

KATIE ELLIS, TITLE I READING SPECIALIST, CHARLES C. BELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, ASHEVILLE, NC

Using Geodes[®] to Promote Educational Equity

For Katie Ellis, the *Geodes*[®] library is more than an early literacy program. It's a way to promote equity for students who have historically been denied access to high-quality curriculum and instruction.

“For me, this is a prevention strategy, not an intervention strategy,” says the 12-year teaching veteran who serves as a Title I reading specialist for low-income students at Charles C. Bell Elementary School, an Asheville-area school in western North Carolina.

“One reading expert said it well: ‘Leveled texts lead to leveled lives.’ I’m passionate about the students who struggle, the students who often fall through the cracks,” Ellis says. “They get promoted from grade to grade but often can’t read.”

Ellis has seen that firsthand in her school. Because decoding was taught separately from content, elementary students’ scores tended to stagnate starting in Grade 3 or even earlier. “We actually saw some kids starting to falter in Grade 1. In Kindergarten, they could memorize their decoding skills, but they weren’t really reading. They had a false sense of success,” she recalls.

“A BEAUTIFUL MATCH”

That has changed now that the school has integrated *Geodes* (early literacy texts from Great Minds[®] that combine phonics practice, engaging content, and art), *Foundations*[®] (a structured literacy program from Wilson Language Training for Grades K–3 that provides a systematic approach to comprehensively address foundational skills as well as spelling and handwriting), and *Wit & Wisdom*[®] (Great Minds’ English language arts curriculum for Grades K–8).

“The *Geodes* library fits perfectly with *Foundations*[®] and *Wit & Wisdom*. It’s the bridge between the two. It’s a beautiful match,” Ellis says. “Now everything fits together into a whole literacy block. There’s so much more coherence.”

Students love the *Geodes* books and have grown in confidence. “I’ve never seen kids with this level of vocabulary, content knowledge, and decoding skills,” Ellis



Katie Ellis

CHARLES C. BELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROFILE

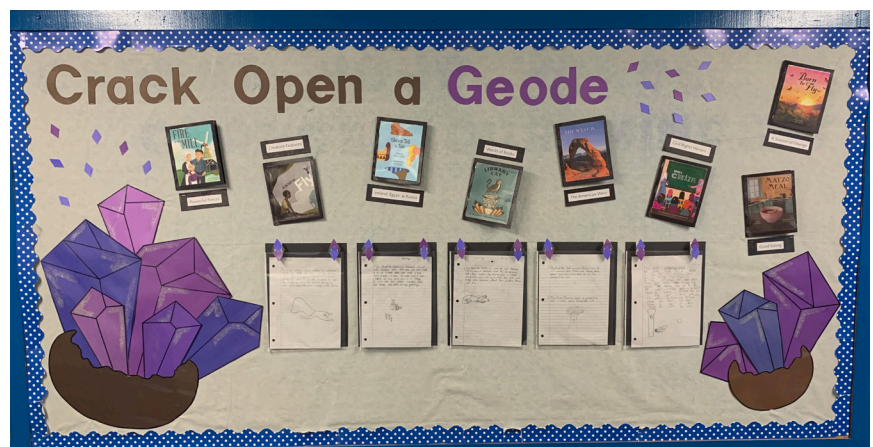
K–5

275 students, 54% low income

Adopted *Wit & Wisdom*[®] in 2016–2017 school year

Adopted *Foundations*[®] in 2012

Adopted *Geodes* in 2018–2019 school year



A classroom bulletin board displays student work.

says. Reading multiple texts about the same subject lends depth to classroom discussions and to students' overall learning.

External confirmation of student success comes from Lorraine Griffith, a humanities content architect for Great Minds. "I visited Katie's classroom in early March. It was astounding. I read with some of her students who began as nonreaders at the beginning of first grade. They are reading and writing from the same texts that other students are using. I was moved to tears."

TEACHERS WELCOME THE COHERENCE

Teachers appreciate having access to a single, coherent set of quality materials that all of their students can use. Instead of having to stitch together up to four separate learning plans, one for each level of reader, teachers can now focus on identifying each student's different access points to the same text. "Teachers love not having to write lessons from scratch anymore," Ellis says.

Teachers also welcome how *Geodes* make extensive use of fine art, original illustrations, and photographs as a way to teach content. "The image discussions are unlike anything we have ever had before," Ellis says.

Students and teachers welcome the additional writing practice, now two or three times a week in Grades 1 and 2. "Every student has a journal and they're excited about it," Ellis says. "If you have a knowledge base, it gives you something meaningful to write about," she says, contrasting *Geodes* and *Wit & Wisdom* with Lucy Calkins' Writing Workshop, which the school used previously.

PARENTS ARE "REALLY THRILLED"

Ellis says the most enthusiastic *Geodes* fans are the parents. "That was the biggest shock," she says. "We get so many comments about how amazed they are at how well their children are reading at home. Even for the students who need extra support, things are connecting now. The parents are really thrilled."

To help students and teachers shift to a more challenging, knowledge-based approach to early literacy, Ellis and her two assistants provide extensive support. They meet with small groups of striving readers to prepare them for each book in advance of the regular classroom instruction. Educator training focuses on sharing research on the science of reading, looking closely at student data, assessing each student's needs, and brainstorming instruction.

She advises educators from schools and districts considering using *Geodes* to visit schools such as hers. "See it in action. Have follow-up conversations with teachers," Ellis says. Once her school reopens, she expects more such visits because Buncombe County leaders, aware of Bell Elementary School's success, are considering adding *Geodes* for many more schools next year after the coronavirus crisis passes.

"AMAZED" AT WHAT KIDS CAN DO

Ellis says it helps to be open and flexible about how best to use the materials. "It's a huge mindset shift to have all students reading the same text. See what's best for your kids. You'll learn as you go," she says.

Whatever approach *Geodes* adopters take, Ellis is confident that student engagement and learning will soar. "Teachers will be amazed at what their students can do—learning words, understanding concepts, making connections. We've learned that if we set the bar high, they'll grow to it."