

Challenging Every Student with IXL Math and Language Arts

ALPHA BLANCA ALVARADO MIDDLE SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CA



How do you meet the needs of every student when skill levels range from kindergarten to high school in a single class? Katrina Musco uses IXL Math and IXL Language Arts to ensure that each student is challenged and supported with practice and instruction at the right level.

One Classroom, Many Learning Needs

Alpha Blanca Alvarado Middle School is charter school serving students in grades 6-8 in a low-income area in east San Jose. It is part of Alpha Public Schools, a network of public charter secondary schools with a mission to prepare students in disadvantaged communities for college and careers. Alpha Public Schools uses a blended learning model that integrates high-quality teaching with innovative technologies to provide a more individualized approach to learning.

Katrina teaches math, English language arts, science, and social studies for a class of 6th graders. She is also responsible for math curriculum planning for the entire 6th grade. Nearly 90 percent of the students in her class are non-native English speakers, primarily from Hispanic and Vietnamese families, and more than half of her students are classified as English Language Learners. In both math and language arts, she has a wide range of proficiency levels, with some students functioning at kindergarten or 1st grade skill levels and others ready to be challenged with high school-level work. In order to meet the needs of every student, Katrina relies on IXL to provide individualized instruction in math and English language arts.

“I love that students can work at their own level, whether they need to fill in missing pieces from earlier grades or need more challenge than I am giving them in class. No matter where they are starting from, my students are making progress on IXL.”

- Katrina Musco, 6th Grade Teacher

Meeting Individual Needs with IXL

Katrina uses a center-based classroom approach in which some students receive direct instruction while others work individually on IXL and other activities using Chromebooks. The school has a 1:1 Chromebook implementation to ensure that all students are able to access technology resources during class time.

Katrina has students spend part of their time on IXL practicing grade-level skills that supplement her direct instruction. Students can work at their own pace and practice as much or as little as they need in order to achieve mastery for each skill. If they get the wrong answer, they get immediate feedback and instruction from IXL so they can understand their mistakes.

Students also spend time working on skills matched to their instructional level. Students who are missing basic skills from earlier grades can go back and fill in the missing pieces. “Even my very low-level students are able to work on IXL,” Katrina says. “I have a student working at the kindergarten level with very low literacy skills. IXL works for her because she can have the question read to her and still make progress on individual skills.” She also has students challenging themselves with high school skills.

One approach that has worked especially well in math is using IXL to practice related skills from kindergarten all the way up to grade level. “I pick something we are working on like finding the volume of a shape, and we practice all the building block skills for that topic from kindergarten up. This lets students find and correct the gaps in their understanding and prior knowledge before they tackle a new skill,” she explains.

Growth for Every Student

With IXL, Katrina sees progress for all of her students. “I can really see my students growing. Students who started the year working at a 2nd grade level are now working at a 4th grade level, while students who were at an 8th grade level are now working on skills at a 9th or 10th grade level. They are able to grow from wherever they are.”

Students have responded positively to the program. Katrina says her

Case Study

students are motivated by seeing their SmartScores (IXL's proprietary algorithm that measures how well a student understands a skill) go up. They also love the medals and awards they earn as they master skills on the program. But she likes that IXL isn't too game-like; her students appreciate the simple user interface and more mature approach to delivering instruction. "I see much more investment in IXL than I've seen in programs we have used that are more like games. They are actually motivated by seeing their own progress in IXL rather than by artificial video game-like elements. They get a real sense of satisfaction from seeing their scores increase." Additionally, students see real value in the practice and instruction—many of Katrina's students come in to spend extra time practicing on IXL before a test.

Katrina uses IXL reports to monitor student progress and share progress with parents. Students also track their own progress on a Google Docs spreadsheet. "With IXL, my students are taking more responsibility for their own learning. It's great to see the progress they are making," she says.

A Model for Success at Alpha Blanca Alvarado Middle School

Here's how 6th grade teacher Katrina Musco is using IXL in her classroom:

- All students have access to computers in the classroom with a 1:1 Chromebook program.
- Students are split into groups and rotate through stations for math and language arts.
- For language arts, students are split into three homogenous groups (above level, at level, and below level) and rotate through three stations. Katrina provides direct instruction at one station. Students work independently on worksheets or computer-based assignments at another station. At the third station, students complete grade-level skills practice on IXL.
- For math, students are split into two heterogeneous groups. While one group receives direct instruction from Katrina, the second group practices independently on IXL. Students spend 15 minutes working on grade-level skills assigned by Katrina, and another 15 minutes working on skills at their own level.
- Students track their own progress using a spreadsheet created on Google Docs.
- Because many students lack access to technology at home, Katrina makes her classroom available before and after school for additional practice time.