



# Meeting Diverse Needs—In Class or at a Distance

Tara Hills Elementary, West Contra Costa USD, San Pablo, California



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“IXL is the most consistently used program across all of our classrooms. It gives us great data to pinpoint student needs. It has really benefited all of our students.”

*Robert Mendoza, Principal*

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Addressing individual needs for a highly diverse student population isn't easy. But Tara Hills Elementary is meeting that challenge by using IXL to pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses, provide targeted practice and instruction aligned to their core curriculum, and help teachers make better instructional decisions.

## Helping All Students Master Rigorous Standards

Tara Hills Elementary draws its student body from diverse neighborhoods in San Pablo and Richmond, CA. Fifth-grade teacher Ian Keough calls the school “a nice melting pot of students with many different cultural and language backgrounds.” A majority of their students are low income and the school qualifies for a whole-school Title I program. The community has a large number of Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese speakers, and about 50% of their students are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). Tara Hills also has a Special Education (SPED) program that serves severely handicapped and medically fragile students from across the district.

With such a wide variety of needs, teachers at Tara Hills needed tools to help them individualize instruction and help all of their students meet grade-level standards. Initially, they started with IXL Math. Ian explains, “We were looking for a way to improve math scores on our district benchmarks and standardized tests. We wanted a program that would promote a deeper understanding of the standards and prepare our students for testing.”

Principal Robert Mendoza also wanted a program with more rigor to supplement their textbook curricula. He says, “We saw that 80% or more of our students were scoring at or above grade level in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, but by the time they were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, only 20% were meeting the benchmarks, especially in math. It seemed like we needed to add rigor to the curriculum to help students stay on track for grade-level standards. We hoped that would translate to higher scores on the tests.”

After a successful year with IXL Math, they decided to add IXL English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science.



## “Stepping into the Arena” for Individualized Skill Development

Ian says that individualized instruction and reinforcement of academic skills are the keys to IXL’s success with their students. “IXL is really helping to reinforce students’ areas of need,” he says. The IXL Real-Time Diagnostic and IXL Analytics have given teachers deeper insights into individual student needs and skill levels. Students complete a diagnostic that pinpoints their overall skill level and identifies areas where they need extra support. Throughout the year, students are invited to “step into the Diagnostic Arena” to complete additional diagnostic questions, which provide real-time feedback for students and their teachers. It also pinpoints specific areas of weakness and generates recommendations for which skills students should work on next to improve.

This individualized approach ensures that each student gets the right level of support and challenge. Students can work independently in IXL on areas of need or practice skills assigned by their teacher to reinforce the day’s lessons. Robert says, “With IXL, it’s very easy to find work that is appropriate for each student’s level. Initially, I wasn’t sure how well it would work with our ELLs, but when I sat in on a class, I saw how valuable it was for them to have access to content across all grades.”

Ian says that IXL has built confidence for his students, along with academic skills. “It really helped me meet the needs of my ELLs and other students who just needed some extra support. If they miss something, they get a breakdown of exactly what they did wrong.”

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“IXL is by far the best program I have used. It is well-rounded, responsive to student needs, doesn’t overwhelm, and has helped me be a better teacher. It really helps you with everything in your classroom and with every type of student.”

*Ian Keough, 5th-Grade Teacher*

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## A Tool that “Makes Me a Better Teacher”

Ian says that using IXL has elevated his instruction. He uses the reports in IXL Analytics to group students for targeted small-group instruction and to identify those who need additional intervention. IXL also gives him real-time feedback, so he knows whether a whole-class lesson has been effective. If the entire class is struggling with the IXL skills he assigns to accompany a lesson, he knows that he needs to go back and teach it another way. He says, “IXL has transformed my teaching. It’s a different way of looking at data. It gives me concrete information so I know exactly what each student needs and how I should adjust my instruction. It’s like night and day, teaching with and without IXL.”

Because IXL is aligned with most major textbooks, it is easy for Ian to find skills in IXL to support what he is doing in class. He assigns practice skills aligned to the lessons he is teaching from McGraw-Hill MyMath and Lucy Calkins Units of Study. “It’s a really great support system to reinforce what we are teaching,” he says.



Robert appreciates having real-time data to monitor student progress at a building level. “It’s more current information than we get from our district benchmarks,” he says. “The IXL Real-Time Diagnostic gives us a great baseline to see where students are. It provides the bulk of our data in math and has really helped us out in ELA.” Though students missed the second-semester district benchmarks and state assessments due to COVID-19 closures, Robert was expecting his students to perform well after their first full year using IXL, based on the data he had seen.

### Supporting Diverse Needs from a Distance

COVID-19 forced Tara Hills, along with schools across the country, to move to a remote learning model in the spring of 2020. IXL proved to be essential during their distance learning experience. Ian had his students spend 20 minutes in the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic each Friday. He then used that information to plan his video lessons for the next week. Students also spent additional time practicing skills in IXL on a daily basis. “We were required to give students 3.5 hours of remote instruction daily,” Ian explains. “About 1-1.5 hours of that time is spent on IXL, divided between math, ELA, social studies, and science.”

Ian loved being able to monitor what students are working on from home in real time with Live Classroom and see how much time they were spending in the program. He says, “With everything going on in the world, it was nice to have one thing that made life a little easier.”

### A Model for Success at Tara Hills Elementary School

Here’s how 5th-grade teacher Ian Keough is using IXL in his classroom:

- Students spend 20 minutes on the IXL Real-Time Diagnostic each Friday so Ian can monitor their skill development.
- Ian assigns skills in IXL daily to reinforce lessons from his textbooks. Students are expected to reach a SmartScore (IXL’s proprietary scoring system that measures how well a student understands a skill) of 80 or above on assigned skills.
- When they finish their assigned skills, students spend time working on skills recommended by the Diagnostic Action Plan.
- Ian uses the reports in IXL Analytics to plan whole-class and small-group instruction and identify students in need of intervention.