Getting the Most Out of Independent Learning

Sanger Elementary School, Hobbs, New Mexico

> "I believe my class this year is more prepared for testing than any of my classes have ever been. The skills they are getting from IXL really make a difference."
>
> *Travis Fisher, 5th grade teacher*

Sanger Elementary serves a diverse population of students in Hobbs, New Mexico. In Travis Fisher's 5th grade class, students enter with a range of skill levels in math and English language arts (ELA). Travis turned to IXL in 2013 to help his students improve mastery on grade-level skills, challenge themselves academically, and prepare for high-stakes testing.

Independent Learning—or Just a Game?

Travis uses a small group rotation model for both math and ELA. While one group of students gets direct instruction from Travis, two cooperative groups work on projects with leveled partners, and a fourth group works independently on computers or individual assignments. Travis wanted a program that would help his students get more out of their independent work time.

Before trying IXL, Travis was using another computer program for extra math practice. However, it was more game-oriented than he liked and didn't connect well with his curriculum. "We use a spiraling curriculum for math, which means that after we introduce a topic it may be a couple of weeks before we spiral back around to it in the curriculum," he explains. "My students needed an opportunity to continue to work on the skills I was teaching and get extra practice in areas where they were struggling."

Travis wanted a program that was engaging, but not in a way that detracted from learning. He also needed to be able to easily map the skills covered in the program to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and his classroom curriculum, so he could assign appropriate activities and monitor student progress.

A Better Use of Independent Learning Time

Travis first tried IXL Math on his own and was impressed with how easy it was to match the IXL skills to the CCSS and his curriculum. When his 30-day trial was over, he purchased the program for his entire class.

Initially, Travis gave students time on IXL Math twice a week during their small group rotations and twice a week in the computer lab. During group rotations, students worked on the skills Travis had introduced in class that week. In the computer lab, they worked on skills at their own level. "With IXL, it's really easy to see which students have mastered the skills and which ones need extra work. I can let students who are struggling work a grade level or two behind, while students who are advanced can work ahead on high-level skills without having to wait for the rest of the class," Travis says. For extra incentive, Travis set up a sticker chart to celebrate students' accomplishments. They earn a star for every three skills mastered on IXL and can trade in stars for small prizes like chips or cookies.

As students ramped up their use of IXL, Travis began using the reports in IXL Analytics to drive his instruction in the classroom. "IXL tells me where I need to do more reteaching. I may reteach a lesson to the whole class or pull out a group of students who are struggling for extra remediation," he says. He also uses reports from IXL Analytics to keep his administrators informed on student progress against standards.

Measurable Results on High-Stakes Tests

Travis says that his students have responded well to IXL. "They really enjoy seeing their progress as they move through the program," he says. "They can visually see on the screen that they are getting better and moving towards mastery." Students also appreciate the immediate feedback they get on the program through the detailed answer explanations and their SmartScores (IXL's proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill). "Some of the skills get really hard, especially as their score improves, and they can get frustrated. But they always get an explanation right away if they miss a question, and when they see their scores improving, it motivates them to keep pushing."

Students are applying their knowledge outside of IXL, too: Travis has seen an impact in standardized test scores. "The first year, we were just getting started, so I didn't have data. But there was a noticeable jump in math test scores last year," he says. He attributes that jump to IXL. While he does not yet have results from the most recent assessment, he believes that this year's class is even better prepared than last year's.

Travis has now started using IXL English Language Arts in addition to IXL Math. His administrators are fully on board as well. They are beginning a district-wide implementation of IXL so all Hobbs students can get the extra practice and support they need for math and ELA success.

IXL

A Model for Success at Sanger Elementary School

Here's how 5th grade teacher Travis Fisher is using IXL in his classroom:

- Travis uses a small group rotation model for both math and English language arts.

- On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students use classroom laptops to work on IXL during small group rotations. On these days, they practice skills Travis has just taught in class.

- On Mondays and Wednesdays, students have 30 minutes to work on IXL in the computer lab. Here, they can work on skills at their own pace.

- Some ELL and special ed students get extra IXL practice time during their pullout periods.

- Travis uses a sticker chart to reward performance. Students get a star on the chart for every three skills mastered on IXL. They can cash in their stars for small prizes.

- Some students work on IXL at home for extra practice and to earn more prizes.

- Travis uses the reports to guide his own instruction and keep his administrators informed.