

We have designed each “White Paper” to explore a fundamental educational principle and key issues engaging the education community we serve. It is our goal to partner with our readers as they meet the challenges they face.



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Elementary School Reading, ELA & Castle Learning Online

Elementary school teachers are challenged to be the experts in many fields and act *in loco parentis* in their classrooms. During these formidable years, one particular area draws the greatest attention and need; the fundamental skills of **English Language Arts (ELA)** skills, especially those for **reading**. These skills are heavily tested by standardized exams each year and lay the foundation upon which middle schools build.

Reading skills and related **ELA** content implications are keenly addressed when elementary teachers use *Castle Learning Online* extensively throughout the year. Islip (Long Island) Schools Curriculum Assistant Superintendent, Michael O’Brien, sees *Castle Learning Online* as an invaluable supplement to classroom instruction that serves as a **Curriculum Based Measurement or CBM** where current and week-by-week information on the students’ progress can be reviewed by the teacher. For the elementary teacher, who uses *Castle Learning Online* as a **CBM**, he/she can monitor student academic growth in **reading skills** and assess grammar skills that support reading and writing for their students. These are the skill areas that elementary teachers believe are traditionally the most difficult.

Our experiences with elementary teachers, during Professional Development (**PD**) sessions, provided invaluable feedback about how *Castle Learning Online* could be used. Meghan Farrelly, one of our Training Specialists and a Content Coordinator, and a certified teacher of English, reported what she learned:

- **Reading Passages:** A majority of an ELA exam, at any level, is based on reading skills. Teachers agreed with Ms. Farrelly that “[even the 3rd grade exam is a series of several reading sets followed by short answer questions.](#)” During **PD** sessions, she said that “[teachers have learned how to use our Reading Sets to create “Model Exams”](#)” that replicate the state testing format.
- **Listening:** *Castle Learning Online* has a deep bank of [Listening Assignments](#) for the elementary student. During **PD** sessions, teachers told Ms. Farrelly that “[there is a huge weakness for most kids when they are required to Listen and Answer questions on the 3rd Grade ELA Exam and those exams that follow in the upper grades.](#)” As a result, we are trying to meet this urgent skill need. Ms. Farrelly noted that “[teachers admit that grammar and listening questions are pretty difficult to create on their own, but by using the Castle Learning database, these teachers can spend more time improving student skills instead of trying to write content.](#)”
- **Vocabulary Skills / Grammar Editing / Constructed Response Questions:** Reading and listening are bound tightly with a students’ knowledge and use of vocabulary and how recognition of correct grammar enhances their understanding of what is being read. *Castle Learning Online* brings to students a deep bank of questions and instructional feedback that helps to improve “word knowledge.” Common words are so important to how well a student comprehends a reading passage or whether they can understand just by listening. Can students determine the meaning of “admit” in the phrase “*Angela would not admit she ate the chocolate*” from choices like “know,” “confess,” or “return”?

Castle Learning Online was developed to supplement and reinforce what teachers are doing in the classroom. Elementary teachers are always honing their **reading / ELA** lessons and when student performance is not meeting expectations, they quickly adjust. Ms. Farrelly remarks that “[teachers feel a real sense of accomplishment when they walk out of the room after a two hour SD session, ready with three assignments they can use,](#)” and that during training she shows how “[each skill I describe is also a ‘different type of assignment’ within the Castle Learning Online site.](#)”

As a partner in education program of the elementary school, *Castle Learning Online* has become an important, integral part of the elementary teacher’s planning, to assure that *all* students are meeting standards for **ELA** and especially **reading** and helping lay that valuable foundation for middle school and beyond.