

Putting MTSS into Practice with IXL



Meghan Michaels

Former Director of Instructional Technology



Location:
Grand Rapids, Michigan



Grades:
K-12



Number of students:
9,300



School characteristics:
Suburban



Subjects:
IXL Math
IXL English Language Arts

An Easier Way to Individualize Instruction

Supporting the needs of students and teachers in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model requires real-time student progress data and tools for targeted instruction and practice. IXL Math and IXL English Language Arts provide both—while saving teachers time. Meghan Michaels, who directed the instructional technology program at Forest Hills Public School District from 2020 to 2023, says, “Teachers are inundated with so many resources and tools. We wanted to give them something that would be both effective and easy.”

The Challenges

Forest Hills strives to offer individualized instruction and support for every student within an MTSS model. Like most districts, they realized that many of their students had gaps in their learning after the pandemic, especially in math and reading. The district wanted to provide a resource to supplement their core instruction and support Tier II and III intervention in math and language arts.



Teachers needed a tool that would provide real-time data to identify student learning needs, plan whole-class and small-group instruction, and deliver individualized learning opportunities. It had to be research-based and aligned with the Michigan State Standards and the curricula they were using in class. It also needed to be easy for both teachers and students to use; the district wanted to make sure they were providing valuable support for time-strapped teachers and not simply putting something additional on their plates. Ideally, they wanted a solution that would reduce teachers' workloads and decrease the time they spent assessing student progress, planning differentiated instruction, and searching for resources.

The Solution

Forest Hills PSD needed a tool that would make individualizing instruction for student learning needs simple.

Meghan says IXL quickly rose to the top of their list. "IXL really checked all the boxes," she explains. The district ultimately purchased IXL Math and IXL English Language Arts for all students in K-12, with an initial rollout in the 2022-23 school year.

The IXL Real-Time Diagnostic gives teachers instant access to the data they need to plan small groups, identify students in need of intervention, and pinpoint learning gaps. The program meets students where they are and provides an individualized learning path to accelerate learning gains. Teachers can easily find skills in IXL aligned with their textbook programs and the standards they are teaching in class. Integration with Clever and Canvas makes access simple for both students and teachers.

Forest Hills used a highly intentional and structured rollout plan to ensure success. They first trained district coaches and Instructional Technology Resource Teachers (ITRTs) at each building, who became peer mentors for the rollout. All teachers had the opportunity to attend a half-day training. As teachers began using the program, many of the ITRTs offered 15-minute after-school or "lunch and learn" sessions to answer questions and demonstrate specific tools and features. IXL and Forest Hills put together a full-day training for special education and resource teachers to address the use of IXL for Tier II and III intervention and using IXL data in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).



Here's how teachers in Forest Hills are using IXL:

- Teachers can use IXL however they choose to support their instruction, and students have access to the program both at school and at home.
- Students use IXL during small group rotations to get extra practice in skills aligned with their math or language arts instruction.
- Students can also work on individual skills identified in their Skill Analysis report. Students who are working above grade level can challenge themselves with advanced skills.
- Students identified for Tier II or Tier III intervention use IXL during their intervention or resource period for targeted practice and individualized instruction. Special education and resource teachers use IXL data to write IEPs and plan Tier II and Tier III instruction.
- Some teachers use the Group Jams for whole-class or small-group instruction.

The Results

While the use of IXL has not been mandated, a majority of K-5 teachers and middle and high school math and English teachers are using the program in some form. The optional trainings have been hugely popular, and the district continues to see high teacher engagement at most schools.

Students have been enthusiastic, too. In the first few weeks of the fall 2023 semester, students across the district answered more than one million questions on IXL and achieved proficiency in more than 26,000 skills (roughly one skill per student per week).

Teachers love all the data they get from the program, especially the Real-Time Diagnostic and Trouble Spots reports. They use this data to make decisions for grouping and individualized instruction. Data from IXL also informs data talks for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and provides insights for building and district administrators. While it's too soon yet to see the impact on state testing results, Meghan is excited to see the engagement with the program and the progress students are making toward skill mastery.

“When I talk to teachers about IXL, what I see is this combination of excitement and relief. IXL has become the go-to option for our teachers.” Meghan Michaels, former Director of Instructional Technology, Forest Hills Public School District

