

JEN ARELLANO, BONSALL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, BONSALL, CALIFORNIA

# “My Students and I Are Just Blown Away”



Jen Arellano was drawn to education after volunteering to teach reading in her son’s first grade classroom. She already knew how to write. And she knows a good story. Before she switched careers and started teaching three years ago, she’d spent over 20 years as a screenwriter in Hollywood— working as a “script doctor” for virtually all the major studios, from MGM to Warner Brothers.

What she didn’t know, as a first-year teacher in the 2017–18 school year, was how to find a good English language arts curriculum for her diverse Grade 4 students. After her elementary school (north of San Diego) abandoned its old curriculum halfway through the year, she and her colleagues cobbled together their own materials, drawing from online sources such as Teachers Pay Teachers.

“I had come out of a very strong teaching preparation program. I had learned a lot of the strategies and cutting-edge techniques,” she says. The missing piece was a strong curriculum.

So, during the summer of 2018, Arellano did a more thorough search and found *Wit & Wisdom*®. She saw it was aligned to the Common Core State Standards. She liked that English language development tasks were built into it. She had used *Eureka Math*® the year before and liked it, so was familiar with Great Minds®, the creator of both *Eureka Math* and *Wit & Wisdom*.

She took the plunge and purchased the materials to use with her students. “I really loved the implementation guide. I recognized the dynamic instructional practices that I’d been taught at Cal State-San Marcos. I saw how the curriculum could engage students.”

## “BLOWN AWAY” BY THE READING LIST

But what she liked most was the reading list. “I was just sold,” she recalls.

So are her students: Grade 5 in school year 2018–19, when she first started using *Wit & Wisdom*, and school year 2019–20, when she shifted to Grade 3.

“The biggest differentiator with *Wit & Wisdom* is the quality of the texts. The kids are so engaged, they can’t wait to get back to the books,” she says, singling out works such as the *Phantom Tollbooth*, *Thunder Rolling in the Mountains*, and *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*. “My students and I are just blown away,” she says.

“I really loved the implementation guide. I saw how the curriculum could engage students.”

— Jen Arellano, teacher

## IMPROVED ACHIEVEMENT

The increased enthusiasm for reading shows in improved achievement scores on California's state test. "Nearly all our Grade 5 students showed growth from the following year, even if they did not move up enough to change their level," she says. Fifteen students went up an entire level from the previous year, 21 showed growth but stayed in the same level, 10 students declined (though only two were in the lowest category).

She says benchmark scores show her Grade 3 students made encouraging growth in the first semester this year.

Being the only teacher in her school using *Wit & Wisdom* posed challenges. Arellano had to go online and use Donors Choose to crowd source the funds to pay for the books, first in Grade 5, then in Grade 3. She taught herself the curriculum, reading all the books and poring over the implementation guide. She created her own instructional PowerPoints and knowledge binders.

She struggled to keep up with the pacing guide and had to decide where to adjust the lessons. She had to make some of the writing prompts more accessible to her students, many of whom were struggling readers and writers. She looks forward to trying *Geodes*, Great Minds' collection of accessible, knowledge-imparting books for emerging and developing readers.

This year, she has an ally — a Grade 5 teacher. "She's a veteran teacher who saw the success I was having and decided to try it," says Arellano, who gave her colleague the *Wit & Wisdom* materials. They meet every two weeks to discuss the curriculum and specific teaching challenges.

Plus, teaching *Wit & Wisdom* for a second year has other benefits. "Last year, I was always about a module behind. This year, I'm only about half a module behind," Arellano jokes. "But I'm not worried. I know the curriculum cycles back and the key concepts and skills are embedded throughout."

**"The biggest differentiator with *Wit & Wisdom* is the quality of the texts. The kids are so engaged, they can't wait to get back to the books."**

— Jen Arellano, teacher