Building Equity and Rigor with IXL Math and Science

Alpha: Blanca Alvarado School, Alpha Public Schools, San Jose, California

> "With IXL, it's so much easier and takes less effort to find out where students need help. And tracking my students' progress is easier than ever. Just three charts give me everything I really need, and I can dig in deeper if I need to. IXL is a data analyst's dream!"
>
> *Steve Seo, 5th-Grade Math and Science Teacher, Alpha: Blanca Alvarado Middle School*

The motto for Alpha Public Schools is "Expect More. Achieve More." Alpha: Blanca Alvarado School turned to IXL to help their students do exactly that. IXL has made it easier for teachers to identify and respond to individual student learning needs. Steve Seo, a 5th-grade math and science teacher, says, "We have leaned heavily on IXL, and the consensus of the teachers is that it has been very effective. IXL allows us to be more responsive, so we can meet the needs of our students at every level."

Meeting the Needs of Learners in Underserved Communities

Alpha: Blanca Alvarado School is a charter school in east San Jose. Alpha Public Schools is a network of charter schools in the Bay Area tech industry's backyard, where it seeks to provide opportunities for students in underserved and underrepresented communities. As a Title I charter school, Blanca Alvarado serves a diverse community of students with a range of learning backgrounds. Originally opened as a middle school, the school has added 5th grade and is now in the process of transitioning into a K-8 school.

Steve explains, "We see large achievement gaps in our community. Since we are a charter school, we don't have a specific feeder school pattern; our 5th graders are coming from all over. Our first challenge is to identify where the gaps are." To meet these diverse needs, Steve looks for materials that can be adapted to the needs of each student. "We want to provide options to increase equity," he says. "Everything is tailored to their academic levels and cultural background."

Blanca Alvarado started using IXL Math in 2016 to help their students address learning gaps and meet grade-level standards. In 2019, they added IXL Science, and in 2020 they added Social Studies. Steve uses both IXL Math and IXL Science with his students.

Eliminating the "Detective Work" of Identifying Student Needs

At the beginning of the year, Steve uses the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic to assess each student's overall skill level and determine what instruction they need. Throughout the year, the diagnostic allows him to see their progress and adjust his lessons. "I love how the reports are synchronized with the standards and with my curriculum, not just in broad topics but down to the subtopic level. It makes it really easy to pinpoint exactly which part they are struggling with, so I don't have to do so much detective work."

Steve also appreciates how easy it is to align the work students are doing in IXL Math with their *Eureka Math* curriculum through IXL skill plans, which guide him step by step. Blanca Alvarado uses a 90-minute block schedule for math and English language arts. During Steve's math class, he spends 20 to 30 minutes on direct instruction to introduce a new topic. Then, students work on the skill in IXL during class time. This allows Steve to see immediately how well students have understood the lesson and intervene if students need reteaching or one-on-one support. Students also have an opportunity to work on IXL during intervention periods, which allows them to catch up on skill gaps identified by the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic. Students can also access the program at home. On average, students use IXL Math for about 60 minutes each day.

Steve uses IXL Science to help students catch up on science concepts and vocabulary they were missing from prior grades. "Science is a very difficult topic for a lot of my students," he says. "There are a lot of topics that just weren't covered in their previous classrooms, so they don't have the background or the vocabulary."

Steve says the clean, simple user interface and immediate feedback in IXL really help his students. "There aren't a lot of distractions," he says. "It's very straightforward, and my students like that. With some programs, students can get overwhelmed with all that extra stuff on the screen instead of focusing on the problem. With IXL, they stay focused on learning." Steve says the focused lessons and examples in IXL work better for his students' attention span than longer videos. "With IXL, they can get right to what they need to focus on," he says.

"The synchronization with my math curriculum and with Google Classroom makes IXL so easy to use, especially during virtual learning. IXL has really thought about all the subtle little things that make a huge difference for me as a teacher."

Steve Seo

Helping Students Succeed with Rigorous Curriculum

Steve says that his students are performing above the district average in math since implementing IXL, and his co-teacher in English language arts has seen similar gains. While the school will not have benchmark data for the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic, he says students showed very strong gains in the first half of the 2019-20 school year. "At the beginning of this past school year, our skills gap was huge for our incoming 5th graders," he said. "The growth that we saw in just half a year was enormous."

He attributes those gains to the way IXL supports high academic standards. "IXL really pushes the rigor," he says. "Students are motivated to try to get their SmartScore up. If they miss something, it goes down, but not so much that they get discouraged. IXL pushes them to keep trying as the difficulty goes up." Students are also motivated by seeing their overall progress in the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic. "I love having IXL to reinforce and reteach," Steve says. "It's a very versatile tool, and really builds their confidence."

"IXL really builds confidence for my students. They have more 'at-bats' when they are learning new skills, and they see immediately what they are doing right or wrong. That translates into better performance."

Steve Seo

A Versatile Tool for Virtual Learning

When Blanca Alvarado moved to distance learning in the spring of 2020, Steve and his co-teachers found themselves relying even more on IXL. Steve used IXL to show example problems on his daily Zoom classes with students. Then, students worked on skills in IXL independently along with homework from their *Eureka Math* program. Steve said, "I always recommended to them that they complete their work in IXL first. IXL is really a very condensed and straightforward teaching lesson in itself. During that time, it reinforced what I was trying to do in direct instruction." With IXL Analytics, it was easy for Steve to monitor his students' progress at home. He encouraged his students to continue to practice and complete the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic over the summer so their 6th-grade teacher would have good baseline data when school started again in the fall.

A Model for Success at Alpha: Blanca Alvarado School

Here's how Steve Seo is using IXL in his 5th-grade math classroom:

- Steve uses 20-30 minutes of his 90-minute block math class for direct instruction. He can pull up example problems in IXL skill plans that are aligned to the lesson he is teaching in *Eureka Math*.

- Students practice IXL skills aligned with their *Eureka Math* curriculum for about 20-30 minutes each day in class. Students are expected to achieve proficiency—a SmartScore of 80 or above (the SmartScore is IXL's proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill). Students can continue to work at home if they do not achieve mastery during class time.

- Students use IXL Math during an intervention period and at home to catch up on skill gaps identified by the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic.

- Steve uses the IXL Analytics reports to plan his instruction and decide where whole-class reteaching and small group or individual intervention may be needed.

- Students can monitor their own progress on the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic and see where they need more practice.

- Teachers from different grade levels use the IXL Analytics reports to help with vertical alignment in their curriculum.