

# ThinkCERCA

## Pilot Study Brief

### PRODUCT INFO

**Product name:** ThinkCERCA

**Product description:** ThinkCERCA is grounded in a pedagogical approach, CERCA, which is a flexible literacy framework that helps students engage in critical thinking. ThinkCERCA supports students in learning how to make Claims, support claims with Evidence, explain their Reasoning, respond to potential Counterarguments, and use Audience-specific language.

**Learning focus:** ELA grades K-8

**Teacher training:** Each involved school selected a team of

teachers, ranging in size from 5-15, with the support of the schools' principals and the identification of a key point person to lead the effort. By participating in the pilot with MassNET, teams received ongoing support and professional development, as well as periodic data analyses. MassNET also facilitated communication between schools and products, but left negotiations and purchasing decisions up to the schools themselves.

**Cost:** An annual license costs \$30-\$40 per student, depending on the number of students.

### DISTRICT CONTEXT

**District demographics:** Boston Public Schools educate over 56,000 students in 125 schools. Nearly half of the students speak a language other than English at home and the students come from nearly 140 different countries. About 20 percent of students have disabilities and 50 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

**Pilot demographics:** Charles Sumner Elementary involved 222 students and 16 teachers throughout grades 2, 4, and 5. John Eliot K-8 included 207 students and 10 teachers throughout grades 6, 7, and 8 in the pilot.

### PILOT GOAL

The goal of schools involved in the pilot was to move to personalized learning through the implementation of instructional software for ELA in grades K-8. Teacher teams at each school also identified an academic goal and how to measure it.

### IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

**Duration:** 2016-17 academic school year

**Quality of support:** The most common support was informal conversations with other teachers, which happened about half of the weeks of the 20 week pilot. Teachers with lower rates of usage reported receiving support more frequently than teachers who used the products more often. Low usage teachers often reported receiving support from coaches more often, as well. ThinkCerca provided extensive support; especially to the elementary teachers at the Sumner, who were part of a new Boston Public Schools program, Excellence for All, to provide highly rigorous instruction to all 4th and 5th graders.

**Data collected:** A range of qualitative and quantitative data were collected, in addition to product data on usage and student progress. Teachers completed a Fall and Spring survey regarding personalized learning in their classrooms, six months of online logs with both qualitative and quantitative components, and a final reflection. Additionally, two teacher focus groups and two classroom observations occurred at each of the involved schools. The data collection provide a longitudinal perspective and included high rates of participation, leading to a rich and detailed picture of teacher thinking and instructional practices around the use of ThinkCERCA.

### FINDINGS

**Educator engagement:** Most teachers (9 out of 15) used ThinkCERCA minimally, while only 3 used the tool at recommended levels.

**Educator satisfaction:** On average, teachers also agreed that the software helped them personalize learning. Teachers tended to rate the product negatively, likely because the product was

not quite appropriate for the developmental levels of the students. At Sumner, ThinkCERCA was used by 4th and 5th grade students who were mostly below grade level in initial assessments. Teachers reported that the content was very challenging for their students and they spent a lot of time and effort to prepare students to do the work, including selecting appropriate texts, creating graphic organizers,

summarizing the CERCA process (Claim, Evidence, Reasoning, Counterargument, Audience) and preparing students with the vocabulary needed for the texts. At Eliot Middle School, students did not struggle as much with the content, but it was a challenge for most teachers to integrate with their curriculum. Many teachers used the tool when it offered content aligned with a planned unit of study. Most teachers involved in focus groups also found the tool to be useful for informing parents and they had a role in supporting engagement with the product. Tech problems were reported on a broad range of issues including: Wi-Fi issues, logon problems, lack of headphones, lack of working devices, and

software problems. Teachers tended to agree that software took time out of class. Unsurprisingly, this was most prevalent among teachers who used the tool with higher rates of frequency.

**Student satisfaction:** Overall, teachers involved in focus groups reported that students were motivated by the objective feedback.

**Student learning:** Students in high implementation classrooms grew in writing mastery significantly over the course of the year, as indicated by writing performance on the MCAS state accountability test.

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## OUTCOME

**Purchasing decision:** Sumner decided to continue with the product because it met a key need and they also reported that students showed growth in their performance on their end-of-year standardized tests of writing.

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See the full report by LearnLaunch at: <http://learnlaunch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-MassNET-Report-April-2018.pdf>