



## Mastering Middle School Math with IXL

Pinellas County Schools, Florida



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"IXL is one of the most organized and easy-to-use programs I have used. It's very user friendly for the teacher, which is half the battle. Teachers don't need more work."

**Melissa Athanson,**  
**Principal, Palm Harbor Middle School**

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Pinellas County Schools prides itself on its commitment to "growing greatness in each and every child," with a strong emphasis on preparing students for college and career success. As part of this mission, they ensure that every child has the opportunity to take higher-level courses, regardless of standardized test scores. However, some students entering middle school need more support to reinforce their knowledge of foundational math to master grade-level standards and advance to higher-level courses. IXL Math gives middle school students the support and practice they need to catch up on missing math skills and prepare for success in high school and beyond.

### The Challenge: Missing Math Skills

Pinellas County is the 7th-largest school district in Florida, with 150 schools serving a diverse range of communities. Palm Harbor Middle School, where Melissa Athanson is principal, pulls from a predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood. It offers an accelerated curriculum and most students graduate with three or more high school credits. Oak Grove Middle School, where Judith McIntosh teaches 7th- and 8th-grade math, is a Title I school in an urban area. Many Oak Grove students speak Spanish or another language at home, and a majority qualify for free and reduced lunch.

At both schools, math teachers were faced with a challenge: Students were coming in from the elementary schools with a broad range of skill levels and many were not prepared to make the leap to middle school math. Judith says, "A lot of my students were missing the foundations of mathematics, such as knowing how to multiply and divide—things you need to be able to do to be successful with 7th- or 8th-grade math."



Melissa explains, “Math is where we saw our students struggling the most. The way they teach math at the elementary level has changed, and we saw our incoming middle schoolers struggling with basic stuff like computation, subtraction, regrouping, and multiplication facts.” Both schools had used a variety of other math programs in the past, but Melissa felt they were either too high level or too remedial. She explained that a popular video-based math program “doesn’t break things down step by step. If you are not already a high-achieving kid, it doesn’t help you.” After researching the options, she secured an IXL Math pilot program in 2018-19 for Palm Harbor. Pinellas County Schools rolled out the program to all middle schools in 2019-20.

## Creating Opportunities for Accelerated Learning

IXL Math gives teachers a tool for individualized instruction and practice so they can better meet the needs of all students. Melissa says, “IXL spans the gamut. If I have students coming in at a 2nd-grade level or lower, and others coming in ready for Algebra 2, it provides something for everyone.” Math teachers in Pinellas County use IXL to reinforce skills they are teaching in class, provide opportunities for students to catch up, and to practice at home. Students get instant feedback on their progress and clear step-by-step explanations if they get a problem wrong. Teachers can see in real-time how students are doing and provide support and intervention for students who are struggling. Since IXL Analytics tracks student progress, teachers can focus on planning instruction and effectively responding to student needs.

Judith says, “I’m not a big textbook person. IXL is better because the problems are all different. It lets them work at their level, and they can practice as much or as little as they need to get to mastery. They can’t just guess on a problem and move on.”

During the pandemic, IXL Math helped teachers keep students on track. Judith used Live Classroom to monitor how her online students were doing during in-class practice time. Melissa says, “When we first went to virtual instruction, teachers had IXL at the ready, so there was not much gap in instruction. Students could pick up where they were and continue to work on those skills at home.”

## Support for Data-Driven Instructional Decisions

IXL Math also supports another important district initiative: the move to data-driven instruction. Melissa says, “We’re a very data-rich district, with lots of different data points—which can be overwhelming. Teachers don’t necessarily know how to take all that data and use it in the classroom.” IXL Analytics provides teachers with reports that are easy to understand, relevant for daily instruction, and highly actionable. “It’s the most user-friendly program I’ve ever seen. The system takes the data and puts it in terms that are easy to understand, so you can see exactly how much progress students have made and what they need to work on next. That’s a huge benefit for teachers.”

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“My students prefer IXL because they are in charge of their learning. If they want to get the 100, they can put in the work to get it. And if they get to 100 or even 80, we know that means they really know how to do it.”

**Judith McIntosh,**  
**7th-and 8th-grade Math Teacher, Oak Grove Middle School**

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Judith's students "step into the arena" for the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic at the beginning of the school year and once per month throughout the year. This provides up-to-date information on student progress that she can use to tailor instructional decisions. It also pinpoints the missing math skills that each student should work on next to maximize learning.

At Palm Harbor, teachers and school leaders look at IXL data together during monthly department meetings and compare it to district benchmark data. They see strong correlations between progress made in IXL and scores on the district benchmark. Melissa explains, "It gives us a lot of data, which I like. We can pinpoint where the issues are and make strategic plans for the year: where we need to change instructional strategies, where we need to revive and remediate as a school, and where we need to focus on professional development."

The move towards data-driven instruction is critical to meeting the district's achievement goals. As Melissa says, "This has been the biggest shift I have seen over my 24-year career in education. Before, everything was curriculum-based—you started at the beginning of the book and went to the end. Now, it's standards-based and mastery-based. It's a complete 180." With IXL Math, they now have a tool to help them make that shift.

## A Model for Success at Oak Grove Middle School

Here's how math teacher Judith McIntosh uses IXL in her 7th- and 8th-grade classrooms:

- She delivers 10-15 minutes of direct instruction each day and then assigns a skill in IXL for immediate practice in the classroom. She uses Live Classroom to monitor how students are doing and provides additional support as needed.
- Students take the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic at the beginning of the year and once per month throughout the school year. Students work on their individual recommended skills if they have extra time in class or at home.
- During some class periods, students are allowed to work collaboratively in IXL Math.
- Judith gives prizes based on student growth, including candy, school store cash, and gift cards. Since the competition is based solely on growth, all students can compete, no matter what level they are starting from.