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Artists-in-Schools: Mike Wiley Inspires Student Confidence in Two Chatham County Schools



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In early January, nationally known theater artist, [Mike Wiley](#), made his way to [Siler City Elementary](#) and [Silk Hope School](#) as part of the Chatham Arts Council's *Artists-in-Schools* initiative. His goal was to weave literacy and history curricula into school-wide performances of *Jackie Robinson: A Game Apart* and classroom workshops. But what he accomplished, was so much more.



Mike Wiley at Siler City Elementary with an enraptured audience; Photo credit: Gina Harrison

Wiley, who is an unassuming man, comes to life with an explosion when he performs for students. To say they are captivated would be an understatement. While he's performing and teaching history, he's also becoming a role model and building confidence in many children who otherwise, would be characterized as shy or in need of a boost. One teacher noted how thrilled she was that Wiley had blindly selected students to participate in a performance because the special attention those students received was exactly what they needed to restore confidence and flourish. "My favorite part of the day is the giddy interaction students have with me," exclaimed Wiley.

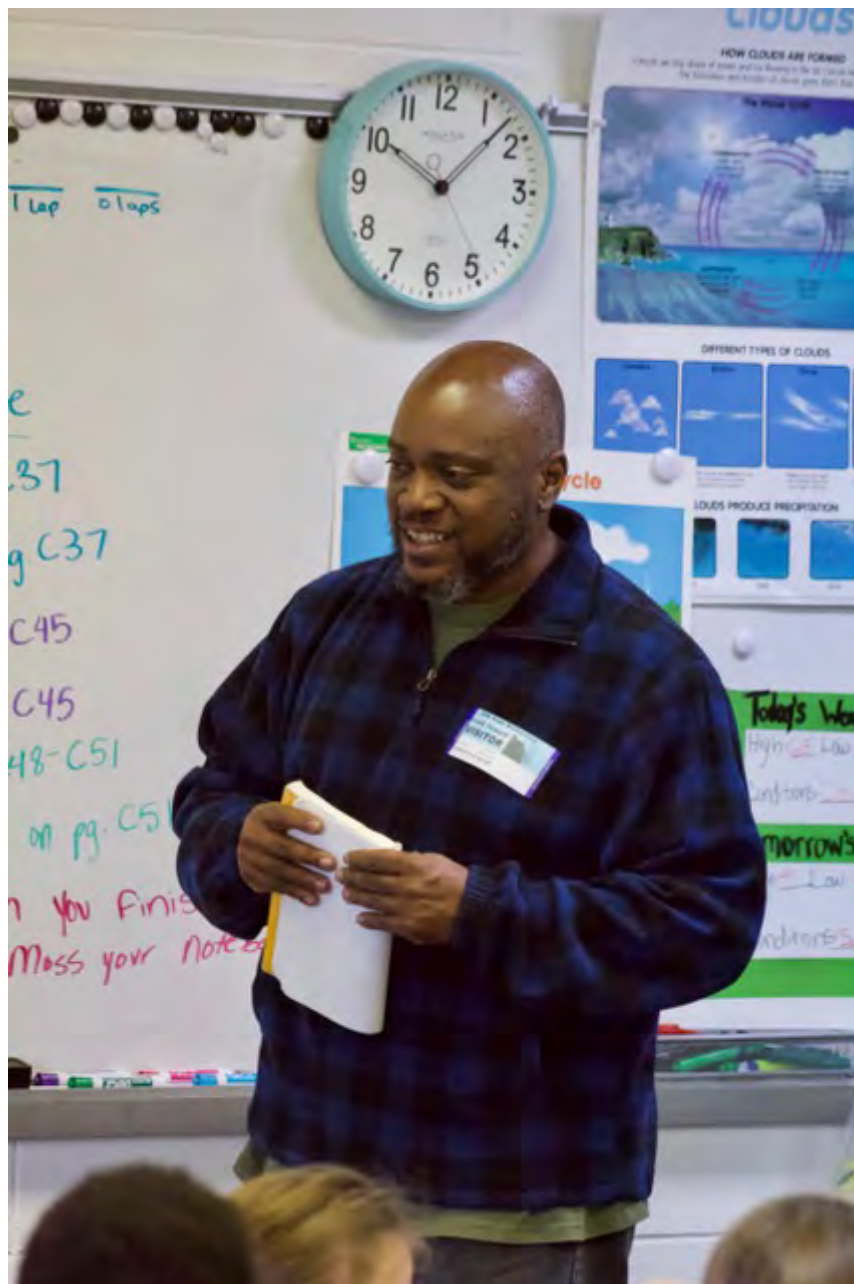


Photo credit: Gina Harrison



Mike Wiley engaging the principal at Siler City Elementary; Photo credit: Gina Harrison

Wiley's school-wide performance served as a model for individual classroom workshops to come. He partnered with [Howard Craft](#), local author and playwright, to lead students in writing exercises that leverage theater to convey self-expression. There was so much weaving, collaborating, and exuberant participation in every moment of his visit.



Howard Craft leading students in a writing workshop; Photo credit: Gina Harrison

Let's peel back the layers. Wiley's performances were based on historical events. Children were raptured with his performance, but they were also soaking in details of critical events like rays of sunshine. He selected children to play a role in each performance, exposing them to the elements of drama while building self-confidence and making a connection to the historical event they were acting out. Then he flipped the day on its head by providing an opportunity for each child to write and bravely unveil their poems to their peers.



Photo credit: Gina Harrison



Photo credit: Gina Harrison

In the classroom, Wiley started with a warm-up exercise to refocus students' bodies, voices, and emotion. It was a little like Simon Says – the students did every single thing he asked them to do without hesitation, without question, without complaint. Witnessing young children work so hard to imitate a British accent or pirate voice was priceless.

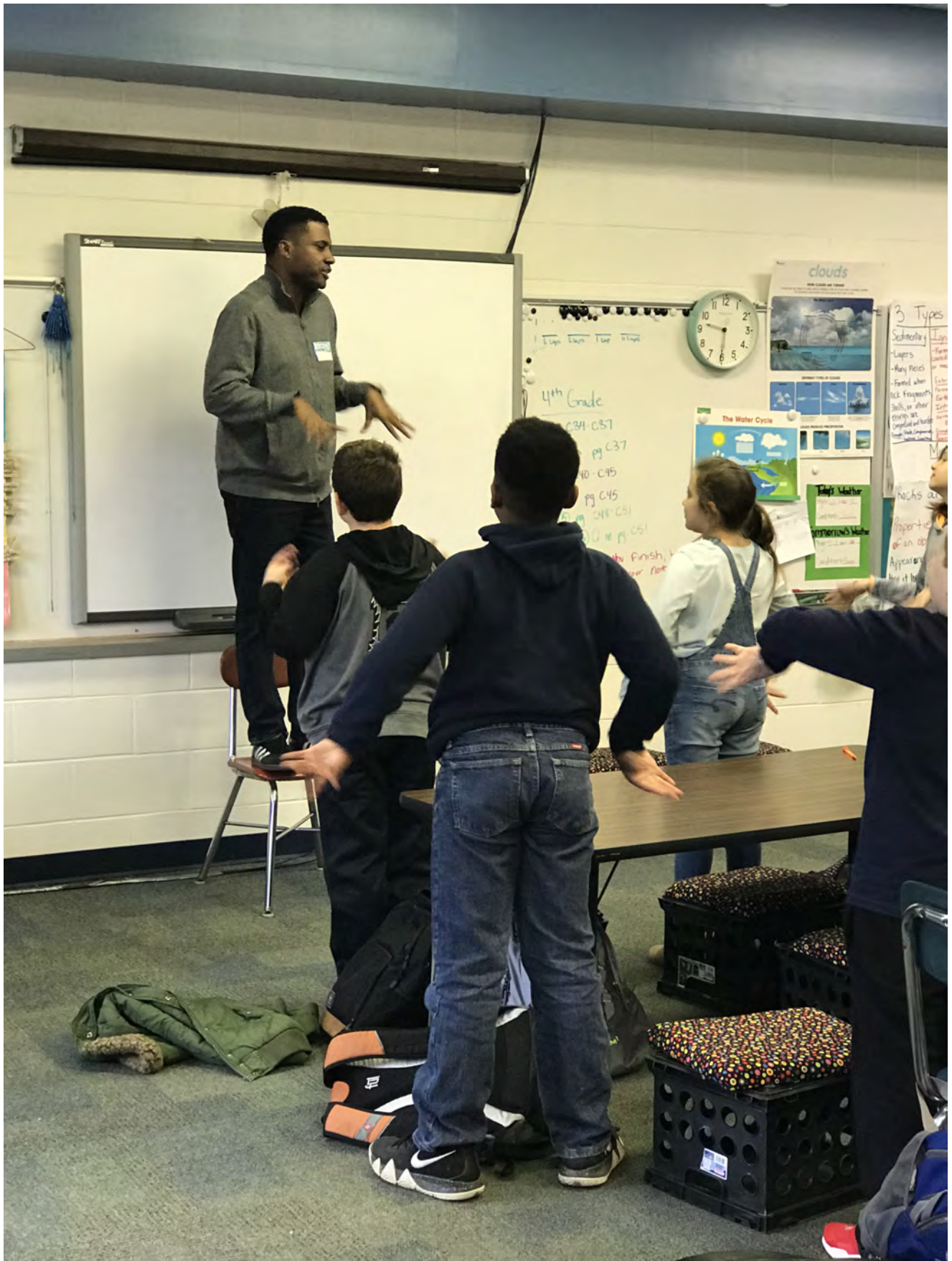


Photo credit: Gina Harrison

“I initially commit to the structure of traditional theater performance and then I break out of those confines,” explained Wiley. “I want them to be able to play outside the lines too, or rather, break free of any inherent structural hindrances they’ve placed on themselves. Howard gives them the tools to write, and they can write anything they want. They’re using structural prompts to answer questions about themselves that they may have never been asked. Ultimately it allows them to color outside the lines.”

Once the class was focused, Wiley conducted a mini-performance on the Montgomery Bus Boycott featuring Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks, before selecting students to join in. After being part of these dynamic interactions, students had an opportunity to write something original. Led by Craft, students were given prompts to help them create character poems based on themselves. They relished in the questions (favorite food, advice to others, etc.) and honed their writing skills throughout the week, before volunteering to present to the class on the last day of the residency.

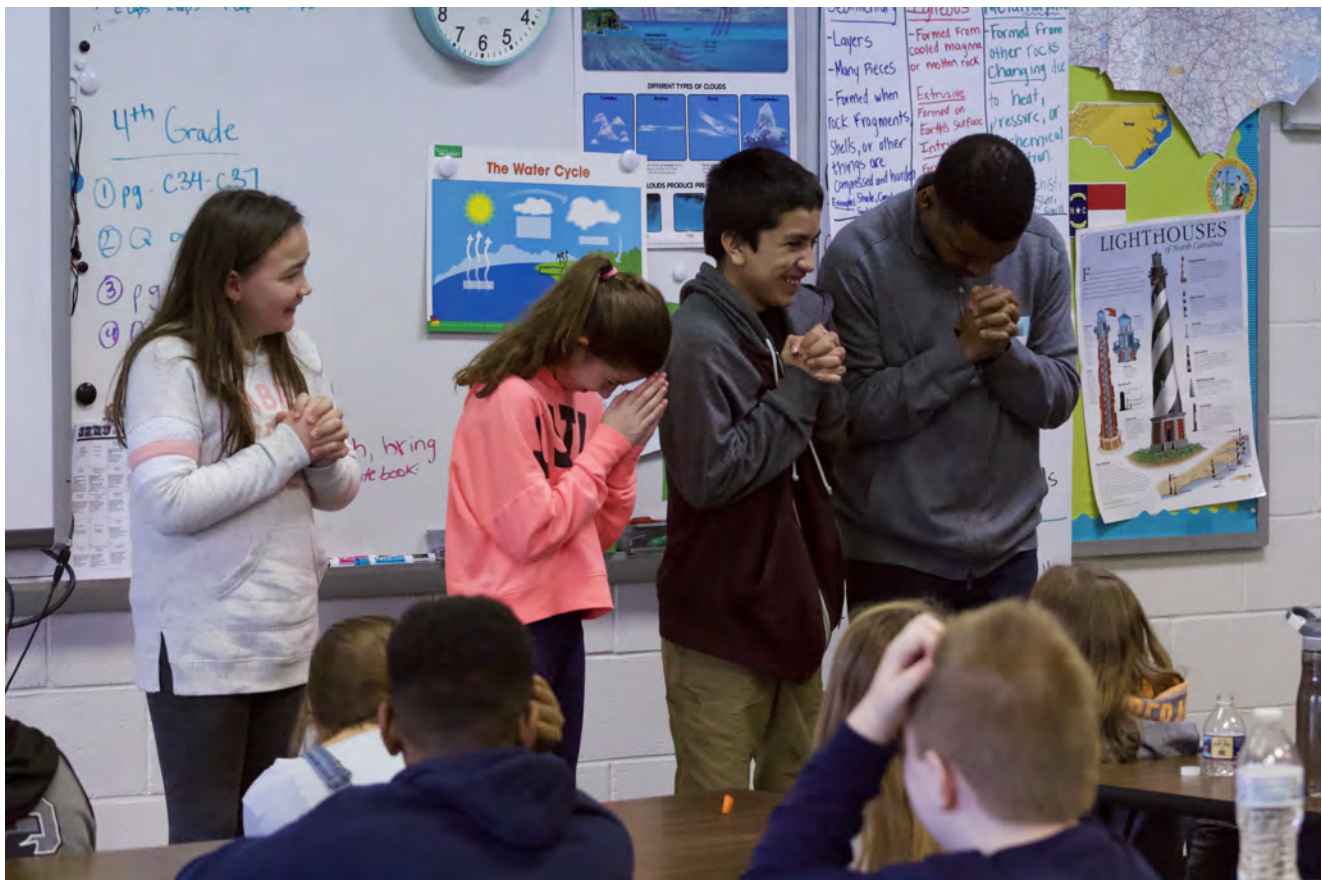


Photo credit: Gina Harrison



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“As a writer, it’s incredible to see the change in a kid who hates writing,” said Craft. “They participate in the workshop, then they see that writing can be fun. They get excited and you can see that light bulb go off.”





Photo credit: Gina Harrison

Students were not the only ones who experienced the dynamic duo of Wiley and Craft. Teachers at both schools were also given the opportunity to participate in professional development training, led by the two, as a precursor to the workshops that would unfold with their students that week. Wiley plucked teachers from the crowd to participate in historical performances, and Craft walked teachers through the steps of a creative writing prompt, resulting in powerful poems about who they are where they're from. Teachers walked away from the training with great excitement, having participated in what their students would soon partake in, and experiencing deeper connections to their colleagues and with the curriculum at hand. When asked about an important learning from the professional development,

Robyn Moore, 4th grade dual language teacher at Siler City Elementary said, “The importance of engaging students with academic content (e.g., history) by helping them relate it to their lives.”



Teachers enjoying the professional development training at Silk Hope School; Photo credit: Gina Harrison



Silk Hope School teachers perform with Mike Wiley; Photo credit: Gina Harrison

The Chatham Arts Council could not bring professional artists into Chatham County schools without the help of our partners: [Chatham County Schools](#), [Chatham County](#), and the [North Carolina Arts Council](#).

A HUGE thank you to our sponsors for powering this initiative in these amazing schools. The Mike Wiley Theater arts residency at Siler City Elementary was powered by John & Elizabeth Bonitz and [Hobbs Architects](#). His residency at Silk Hope School was powered by The R.E. and E.F. Crane Foundation. Special thanks also to [Deep River Mercantile](#) and [Stillpoint Acupuncture](#).

We're hoping to expand the AIS initiative to [Chatham Charter School](#), [Willow Oak Montessori](#), and [Woods Charter School](#) in 2020. Can you help us? We hope so! If you're intrigued, click [here](#).





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