Building Skills and Confidence in English Language Arts

Abbey Faust
5th Grade Teacher

Lincoln Elementary

Location:
Spencer, Iowa

Grades: 3-5

Number of Students: 430

School Characteristics: Rural

Subjects: IXL English Language Arts

Targeted Learning Addresses Skill Gaps and Empowers Students

Spencer Community Schools wanted an online program to foster skills development in English Language Arts (ELA) and address skill gaps identified on benchmark assessments. IXL English Language Arts gives teachers a powerful tool for data-driven instruction and targeted practice aligned with their ELA curriculum. As a result, students are showing substantial gains in the classroom and on their FastBridge® assessments. Best of all, they are more motivated to learn and more confident in their ELA skills.

The Challenges

Spencer serves a primarily rural/suburban population in Clay County, Iowa. Lincoln Elementary, where Abbey Faust teaches 5th grade, is home to third- through fifth-grade students for the entire county. At Lincoln, students enter with a wide range of ability levels in ELA, with some students testing significantly below grade level, some at grade level, and a few slightly above. FastBridge testing showed that many students entering 5th grade had significant skills gaps, especially in vocabulary and conventions. Abbey's class of twenty-five also included four English language learners (ELLs) and several students on Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs).

FastBridge benchmark assessments provided a starting point to identify

Teachers needed an easier way to identify and address skill gaps in English Language Arts, guide daily instructional decisions, and provide differentiated instruction and practice.

student learning needs but were not frequent or granular enough to guide daily instructional decisions. In addition, differentiating instruction for students with such diverse learning needs could be challenging and time-consuming.

The Solution

Abbey was first introduced to IXL during the pandemic, when she was teaching remotely. Two years later, the district implemented IXL English Language Arts for all students in 3rd through 5th grade and IXL Math for students on IEPs. IXL has since given teachers in Abbey's district the data and tools they need to guide daily instructional decisions, provide targeted instruction and practice, and monitor progress toward learning goals.

Fifth-grade teachers at Lincoln work together to plan a "skill of the day" based on IXL data. These skills often target vocabulary and conventions, the areas identified as the biggest needs for most students. IXL skills are aligned with their ELA curriculum. For example, teachers may assign skills related to Greek and Latin roots as a background builder before teaching a lesson or as extra practice after. Teachers also use the IXL Group Jams as a fun classroom activity to reinforce learning. IXL reports enable teachers to see how quickly students are progressing and which students need extra support.

IXL automatically creates personalized action plans for students based on their FastBridge data, which saves teachers time and supports differentiation. Students can work at their own level and take as long as they need to demonstrate proficiency. This ensures that students are consistently working at the appropriate level to maximize growth— whether they are building foundational skills from previous grades, mastering current grade-level content, or advancing to above-grade-level skills. Immediate feedback and targeted mini-lessons provide "just in time" correction and instruction to support independent learning.

Here's how teachers are using IXL English Language Arts at **Lincoln Elementary**:

- Students "Step into the Arena" in IXL to complete the diagnostic benchmark at the beginning of the school year and once each week in real-time mode throughout the year. This data, along with their FastBridge data, informs their individualized learning paths within IXL.
- Teachers assign a "skill of the day" aligned with their instruction. Students are expected to get a SmartScore™ of 80 or above to demonstrate proficiency of the skill of the day. Abbey differentiates the skill of the day, assigning one level for students working at or above grade level and another for students working below grade level.
- Students work in IXL daily during class time or in a dedicated intervention period. After they achieve proficiency in the skill of the day, they can work on recommended skills from their action plans.

Case study: Lincoln Elementary

- Group Jams engage students with a fun, collaborative activity that also builds skills.
- IXL reports give teachers immediate progress data that is granular and actionable for daily instructional decisions.
- Abbey encourages friendly competition using the Leaderboards based on the number of skills proficient or mastered. Students can work on skills for grades 3 – 6 in the competition, giving all students equal opportunity to win. Classroom milestones are displayed in an IXL Corner.

The Results

Students are showing strong progress within IXL, which is translating into progress on the FastBridge assessment. Many students have moved up in grade level over the course of the school year. Abbey says she also sees a big difference in how students are performing in classroom activities and interacting in small-group or whole-class settings.

Students love to see their growth within IXL and always know exactly what they need to do to improve. Abbey reviews progress data and action plans with students regularly and uses the data for parent conferences. Leaderboard competitions and virtual awards in IXL keep students motivated. Abbey says that as her students' skills have improved, their confidence has soared, too.

"I can see the skill growth in IXL transferring back into their work in the classroom. They are coming into small group rotations or large group instruction with more knowledge and confidence."

— Abbey Faust, 5th-Grade Teacher, Lincoln Elementary

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