



# Helping All Students Succeed in a Middle School IB Program

Starbuck Middle School, Racine, Wisconsin



All students at Starbuck Middle School participate in a challenging International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. They brought on IXL Math and IXL English Language Arts to ensure that all students have the individualized support they need to meet both state and IB standards. Jeremy Brennen, a 7th- and 8th-grade Special Education (SPED) teacher, says, “IXL is a great tool to support the things we are teaching in class. The number one success is that kids are actually engaged in learning. They love seeing their own progress.”

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“IXL is such a great program. Kids are willing to use it, and that helps them continue to learn.”

*Jeremy Brennen,  
Special Education Teacher, Grades 7-8*

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## The Challenge: Meeting Individual Student Needs

Starbuck serves a highly diverse student population in Racine. As a “choice” school, it is open to middle school students from across the district. It is also a full-school Title I program, with a majority of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Teachers and administrators are committed to academic excellence and making the IB program accessible for all students, including students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Some students come into the program from one of the IB elementary schools, while others arrive without any prior IB experience. Students must meet the Wisconsin Academic Standards while also engaging with the IB curriculum.

Jeremy has one self-contained SPED classroom. He also co-teaches one section each of 7th- and 8th-grade math and English language arts. In his co-taught classes, he provides additional support for students on IEPs and others who need some extra help. Jeremy’s students come to the classroom with a range of skill levels. In his self-contained classroom, some students are several grade levels behind in both ELA and math. His biggest challenge is finding materials that help him individualize instruction while keeping students engaged and on-task.



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"IXL saves me so much time as a special education teacher. The data I need to write IEPs is right there. And I can pinpoint exactly what each student needs when I'm creating lessons."

*Jeremy Brennen*

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## An Easier Way to Differentiate Instruction and Monitor Progress

IXL helps Jeremy meet the individual needs of each of his students. For students in his pull-out SPED program, that may mean reviewing skills from prior grades. Other students may just need extra practice on the grade-level skills they are learning in class. No matter where they are in their skill development, IXL meets them on exactly the right level.

All students at Starbuck use IXL. The school first started using IXL in 2019. When the pandemic hit in 2020, it became an invaluable tool for maintaining instruction and monitoring progress during virtual and hybrid learning. Jeremy says, "IXL is a fantastic program for online learning. Sometimes students don't want to turn on their cameras or microphones, and it can be really hard to keep them engaged with learning while they are home. But with Live Classroom, I can see exactly what everyone is working on in real time. If they are having trouble with a specific problem, I can instant message them right then and there to get them back on track. I really love that feature."

Now that students are back in the building full time, the general education teachers use IXL for targeted practice after they teach a lesson. They can find IXL skills precisely aligned with the standards they are teaching. Students are expected to get a SmartScore (IXL's proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill) of at least 80 to demonstrate mastery. The answer explanations and IXL video tutorials provide opportunities for self-remediation if students are struggling to master a skill. Students who need extra time can continue working on IXL at home.

Jeremy especially loves how easy it is to monitor student progress with IXL. He can drill down in IXL Analytics to look at student progress on a very granular level. He uses that information to inform his IEPs and plan individual and small group instruction for his students. "As a special education teacher, the data I can pull out of IXL is invaluable. I am constantly looking at the numbers, and I can use that data to pinpoint the lessons they need and provide individualized instruction, as SPED teachers are required to do. It really has made my life easier."

IXL is also helping students address skill gaps so they can better meet the rigors of the IB curriculum—particularly now when many students are struggling to get back up to grade level after two interrupted school years. Jeremy says, "IXL gives them the opportunity to stay on topic until they reach proficiency. Many of our students are coming in with lower reading and math scores. IXL is really helping students bridge that gap."



## The IXL Effect: Engaging Students with Learning

Jeremy says the best thing about IXL is how it engages students. “I’ve seen a big improvement in engagement. Compared to [our previous program], IXL has a much friendlier interface and a more game-like feel. Students actually do it,” he explains. “Kids love seeing their progress and getting the awards in the program. It makes learning a bit of a competition, and kids really jump all over that. They love to get it right.” His students particularly enjoy challenging each other with IXL Leaderboards.

Even better, he is seeing improvement in his students’ math and reading benchmark scores. His students averaged 8-to-12-point gains on the MAP test in the first semester. He says, “The scores are going up because kids are actually doing the work. And they are engaged in real learning when they are working in IXL. Compared to other things on the market, the depth and breadth of what IXL has to offer are the best I have seen, bar none.”

## A Model for Success at Starbuck Middle School

Here’s how Jeremy Brennen is using IXL with his middle school SPED students:

- Students in his co-taught math and ELA classes use IXL to practice and reinforce the skills they are learning in class.
- Students in his special education self-contained classroom can work on individual skills at their level.
- Students can take as much time as they need to master a skill and get instant reteaching if they are struggling. They can continue working at home if they need more practice.
- Students in the co-taught classrooms are expected to get a SmartScore of 80 or higher to demonstrate mastery of a skill.
- Jeremy uses the data in IXL Analytics when writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for his special education students.