



Building Skills and Confidence in ELA and Social Studies

Sanders-Clyde Creative Arts School, Charleston, SC



"I never had problems getting them to do the work if it was IXL. ... IXL gives them confidence in themselves."

Kathy Dizon, 6th grade language arts and social studies teacher

How do you close the confidence gap for disadvantaged students? For Kathy Dizon's 6th grade class, IXL was the key to accelerating academic achievement and boosting motivation.

An inner city, Title I school in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, Sanders-Clyde Creative Arts School serves a diverse population with 88% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In Kathy's class, many students started the year significantly behind grade level. She turned to IXL Language Arts and IXL Social Studies to help them catch up.

Starting from Behind

In 2016–2017, Kathy taught 6th grade English language arts and social studies. Of her 31 students, 28 tested below grade level, with many testing at a 4th grade reading level or below. A veteran teacher, Kathy recognized that her students had a lot of challenges to overcome. Most of her students did not have access to computers or educational resources at home, and many came from families with parents who did not have high school diplomas. "They are smart kids, but they lack intrinsic motivation," Kathy says. "They would rather play it safe and not put forth effort than try and fail."

Kathy knew that closing the skills gap for her students would first require building their confidence and interest in the material. The school purchased IXL for all students in the fall of 2016. Kathy uses IXL Language Arts and IXL Social Studies, while a co-teacher uses IXL Math and IXL Science. IXL and other digital programs in use at the school allow students to get more targeted instruction and immediate feedback. "We wanted to focus more on digital content rather than worksheets," Kathy explains. "With digital content, students stay more engaged and we can cover more ground."

Closing the Confidence Gap

IXL soon became an integral part of Kathy's classroom. The school has a 1:1 iPad program, so students can easily access IXL in class. In the beginning, Kathy had them work on IXL two or three times per week. Before long, students were using it every day.



Each day, Kathy teaches a mini-lesson on a grade-level language arts skill or concept. Students practice the skill on IXL immediately after. Students usually work on skills at grade level, but can work up or down a couple of grades depending on their needs.

In social studies, Kathy uses IXL to wrap up each unit, review material prior to the unit test, and brush up on specific skills, such as map skills. “They weren’t familiar with a lot of continents and countries,” she says. “They really got into trying to figure out different locations.” As state testing approached, Kathy used IXL three times per week to review lessons from the entire year and prepare for the test.

Kathy immediately noticed that students were more engaged and eager to learn when using IXL. “They are really motivated by the certificates, and they love the virtual awards and medals,” she says. “It makes them feel good about themselves and helps to build the intrinsic motivation they need. That piece is really important, especially for kids who don’t have much support at home.” As students built confidence, they started to push and challenge themselves—and each other—to do better.

“I had one student who was always off task, but once he got his first IXL certificate, he was much more focused. His projected growth on the MAP Reading Test was only six to seven points for the year, but he ended up growing 19 points between the winter and spring MAP tests. He was ecstatic when he saw his spring MAP score!”

Kathy Dizon

Creating Healthy Competition for Learning

IXL has become part of the school culture at Sanders-Clyde. Hallways are lined with IXL certificates that celebrate skills students have mastered. Teachers have created healthy competition between grade levels by color-coding the certificates for the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. “My students love to look for their names on the walls,” Kathy says. Kathy also starts each day with a PowerPoint recognizing her class’s achievements. Students record their own IXL progress on a personal data sheet each day.

Seeing their progress has encouraged Kathy’s students to put forth their best effort. Her students became much more focused on learning, and she noted a marked reduction in behavior problems in class. “I saw a big change in their behavior after they started seeing the certificates,” Kathy says. The change was especially noticeable for students who had not previously been successful in school. “Posting these certificates built their confidence, and as the craze grew, the behavior problems became more and more manageable. Walk into my classroom now and you will see a calm, peaceful atmosphere with soft instrumental music playing while students are actively engaged in their work.”

That focus and determination is paying off. Kathy says that her students grew more this year in language arts than in her previous 32 years of teaching. She credits much of that success to IXL.

Over the course of the school year, Kathy’s students answered 109,354 questions on IXL, spending more than 732 collective hours on the program and making progress in 384 skills. Most of her students are now working on IXL at grade level, and her students have even achieved excellence in 25 high school skills. “My students are excited and motivated to learn,” she says. “Next year, I will be using IXL with 5th graders, and I expect to see similar success.”



A Model for Success at Sanders-Clyde Creative Arts School

Here's how 6th grade teacher Kathy Dizon is using IXL in her language arts and social studies classroom:

- Students access IXL daily during class using classroom iPads.
- Each day, Kathy teaches a mini-lesson on a specific skill or concept. Students then practice and apply the skill using IXL.
- Students record their progress on IXL on a personal data sheet, including time spent, questions answered, and skills mastered.
- Kathy starts every day with a PowerPoint showcasing student progress towards skill mastery on IXL.
- As students master new skills, they earn IXL certificates to take home to their parents. IXL certificates are also posted in the hallway at the school.