Bringing Excitement to the Common Core

ENTERPRISE HIGH SCHOOL, ENTERPRISE, MISSISSIPPI

Enterprise High School serves 300 students in rural Mississippi. When the school implemented the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2014-15, Algebra I teacher Jacqui Lewis wanted a program that would help with this transition. IXL Math brought the standards to life for her and her students—and brought new energy to her classroom.

New Standards, Burned-Out Students

When the district rolled out CCSS, the new math standards weren't always easy to interpret. As the only Algebra I teacher in the district, Jacqui felt like she was on her own. "There was no one to collaborate with," she explained. "It was hard to understand how each objective mapped to the curriculum we were using, and which problems I should assign to help my students master the objective." Knowing that students would be facing the new PARCC assessments at the end of the year put added pressure on Jacqui and her students.

By the end of first semester, her students were burned out and bored—and so was Jacqui. She needed a better way to monitor student progress towards CCSS objectives. She also needed to get her students reenergized and engaged with the curriculum.

"My students are logging in before and after school to complete more problems. They are also begging their other teachers to allow them to go to computer rooms to work on IXL whenever those classes have down time. I have never seen them beg to work on math before!"

- Jacqui Lewis, Algebra I Teacher

Jacqui had started using IXL Math herself during first semester. "I loved that I could search by Common Core objective and find all of the specific skills and problem types that mapped to that objective," she says. "It helped me understand the objectives better and see the kinds of problems I needed to be assigning to teach each objective. I used IXL for months by myself just to familiarize myself with the Common Core." She realized that her students would also benefit from having access to the standards-based practice and instruction on IXL. She petitioned her principal for a classroom license and started using the program with her students during second semester.

"A Whole New Energy Level in the Class"

Almost immediately, Jacqui noticed a difference with her students. "They got hooked right away. They love the immediate feedback and the awards. It's like a game—it keeps them coming back." Implementing IXL infused her classroom with new excitement for mastering the curriculum. "They were working harder than they had worked all year," she says.

Jacqui used reports from IXL Analytics and IXL's game-like elements to fuel her students' natural competiveness. She made a large spreadsheet of the objectives they needed to cover and posted it on the wall, and organized her class into cooperative learning teams that are balanced by ability level. Teams compete against each other on different metrics such as problems completed per session, sessions completed, total problems completed, and objectives mastered. "I focus on the productivity," she explains. "If they are putting the work in, the mastery naturally follows with IXL." Students access IXL both at home and on Chromebooks during their 90-minute block sessions. Jacqui calls her classroom model "Talent-Balanced Teams and the 90-Minute Sprint."

Jacqui also uses IXL as a remediation program for struggling students. All students at Enterprise High School take Algebra I their freshman year. Students who are struggling in first semester are re-routed to a remediation course for second semester. These students now have 90 minutes each day to work on foundational math skills to prepare them to retake Algebra I during their sophomore year. "IXL is perfect for these students because the tutorials are built right in," she says. "They have a teacher there to monitor progress and answer questions, but they can work at their own pace on IXL every day to build those skills."

Success on the PARCC—and Excitement for STEM

All the extra practice is really paying off for Jacqui's students. A whopping 82 percent of her students passed the math section of the PARCC test in 2015—the highest passing rate in the state. Statewide, only 27 percent of Algebra students passed the PARCC that year, and the runner-up district had a 69 percent passing rate. Even better, 8 percent of Jacqui's students reached the highest level (Level 5) on the PARCC, compared to just 1 percent across the state. "IXL certainly contributed to this success!" she says.

More importantly, Jacqui's students are more excited about math. Jacqui sees algebra as more than just a requirement. For her students, it's also a potential gateway to STEM careers. "They don't get a lot of exposure to high-tech careers here," she explains. "I want them to do well on the tests, but I also want them to get excited about math and start thinking about different kinds of career options." A former computer science engineer, Jacqui infuses her class with real-world connections to science and engineering career options. Her hope is that her students' success in math will encourage more of them to apply to four-year colleges and to consider pursuing STEM degrees and careers.

Enterprise High School's success has been noticed by the state. This summer, Jacqui has been asked to train other Mississippi teachers in her "Talent-Balanced Teams" model. She says she will be pointing to IXL as a core component of her plan.

A Model for Success at Enterprise High School

Here's how Algebra I teacher Jacqui Lewis is using IXL in her classroom:

- Students are divided into cooperative learning teams that are balanced by ability level.

- Teams compete against each other to complete IXL problems and master IXL skills. Jacqui tracks metrics such as total number of problems completed, problems completed per session and skills mastered, and posts team scores on a large spreadsheet. The team approach encourages students to help each other master skills to improve their overall team score.

- Students work on IXL at home, before and after school on classroom computers, and during class time on Chromebooks.

- Students can use IXL to bring up their grades on tests. If they don't get the grade they hoped for, they can work on the skills on IXL until they can demonstrate mastery.

- Students needing remediation are put into a special class during second semester, where they work on IXL at their own pace for 90 minutes per day.

- Jacqui uses IXL Analytics to monitor class activity and progress towards CCSS objectives.

- Jacqui sometimes uses the Real-Time Center report on IXL Analytics to monitor what students are doing. She's even been known to check in remotely when students are working with a sub—and makes sure they know she's keeping an eye on their progress!