

# “Productive Struggle” Helping Students —and Staff

Educators in Rogers Public Schools in northwest Arkansas have seen first-hand how students benefit from productive struggle in a challenging English language arts curriculum, *Wit & Wisdom*®.

“It’s not just direct instruction anymore,” says Sarah Stallings, the district’s K–8 curriculum specialist for ELA and social studies. “Students are learning for themselves, discovering, and growing. They are digging in, talking, and writing so much more. We never had so much excitement about literacy instruction. *Wit & Wisdom* is absolutely challenging, but it’s also exactly what our kids need.”

Kara Davis, the literacy facilitator at Northside Elementary School, agrees that *Wit & Wisdom* is hard, “but having a challenging curriculum helps kids get better.”

Carolina Quiros, a literacy facilitator at Russell D. Jones Elementary School, says the productive struggles are also benefitting teachers.

“Students must learn to be problem solvers in this world, and teachers need to get out of their comfort zone,” she says. “They must continue to be lifelong learners and be that model for our students. We cannot continue to spoon-feed knowledge or to water down the content for our students. It is our job to give them the tools they need to be successful without us.”

## ENCOURAGING EARLY PROGRESS

After just a few months, the district is seeing results, notably in student writing. Stallings says that one student who could barely write a sentence last year easily produced four paragraphs for a writing assignment this year. What changed?

“He actually had something to write about this year,” she says, commenting on students’ daily immersion in information-rich texts.

Davis says interim assessments from ACT Aspire showed positive gains, especially in Grade 5, where performance levels at her school climbed from 12th in the district to third.

The learning is also having ripple effects outside school. Stallings recalls how a Grade 4 student told her the Heart module they had just studied made him less scared to visit his cardiologist. “And the student and his cardiologist even had a great conversation about the



## ROGERS PUBLIC SCHOOLS PROFILE

16 elementary schools

15,600 students

Adopted *Wit & Wisdom* for Grades K–5 in 2019–2020 school year



Sarah Stallings



Kara Davis



Carolina Quiros

heart,” Stallings says. When visiting a local art museum, students used the “I notice” and “I wonder” routines of *Wit & Wisdom* to help interpret the art, according to Quiros.

### SUPPORTING TEACHERS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

The district supports teachers in several ways. Before school closures, literacy facilitators in every building provided frequent feedback and model lessons and helped teachers review the student data. Three days of initial training before school opened in the fall and two “spotlight” visits by Great Minds® experts during the year were “invaluable,” Stallings says. In a spotlight school visit, a Great Minds implementation lead observes classroom instruction with school and district leaders to develop a vision for implementation and guide teachers in using the curriculum. (Great Minds is the organization that created *Wit & Wisdom* along with *Eureka Math*®, *Geodes*®, and *PhD Science*™.)

A major shift has been to help educators stop teaching the state’s academic standards in isolation, one by one, and instead integrate them into every module and lesson. When the standards were taught in isolation, Quiros says, “students couldn’t apply them in different situations.” Previously, teachers spent most of their prep time creating or finding material that aligned with specific standards. “Now we’re having conversations about instructional practice and how to scaffold a lesson and when,” Davis adds. “And teachers have much more time to look closely at student work.”

The educators value the richness of *Wit & Wisdom* and how modules connect. “Our Grade 3 students especially loved making the connections between space explorers and sea explorers,” Davis says. Stallings says, “Building knowledge is such a big idea. It’s easy to think about but hard to put into practice. *Wit & Wisdom* has done that.”

Stallings and her colleagues say it is important for district leaders to help teachers understand the research behind a knowledge-building curriculum and provide sufficient time for teachers to adjust their instructional approach. She advises that leaders provide frequent reassurance and nonjudgmental feedback. She says it is often enlightening and encouraging to compare students’ previous writing with their current writing.

Finally, Davis advises patience when it comes to implementing *Wit & Wisdom*. Mastery will not come after the first lesson, for either students or teachers. But as the Rogers district’s experience shows, the productive struggle is worth it.

## Shifting to Online Instruction

During the pandemic, Sarah Stallings says, some schools are using Great Minds’ *Knowledge on the Go*™—the hundreds of free, online lessons in English, math, and science—for virtual instruction. But many students do not have access to the internet, so participation is not universal.

Kara Davis says Northside Elementary is using *Knowledge on the Go* lessons for its core literacy instruction in Grades 2–5. Students first watch the videos, then “our teachers typically go through different portions of the *Knowledge on the Go* lessons during daily Google Meets with their students. They use this time to answer questions and help students understand the lessons,” she says. “It is such a delicate balance right now between providing content to our students and understanding that this is such a stressful time for all involved. We understand that all families are doing the best they can in this hard situation.”

