Case Study:
Computer e-Books Engage Catholic High School Teens

**Julie W. Spedale, Director of OPTIONS,
St. Thomas More Catholic High School, Lafayette, LA**

STUDENT OUTCOMES

> 66 *Built-in accommodations help students improve their reading skills through seeing the text on screen and hearing the text read aloud. I like the unique way the e-books are written and formatted and how the content is structured.* 99
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> **Ms. Spedale
> Director of OPTIONS**

"When students are brought together through a compelling story, there is no telling how far that friendship and learning opportunity will grow." Julie W. Spedale, Director of OPTIONS, St. Thomas More Catholic High School, Lafayette, LA.

St. Thomas More Catholic High School offers a comprehensive and challenging curriculum that serves 1100 students with college-preparatory and academic support. The school also provides a unique advanced placement program for students with mild to moderate special needs who have Down syndrome, autism or cognitive disabilities. This program is called OPTIONS.

Parents enter their teens (ages 15 to 18) in the OPTIONS program because they want every opportunity for their children to become productive citizens and to experience a spiritually rich Catholic education. Students in this program receive a certificate of completion when they finalize their course goals and objectives set forth in the Individual Catholic Education Plan. OPTIONS courses include religion, reading, writing, math, physical education and life skills. Students may also elect art, band, and basic computer applications.

Julie Spedale, now in her third year as Director of OPTIONS uses specialized computer e-book software (Start-to-Finish) as her curriculum to improve students' reading comprehension and fluency skills. Ms. Spedale, along with Mary Carolyn Duffy, a teacher, and Ally Reviere, a paraprofessional, use this reading software to engage students to succeed in both academic and social settings.

"The Start-to-Finish computer e-books are assistive technology tools that offer multisensory learning through professional narration and text highlighting," shared Ms. Spedale. "Built-in accommodations help students improve their reading skills through seeing the text on screen and hearing the text read aloud. I like the unique way the e-books are written and formatted and how the content is structured."

DON JOHNSTON

The Start-to-Finish Library offers 95 computer e-books and paperback titles, including retold classics that correlate to required reading curriculum such as *Tales from Homer: Stories from the Iliad and the Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The collection also includes mysteries, social studies, history, American government, world culture, earth, space and life sciences.

"It's amazing how my students can now read and relate to some of the same novels that our general education students read," said Ms. Spedale. "By reading the same books as their general education peers, students in the OPTIONS program gain background knowledge and an appreciation of literature."

As a part of each reading assignment, students dialogue about the stories with teachers, student mentors and their families. This reading approach connects students to their peers on a deeper and social level through their book discussions.

Ms. Spedale said, "It's a challenge for educators to find high interest/low level reading material for students with special needs. Our students want to be as mainstreamed as possible when it comes to living a full life and being accepted into society. I'm amazed how far our students have progressed using these e-books. Our collection has grown as our students' reading skills have improved."

The OPTIONS classroom has five computers with touch screens. Students take part in basic academic subjects for three hours a day, including reading assignments on and off the computer. Prior to computer reading instruction, students often read a book as a group or in pairs to experience a repetitive learning setting. After reading aloud and then hearing the content read aloud through the software, students take the Start-to-Finish end-of-chapter quiz on the computer to gauge their reading comprehension. A printable student data report captures reading progress. An audio book (of the story) on CD is available to be sent home for reading practice or when a student is absent and must make up reading assignments. Students can also print a paragraph of the story to read to parents and family members at home. "This approach extends reading assignments into the home environment and keeps parents up-to-date on the novels we read," said Ms. Spedale. "Students can also record themselves with their own voice reading a passage from the book using the Start-to-Finish software."

Several girls in the OPTIONS class just read *Anne of Green Gables* on the computer and were glued to the book. Ms. Spedale said, "We want stories that hold students' interest and attention, as well as align to our curriculum. My students remember more information because of the unique way the stories are retold, written and formatted. They love to hear stories read aloud by human voices (authors and narrators) that make the content come alive. Students hang on to each chapter and cannot wait to get to the next chapter or start a new book. Start-to-Finish has provided us with a successful computer reading curriculum using high interest/low level literature to engage our students in a thoughtful reading experience that they can share and discuss with others."

About St. Thomas More High School

St. Thomas More Catholic High School (http://www.stmcougars.com) commits to the vision of excellence in a caring Catholic high school environment. The school community encourages growth in the knowledge of Christian principles and Catholic traditions that foster the development of the whole student. Its curriculum is comprehensive and offers college preparatory, honors and advanced placement courses. Ongoing curriculum development includes the vertical and horizontal alignment of all courses and the incorporation of state and national standards. A working partnership between the family and the professional community of the school is essential to offer the best possible education. A seamless infusion of technology in all aspects of learning accentuates current pedagogies and preparation for the future. St. Thomas More seeks to develop strategies that enhance the rigor of its curriculum, facilitate understanding of the relevancy of the knowledge learned, and lead to meaningful relationships between students and educators.

Our Vision

Empower Students with Accessible Technologies that Address Unique Literacy Needs

It's commonplace in schools to see stacks of textbooks, paper notebooks, pencils and pens. These are the "conventional" learning tools in schools, and they are effective for many students. But for students with physical, cognitive or learning differences, these tools pose significant barriers to learning. These students require **specialized accessible technology** and media to maximize their learning. This is where Don Johnston excels. Since 1980 we have been developing and supplying innovative technologies to schools who recognize that each student has unique learning needs and can thrive in the right environment.

We strive to create the right environment. This requires the right tools, the right implementation and the right instructional approaches. We are committed to providing you with the most value from product selection to ongoing support and implementation.

Don Johnston empowers educators with specialized accessible technologies and supported reading and writing tools for students with cognitive, physical, and learning differences. Since 1980, the company has partnered with literacy experts, assistive technology specialists, speech language pathologists, psychologists, teachers, researchers, and scientists to develop over a dozen assistive technology products. The company also publishes Start-to-Finish®, a collection of paperback, audio and computer books for students who read below grade level.