



Mastering the Multi-Grade Classroom with IXL

Freeman Academy, Freeman, South Dakota



How do you successfully teach in a classroom that spans three grade levels? For Karla Rupp, an IXL Elite 100 Teacher, covering everyone's grade-level curriculum and addressing their varied skills was a daunting task. After implementing IXL to help her differentiate instruction and navigate a myriad of standards, Karla says, "there was a definite change in the rate of growth for every student in my class." Within a few months, her multi-grade students were thriving and showed considerable academic growth. Here's how IXL is helping Karla effectively meet the needs of all the students in her early elementary classroom.

"With IXL, I can scaffold a lesson where I start with whole-group instruction on a skill that spans all three grade levels, give the opportunity for hands-on partner work as a second look at the concept, and then have them 'show what they know' on IXL."

Karla Rupp, IXL Elite 100 Teacher

Juggling Standards for Multiple Grades

Freeman Academy is a Christian school serving the small town of Freeman and surrounding communities in rural South Dakota. They also welcome a handful of international students, mostly from China, who live onsite in a school dormitory. With just 83 students across grades 1-12, Freeman is focused on personal attention and high academic standards.

Karla teaches a mix of first, second, and third graders in her elementary classroom. Teaching multiple grades provides many opportunities for the students to collaborate, and she loves seeing conversations between the "olders" and "youngers" in her class. She also appreciates that the younger students get exposure to more advanced content. However, meeting individual needs and covering grade level standards for all of the grades in her classroom is a real challenge. Karla says, "I calculated the number of standards for each grade in math and ELA and the hours of instructional time I have available over the school year, and realized I would have to cover seven standards an hour to get through them all!"



In her first year of working in a multi-year classroom, she initially tried separating students by grade level and working with each grade individually while other students were completing independent assignments. It soon became clear that this approach was not going to be feasible. Instead, Karla needed a new approach that would allow her to address the needs of multiple grade levels, as well as individual student needs, during the same instructional block. IXL turned out to be the key to making this happen.

Moving to Mastery-Based Learning with IXL

Karla began using IXL Math and IXL English Language Arts early in her first year of teaching her multi-grade classroom. It quickly became a core component of her instructional approach. "I can't even fathom not having it," she says. "There is no way I could do what I am doing without it."

Freeman Academy uses a benchmark assessment to measure each student's mastery of grade level skills. Karla then uses the scores from the beginning of the year to map out a scope and sequence based on student learning needs. Next, she matches the standards in her scope and sequence to the skills in IXL. "It really helps that IXL is aligned with the same standards I am expected to teach and that my students are tested on in the state tests," she says. Using this standards alignment, she is able to identify core skills that appear across all of the grade levels and plan lessons that accommodate the needs of each grade.

Each day, Karla teaches a whole-group lesson that spans similar standards across all three grade levels. Students are then given time in IXL to practice skills and "show what they know" at their own skill level. However, Karla does not limit students to their assigned grade; if students have mastered the skill at their own grade level, they can work ahead on similar skills for the higher grades. Students who are struggling may go back and review foundational skills before tackling skills from their own grade level. With the help of the Live Classroom report, Karla can monitor student progress and immediately identify students who need one-on-one or small group support.

Accelerating Learning Across the Grades

Since adopting IXL in her classroom, Karla has found it much easier to plan instruction for her multi-grade classroom and deliver personalized lessons that meet the needs of each individual student. More importantly, her students are thriving across all three grades. This year, her third graders showed eight months of academic growth in just 3.5 months, and her first graders showed six months of academic growth in the same time period. The growth her students showed on IXL was corroborated by their scores on the mid-year benchmark.

Karla attributes these gains to the individualized instruction students get in IXL and the reports from IXL Analytics, which allow her to target her instruction to student needs. IXL gives students immediate feedback so they know right away whether they understand a concept or not. If students get a problem wrong, they review IXL's explanations so they can correct their mistakes and try again. If Karla sees that a student is not progressing, she can promptly intervene. "With a paper worksheet, students may practice a skill the wrong way 30 times without getting corrected," she says. "With IXL, they know immediately. Reviewing IXL's reports in real time allows me to intervene on the spot before misunderstandings become ingrained."



Students have also been more motivated since they started using IXL. Karla's students love to see their progress on their reports and share the new skills they have learned with their parents. "You can't expect growth if kids aren't motivated," Karla explains. "With IXL, they are part of the process. I never hear a student say they don't want to do it."



A Model for Success at Freeman Academy

Here's how elementary teacher Karla Rupp is using IXL Math and IXL English Language Arts in her mixed-grade classroom:

- Karla uses IXL to plan instruction by grouping similar standards that overlap across her three grade levels. She develops whole-class lessons that span the skills across all three grades.
- After the whole-class lesson, she lets students work together on partner work with hands-on activities. They then practice skills individually at their own level within IXL. Students practice on IXL using classroom tablets for an average of 20 minutes per day during the school day.
- Students are expected to earn a SmartScore of 90 or higher to show mastery. Students who do not complete their assigned skills practice during the day may access the program at home or during an after school program at the school.
- If students miss a question, they are expected to review IXL's explanations to correct their mistakes and try again. If they get two problems in a row wrong, they are required to work with Karla or another student who has already mastered the skill.
- Karla monitors students using the Live Classroom report while they work in class and provides immediate intervention for students who are struggling.
- Karla's commitment to using IXL in her classroom led to her being recognized as part of the IXL Elite 100 for the 2016-2017 academic year. This program honors the top teachers worldwide based on their students' time spent on IXL.