Implementation Strategies

Decorah Middle School, Decorah Community School District
Decorah, IA

Grade(s): 5 – 8
Scenario: Computer Lab, Laptop Carts
Purpose: Enrichment/Gifted and Talented, At−Risk Students, Supplement
ALEKS Portion of Curriculum: 25%
Time Spent in ALEKS: 1.25 hours per week, 15 hours per term
ALEKS Course: Mathematics – LV 3 (with QuickTables), Mathematics – LV 4 (with QuickTables), Mathematics – LV 5 (with QuickTables), Middle School Math Course 2, Middle School Math Course 3, Pre−Algebra, Algebra 1

Angie Peltz, Teacher
I have been using ALEKS for the past four years. We use it as a way to enrich our current curriculum with additional practice on computation. Our curriculum resulted in students who had a rich understanding of math concepts in class, but we felt like there wasn't enough practice happening outside of the classroom. As we explored a couple of options to help us with this problem, we came back to ALEKS over and over again. I personally use ALEKS as a way to give my students a sneak peek at upcoming topics, further their understanding of a concept by clicking on that piece of their pie, or simply as enrichment for my higher level math students. ALEKS allows all of my students to find success at their own level. I can see what my students are working on, how long they attempted a topic, and how they have progressed through the year.

Scenario

What challenges did the class or school face in math prior to using ALEKS?
We have a great math curriculum, but we felt like there was a hole in their computation skills. Students understood the concepts being introduced or reviewed, but there wasn't much practice so we found ourselves supplementing with extra worksheets. Implementing ALEKS has allowed us that extra practice without the worksheets.

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

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

Implementation

How do you implement ALEKS?
ALEKS is implemented once a week during a 45−minute whole group lesson. Students are then asked to complete 30 minutes a week outside of the classroom for extra practice.

Do you cover ALEKS concepts in a particular order?
No.

How do you structure your class period with ALEKS?
I have my students complete ALEKS once a week during the 45−minute class period. If they are ready for the concept that we are talking about in class (according to their pie), then they are asked to touch base with me with that for part of the class period. If they are not ready, I choose the topics for them to work on in the hopes of guiding them into that concept eventually. After we touch base on the current topic, they can choose their own topics to work on next. I also have students log into their ALEKS account when they have extra time during the course of the day. Next to reading, it is one of their favorite things to do!

How did you modify your regular teaching approach as a result of ALEKS?
When a lot of students have covered a topic in ALEKS, I have students act as mini−teachers to help teach and make the concept at hand more manageable. I also have them touch on the piece of pie that we are learning about in class during our whole group ALEKS time.

How often are students required or encouraged to work on ALEKS at home?
They have a weekly assignment to complete 30 minutes a week.

How do you cultivate parental involvement and support for ALEKS?
My classroom website includes a link to the ALEKS website. I also remind parents in weekly newsletters about the assignment.

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?
It is approximately 15 percent of their total homework load for the week.

How do you incorporate ALEKS into your grading system?
We do not grade math using letter grades; instead we use a standards–based checklist. Therefore, ALEKS is not part of their overall grade in that regard, but students who complete ALEKS tend to do much better in class.

Do you require students to make regular amounts of progress in ALEKS?
When I check their progress in ALEKS, I stress that I am checking the number of topics they have tried versus mastered. I use the sports analogy that they can try every sport under the sun (i.e. topics), but if they don't stop and practice the sport, they will never get better at it. When I look at their numbers, I want to see the two numbers (mastered topics/attempted topics) very close and not far apart.

Learning Outcomes

Since using ALEKS, please describe the learning outcomes or progress you have seen.
The biggest outcome that I have seen, and absolutely thrills me as a teacher, is when I hear them say, "Hey, I have done this in ALEKS! I know how to do this!" The introduction of new concepts is more exciting because there is always at least one student who has already explored the concept through their ALEKS time. It makes it more accessible to other students when they hear their peers excited about it. The students are so excited to see their pies fill up over the course of the year. They understand the process of building upon their skills to get to other concepts, so when their neighbor is working on something that they want to do, they understand that there are certain concepts that must be mastered before that opens in their pie.

Best Practices

Are there any best practices you would like to share with other teachers implementing ALEKS?
I have found great success in having my computer open to check and see what students have mastered versus tried. They want me to say, "Great job! You are five for five in topics today!" They thrive off of that!