



A District-Wide Approach to Personalized Learning with IXL

Distinctive Schools, Chicago, Illinois, and Twin Cities, Minnesota



Distinctive Schools runs a network of charter schools with four schools in Chicago and two in the Twin Cities area in Minnesota. They serve an urban population with a high percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch and have many students with special needs. When they implemented the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2012, they wanted to find new tools to support students and track progress towards learning goals. IXL helped them transition to the CCSS while empowering teachers and meeting individual student needs.

Building a Flexible Learning Environment

Anthony Claypool, the Director of Curricular Programs and Data for Distinctive Schools, explains that the schools are founded on a personalized learning approach. "It's important to us that every child has his or her educational needs met," he says. "Our vision is to get to know students really well and help them know themselves, [including] learning styles, aptitudes, and preferences." Their research-based learning model is built on the four principles of personalized learning: flexible learning environments, use of learner profiles to plan instruction, mastery-based learning, and individualized learning pathways.

In keeping with their commitment to flexibility, administrators did not want to mandate the same programs for all teachers and students. At the same time, Anthony realized that they needed tools to help students move towards meeting the new standards while still accommodating their individual needs. "When we switched to CCSS, we also wanted to move away from paper consumables," Anthony says. "Part of that was cost, but we also wanted practice materials that would adapt to the student." IXL provided the answer they were looking for.

"IXL holds students accountable and encourages them to give their best effort."

Nicole Swick, 5th grade teacher, CICS West Belden



One Goal, Many Pathways

Distinctive Schools introduced IXL Math and IXL Language Arts as an optional program for teachers in 2012. IXL complements the homegrown curriculum that Distinctive Schools adopted when transitioning to the CCSS. Early in the implementation, students could work on IXL at computer stations in the classroom or in computer labs at scheduled times. Most of the schools are now moving towards a 1:1 model that makes IXL even more accessible.

IXL Math and IXL Language Arts have made the transition to CCSS easier for students and teachers. The schools use short-cycle assessments from NWEA to formally monitor progress towards CCSS skills. IXL provides targeted, personalized practice and actionable data that help teachers drill down to better understand where students are struggling. “We don’t just want to teach to the test,” Anthony says, “but we need to make sure students are making progress in the skills they are expected to master.” He appreciates that IXL is already mapped to the CCSS so teachers don’t have to do their own alignment.

Anthony says that IXL provides valuable data to support their move towards a true mastery-based learning model. “We like to have multiple data points and sources of evidence,” he says. “IXL can be used to provide evidence for standards-based report cards or when building a learner profile for a student.”

But while all teachers are moving towards the same goals, Distinctive Schools does not prescribe a specific classroom model of how to use IXL. Anthony says that the program’s flexibility is one of the keys to its success. He says, “I think the biggest advantage of flexibility is to let teachers figure out how to use a resource in the classroom. Mandating the use of something like IXL would only result in a low-level compliance implementation that doesn’t harness any of its power. Teachers who opted in have shown that they can use the software in different ways, from whole-class, grade-level content practice, to small group remediation and extension, to personalized pathways for students to practice skills.”

“It has made practicing skills much more fun! Kids love earning the medals and seeing their progress increase.”

Kate O’Gara, 4th grade teacher, CICS Bucktown

Empowering Teachers with Flexible Classroom Models

Teachers are free to incorporate IXL into their classrooms in the way that makes the most sense for their students. Most use IXL for independent skills practice. Nicole Swick, a 5th grade teacher at CICS West Belden in Chicago, says her students access IXL several times per week on classroom iPads to practice skills they are working on in the classroom. “It’s a hassle-free way for students to practice the skills we are learning,” she says. “The instantaneous feedback and grading are amazing.” Nicole counts on IXL to help her determine whether students have really mastered a skill. Her students are expected to earn a certain number of ribbons or medals each week, but each student works on skills tailored to their needs.



Kate O’Gara at CICS Bucktown started out using IXL just for optional independent practice but has since moved to a more structured model for IXL use. Her students are required to work on targeted skills until they receive a SmartScore (IXL’s proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill) of 90 or higher. She uses IXL Analytics to track mastery towards CCSS skills and assign specific skills to students. Sometimes, she also uses IXL as a pre- and post-test when teaching a unit. Her students access IXL three times per week at school on Chromebooks. For homework, she gives them the option of paper homework or IXL. She says, “[IXL] is great because I can see who is doing well or who I need to check in with. I also use it to see if students are understanding a skill or if I need to pull them to work more with me before they can be successful independently.”

“They are so motivated to work because there is so much data to see!”

Dina Tartan, 4th and 5th grade teacher, CICS West Belden

Dina Tartan at CCIS West Belden also relies on IXL Analytics to drive classroom instruction. She uses the Live Classroom report to monitor what students are doing in class and see who might need extra help to improve. She also uses the Trouble Spots report to group students for small group instruction and identify students who need targeted intervention. Dina says her students are “engaged, focused, and on task” when using IXL and are highly motivated by looking at their own progress data. In fact, she states that her class answered 187,000 IXL questions in just a four-month period!

While each of the teachers uses IXL a little differently, they all say that the program has helped their students progress towards mastery of the CCSS. IXL has been the perfect match for a district focused on maintaining high standards in a flexible, personalized environment.