



Driving Achievement in a Blended Learning Model for Middle School

Digital Arts and Technology Academy at Adams Middle School, Grand Prairie, Texas



When Dr. Darwert Johnson became principal of John Adams Middle School in Grand Prairie, Texas, in 2015, the school was designated as “underperforming” by the Texas Education Agency. Dr. Johnson and his leadership team introduced a blended learning model focused on data-driven small group instruction and technology-enabled individual practice. Now known as the Digital Arts and Technology Academy (DATA) at Adams Middle School, they are one of the highest performing schools in the district—thanks in large part to IXL.

“I love that IXL is not a replacement for a teacher engaging with their students—instead, it enhances the instruction that’s being delivered. And it’s truly motivating for students. It gives them pride in what they do.”

Darwert Johnson, Principal

“Changing the Narrative” for an Underperforming School

DATA at Adams Middle School is a full-school Title I campus, with 88% of their students qualifying for free- and reduced-lunch. They were designated as an underperforming school in 2015 due to their students’ low performance in math and English language arts on the Texas STAAR test. Dr. Johnson says, “We were struggling to close the gaps, and students were falling behind in new learning. I noticed that the elementary schools tended to perform better on the state assessments, and so did many of the high schools, so I wanted to know what was happening at the middle school level—and what we could do to change it.”

The leadership team started by talking to elementary school principals to find out what was working there. Based on their findings, they decided to introduce a blended learning program for math and language arts with a station rotation model similar to the one used at the elementary level.

The new model at DATA uses four stations:

- Direct teacher-led instruction
- Small-group or independent guided practice
- Project-based group work
- Technology-enhanced individual practice and instruction with IXL



The blended learning model was implemented in the context of a school-wide focus on digital arts and technology, supported by state-of-the-art computer labs, 3D printers, robotics, and a 1:1 iPad program. DATA at Adams Middle School engages students with real-world skills and applications, including Career and Technology Education (CTE) courses that students can take for high school credit. Dr. Johnson says, “We’re trying to change the narrative for students in this neighborhood and give them the tools and skills they need to go to college or get a trade. We’re creating new opportunities for our students.”

Double-Digit Growth with IXL

DATA started IXL Math in the spring of 2017 as a 30-day free trial for four 7th-grade math teachers. Within 30 days, they saw double-digit growth among those math students based on their 9-week benchmark assessment. Given these results, Dr. Johnson decided to purchase IXL Math for all students for the 2017-18 school year. After seeing gains of more than 20% in math on the first quarterly benchmark, he decided to implement IXL English Language Arts, too.

IXL is now the primary program DATA students use for the technology-enhanced learning station in their rotation model for both math and ELA. Teachers use IXL to reinforce skills taught in class, provide extra practice time, address skill gaps for struggling students, and extend learning for on-level and advanced students. Kelly Yeager, a 6th-grade teacher, says, “I like that I can customize what they work on as needed. It is also user friendly and the students enjoy working on it; some even work at home without it being assigned to them.”

“Students really love the format and enjoy using it,” says Dr. Johnson. “We had another program that the district wanted us to use, but students said they would rather do IXL.” Students at DATA are highly motivated by the awards and certificates in IXL and love seeing how many skills they can master. They also like the complete answer explanations, which allow them to learn and advance independently.

Teachers appreciate how easy it is to differentiate instruction with IXL. They use the reports in IXL Analytics to identify students in need of intervention and pull students for small-group instruction. And IXL makes it easy for them to map IXL skills to the Texas TEKS and their textbook programs. Dr. Johnson says, “The great thing about IXL is that it helps students become problem solvers and critical thinkers. It’s not just basic multiple-choice problems like some programs. There are complex word problems and multi-step problems in math, and in ELA they learn about authors’ points of view, inferencing, etc.—the things that get kids really thinking.”

“Using IXL helps you learn if you are struggling. For example, if you don’t get something on your level, you can go down a level and work your way up. If you get a question wrong, I like how it tells you why it is wrong. So for me it helps a lot.”

7th-Grade Student, DATA at Adams Middle School



Building Confidence and Driving Achievement with IXL

Students at DATA went from a 60% passing rate on the Texas STAAR in 2017 to a 72% passing rate in 2019. Dr. Johnson believes that results would have been even higher for 2020 if testing had not been interrupted by COVID—and he credits much of the growth to IXL. “IXL keeps them motivated and focused on real learning,” he says.

Thanks to their blended learning model and IXL, DATA at Adams Middle School is now one of the highest-performing schools in the district. But for Dr. Johnson, success isn't just about test scores. He says they have seen student confidence levels go up and behavioral issues go down. They are also seeing more students take the Algebra placement test in 7th grade and aspiring to higher-level courses. “With IXL, our students have really gained confidence,” he says. “They have started to believe in what they could achieve.”

Maintaining Learning Gains During Distance Learning

During the spring of 2020, DATA at Adams Middle School moved to a virtual learning format due to COVID. IXL made the transition to at-home learning easier for students and teachers. Teachers used both live synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning during the closures. With IXL, learning is available for students 24/7.

While not all students were able to connect from home, many students continued to use IXL during the closures—even when it was not specifically assigned to them. Amber Phillips, a master teacher for ELA at DATA, says, “Our kids were still using IXL at home in the middle of a pandemic—which shows you they actually do care about their learning!” Ebelechukwa Agu, a master teacher for math, says, “We hit the ground running [during virtual learning]...students who used IXL did not lose steam at all.”

“I love the progress monitoring tool for my students that lets me know when they've advanced to mastery levels. To me, growth is more than percentages, so when I show my students their growth, their eyes light up and they try even harder!”

Ms. Kelso, 6th-Grade ELA Teacher

“With IXL, I can easily find a specific Texas standard (TEKS) and assign [the corresponding skill to] students who either are struggling or for enrichment purposes. Reports are useful to know who is working in real time and who works outside of school. There is a direct correlation between students who use IXL regularly outside school hours and their learning outcomes.”

Margaret Carrico, 7th-Grade Math Teacher



A Model for Success at DATA at Adams Middle School

Here's how teachers are using IXL in a blended learning program at DATA at Adams Middle School:

- Students work in a blended station rotation model for math and ELA. IXL is used as one of the stations for independent practice, intervention, and enrichment.
- The school has a 1:1 device program to ensure that all students can access digital programs during the school day. Students spend 60-120 minutes per week on IXL in each subject. Some students also continue learning with IXL at home. Students are evaluated for their work in IXL based on the time they spend on assigned skills.
- Teachers first introduce a topic during direct instruction, and then assign skills on IXL to reinforce the lesson. Instruction in IXL can be easily differentiated to meet individual student needs.
- Struggling students may spend additional time in IXL catching up on missing skills as part of their Response to Intervention (RTI) program. On-level and advanced students may use IXL for enrichment.
- Teachers use the reports in IXL Analytics to plan direct teaching, group students for small-group instruction, and identify students in need of intervention.