

Implementation Strategies

St. Margaret of Scotland School, Archdiocese of St. Louis
Saint Louis, MO

Grade(s): 5 – 8

Scenario: Computer Lab, Home Access

Purpose: After-School, Improve State Test Scores

ALEKS Portion of Curriculum: 25%

Time Spent in ALEKS: 1–2 hours per week, 36 hours per term

ALEKS Course: Mathematics – LV 3 (with QuickTables), Mathematics – LV 4 (with QuickTables), Mathematics – LV 5 (with QuickTables)

Rebecca Finnegan, Teacher

We implemented ALEKS at my school as a pilot in the spring of 2011, and fully implemented the program in the fall of 2011. Students in first and second grades use QuickTables only, and students in third through fifth grade use both QuickTables and Mathematics. I am a very strong advocate for the program. I am seeing growth in skills from students with a weakness in math, and I am seeing amazing progress for students with strong math skills. Parents and colleagues at my school are delighted with the program.

Scenario

What challenges did the class or school face in math prior to using ALEKS?

We had very weak math computation test scores according to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). We found that students seem to be successful with classroom instruction, but that they did not retain skills as they move on to new grades. As is the case with many schools, we also faced financial difficulties in trying to provide programs beyond the basic curriculum.

How many days per week is class time dedicated to ALEKS?

2 days per week.

What is the average length of a class period when ALEKS is used?

30 minutes.

Implementation

How do you implement ALEKS?

Our school read materials about ALEKS, viewed the program online, and had a presentation from our sales representative. We had immediate buy-in from teachers. It was difficult to secure funding for the program as it had not been written into the budget. However, the principal managed to include it under our "textbook" category and offset costs by ordering fewer workbooks for the grades using ALEKS. All of the areas covered in ALEKS are covered in our curriculum, so the resource matched our needs perfectly. Being able to coordinate it with the ITBS and our textbook curriculum made the implementation very smooth.

Do you cover ALEKS concepts in a particular order?

No, students are free to work on areas of interest.

How do you structure your class period with ALEKS?

I have two 30-minute class periods devoted to ALEKS in the computer lab. During those classes, I work with small groups on mini-lessons, designed from the "ready to learn" component of the Average Report Pie Chart. The mini-lessons take only 5–10 minutes, and students are anxious to return to their individual work.

How did you modify your regular teaching approach as a result of ALEKS?

I spend much less time on drill and practice, as that is available through ALEKS. ALEKS keeps accurate records of progress on math facts without taking instructional time away. I teach more frequently in small groups and in math centers due to the wide variety of exposure to topics in various areas. I have time to work with small groups on mini-lessons while the rest of the class uses ALEKS, and I can make those groups flexible based on needs presented in the Average Report Pie Chart component of ALEKS. I use the Quiz component of ALEKS in conjunction with my textbook in order to help students retain skills.

How often are students required or encouraged to work on ALEKS at home?

I ask them to complete 60 minutes per week on the mathematics component only.

How do you cultivate parental involvement and support for ALEKS?

We informed parents about ALEKS through school and classroom newsletters. Teachers displayed ALEKS at Back-to-School Night, allowing parents to work with the program in the classroom. We communicated closely with parents as students installed the program and logged on at home for the first time. After that, the parent buy-in was automatic. Parents reported seeing their child sit down to do math without any prompting from them – amazing! One parent pulled me aside at a school event and thanked me for advocating ALEKS for our school. He has very bright children, and he sees ALEKS as providing the appropriate challenge for his kids without any kind of stigma sometimes associated with being high-achieving students. He also inquired about purchasing ALEKS for his high school daughter who finds math more challenging, and he commented that ALEKS might fill in the holes in his child's skill development. He also stated that having worked with ALEKS will be helpful when students take online classes or even test preparation classes for ACT and SAT.

Grading

Is ALEKS assigned to your students as all or part of their homework responsibilities? If so, what part of the total homework load is it?

Students must complete 60 minutes of ALEKS mathematics weekly as a regular part of their homework. They are given a homework grade for ALEKS each week, indicating the number of minutes out of 60 that they completed. As students show that they are regularly using ALEKS, we will change the grading to reflect number of topics mastered per week.

How do you incorporate ALEKS into your grading system?

Right now, ALEKS is just recorded as a weekly homework grade. It is 20 percent of the homework grade. Homework makes up about 75 percent of the subject grade.

Do you require students to make regular amounts of progress in ALEKS?

Currently, we are requiring time commitments from the students. We plan to adjust those requirements as students become more accustomed to ALEKS. We will set individual goals for each student. The number of lessons successfully completed will be compared to the goals set for the student. It will range from 1–6 lessons per week, dependent on each student's previous levels of success.

Learning Outcomes

Since using ALEKS, please describe the learning outcomes or progress you have seen.

I see major progress with all students using ALEKS. I see quick recall of basic facts when doing QuickTables. I see advanced students able to actually advance into higher level concepts without impeding the progress of others. I see students with weak skills find success with math through ALEKS, and I see a renewed motivation to learn math. Students are very proud of their pie as they make progress through the program. It is very rewarding to introduce a new concept in class and hear students say "Oh, yeah, ALEKS taught me that!" They approach new concepts with confidence.

Best Practices

Are there any best practices you would like to share with other teachers implementing ALEKS?

We began our afterschool math workshop, Club ALEKS, two months ago, and we are very happy with it. We originally set up the club as a one hour per week afterschool session for students without Internet access available at home. In third through fifth grade, we only had four students that needed Club ALEKS. We have now expanded Club ALEKS to include students that need support while doing ALEKS, and students whose parents request it for various reasons. We require permission slips from parents and advance notification if a child is not supposed to attend for some reason. The permission slip indicates how the child is to get home after Club ALEKS. Teachers in third through fifth grade take turns supervising ALEKS E– a fairly simple task. Teachers have commented that they are able to support the students that need help with ALEKS, while others just work on their own. Parents are grateful for the additional no-cost service, and teachers are happy to have their students make more progress. ALEKS is a win-win program for all!