admits. "I love reading. But for him, it was also the exciting topics, the challenging books, being pushed to all this thinking. Instead of just, 'You're a level L.'"

Wexler notes that a transformation from a focus on comprehension skills and reading levels to content and knowledge from texts is gradually underway in schools nationwide.

She concludes: "And for the millions of kids across the country like Matt, who are only waiting for someone to actually teach them something in order to unlock their potential, it's about time."