



# Algebra Students Find STAAR Success with IXL Math

MacArthur Ninth Grade School, Aldine ISD, Houston, Texas



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“There is never a time when there isn’t anything to do on IXL. They can go backwards to fill in holes if they are struggling with a skill. And my high-performing kids can pretty much self-teach and work ahead.”

*Myra Kerscher, algebra teacher*

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Students in Myra Kerscher’s Algebra 1 class at MacArthur Ninth Grade School have a secret weapon when it comes to preparing for success on the math portion of the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR): IXL Math is keeping students motivated and on track to master their algebra curriculum.

## Finding Motivation for Math

MacArthur Ninth Grade School, part of Aldine Independent School District, is a Title I school serving a mostly Hispanic population on the north side of Houston, Texas. Many students come from families living in poverty, and one third of the students are English Language Learners (ELL). In Myra Kerscher’s classes, about one third of her students are also classified as Special Education (SPED).

Before she started to use IXL Math, Myra found that motivation was a serious problem for many of her students. “It was hard to get them to pick up a pencil and just try,” she says. “Working on paper, I might have 85 percent participation on an assignment—but sometimes that participation was just trying a single problem or scribbling.” She knew she needed a way to get her students more engaged with the content if they were going to master the material and be successful on the STAAR.

Myra found IXL in the spring of 2014 while searching for resources to help her ELL students. She decided to start a free 30-day trial for all of her students in the weeks leading up to the STAAR. Her students took to the program immediately. “My students did more math in those 30 days than they had all year,” she says. “They did non-stop IXL for a solid month. I could not believe how many problems they did and how much progress they made in that time.”



## A Flipped Classroom Built around IXL

The next year, Myra used IXL for the three months preceding the STAAR. The results persuaded her principal to purchase the program for the entire math department for the 2016–2017 school year.

IXL Math is now thoroughly integrated into Myra's classroom. She is using a flipped classroom model, in which students watch video lessons at home and then practice what they have learned in the classroom the next day. She starts each day with a brief quiz to make sure they watched the video and then dives into IXL. Sometimes, she projects a few IXL problems for the whole class to work on together. Students then work on IXL individually or in small collaborative groups.

Myra assigns IXL skills that are aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standard she is teaching that day. The SmartScore (IXL's proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill) they achieve for each skill becomes their grade; for most skills, Myra expects them to aim for a score of 100 and earn at least an 80. Typically, students can complete two to three IXL skills during their 90-minute block math class. If students are struggling or need more of a challenge, she may assign them related skills from other grade levels.

As students work on IXL, all of their practice is tracked in IXL Analytics. Myra uses the data from IXL Analytics to monitor student progress and make decisions for whole-class, small group, and individualized instruction. "IXL lets me see exactly where students are struggling," she says. "If there is an area where most of my class is still in the 50s and 60s or below, I know this is an area where I need to rethink how I am teaching. I plan my re-teaching around the IXL data and build small collaborative groups based on students' individual needs." The insights are also essential for coordinating with her SPED co-teacher, who works with small groups of SPED students during class time.

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"IXL works because the students love it so much. They are really motivated to keep trying, and because they want to do it, they really grow."

*Myra Kerscher*

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## Results in the Classroom—and on the STAAR

With IXL, Myra's students are more engaged and motivated than ever. "Last year, my 120 students completed more than 200,000 problems on IXL. I had students who completed five or six thousand problems. I could see them working on it at night. Most of them went far beyond what I required of them."

Myra attributes this high level of motivation to the instant feedback students get from the program. "On paper, they may be content to scribble. But they don't want to see that zero on their SmartScore. They like watching that score go up." Students also benefit from IXL's explanations when they get something wrong. "In math, the biggest problem is that students don't want to try because they are afraid of doing something wrong. With IXL, when they are struggling they get an immediate explanation that helps them move forward. They don't have to wait for a teacher to come help them."



All that practice has paid off with big results. Before using IXL, Myra was ranked fourth or fifth among the teachers in her department based on her students' progress. Since using IXL, she has been ranked number one in her school for two years in a row and is now ranked among the top math teachers in the district.

Even more impressive are the results on the STAAR. Last year (the first year Myra used IXL Math for the entire school year) Myra was hoping to have 80 percent of her students pass the math portion of the STAAR. In the end, an astounding 93 percent of her students passed—the best her students have ever done.

## A Model for Success at MacArthur Ninth Grade School

Here's how algebra teacher Myra Kerscher is using IXL in her classroom:

- Myra uses a flipped classroom model, in which students watch video lessons at home and work on practice problems and activities at school.
- Students spend a portion of each class period on IXL. Each day Myra assigns two to three skills related to the planned lesson. Students may work independently or collaboratively.
- Myra often starts her classes by projecting IXL for whole-class instruction, leading the class through several problems from that day's assigned skills before students begin to work on their own.
- For most skills, students are expected to aim for mastery, which is a score of 100. Their final score becomes their grade.
- She uses IXL Analytics to monitor student progress towards standards and determine where whole-class re-teaching or small group intervention is needed.
- For students who are struggling or who need more of a challenge, Myra creates individualized assignments based on the skills IXL recommends.
- In the weeks leading up to the STAAR, Myra has her students review key skills that she expects to be on the test.