



AIM Institute®
for Learning & Research

5 MARGINAL SHIFTS FOR **ENGLISH LEARNERS** IN ANY CLASSROOM

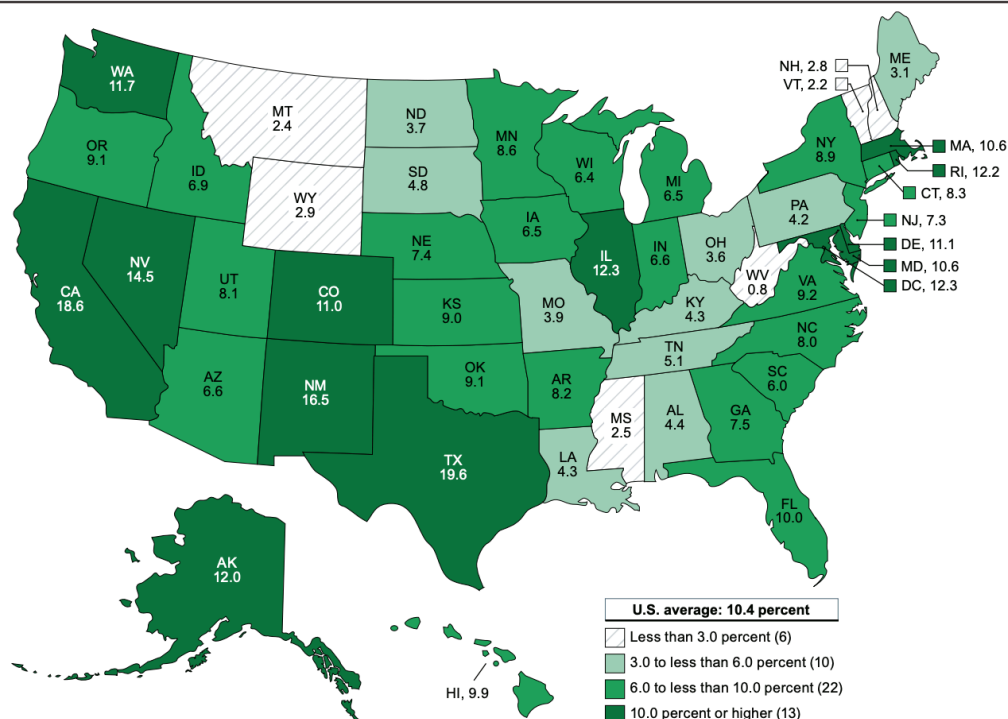
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English learners represent a growing population of individuals from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. In 2000, 8.1% of the US school population was classified as English learners (ELs). Almost two decades later in 2018, the percentage rose to 9.5%. Currently, ELs comprise 10.4% of the population, representing over five million students in today's classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, only 3% of teachers have the necessary qualifications to teach these students (Rahman et al., 2017).

With the number of English learners (ELs) in classrooms steadily increasing, it is essential for educators to adopt teaching strategies that build on their strengths and address their unique needs. ELs often face significant challenges in accessing the curriculum due to language barriers, cultural differences, and varying levels of prior educational experience. Leaders should prioritize support to teachers, ensuring they have the necessary training, resources, and strategies to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Through culturally responsive instruction, teachers can build on students' strengths and bridge gaps, providing ELs with the support they need to succeed academically and socially.

****Footnote -** This whitepaper uses the term English Learner (EL) which aligns with the current Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301, 2015) and is not intended to diminish or disregard other, more inclusive terminology in the field.

Figure 7. Percentage of public school students who were English learners (ELs), by state and categorized into specific ranges: Fall 2019



NOTE: U.S. average is for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *EDFacts* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted March 31, 2021; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 204.20.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

STRUCTURED LITERACY FOR ALL STUDENTS

WHAT WE TEACH

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension



HOW WE TEACH

- Explicit Instruction
- Systematic & Cumulative Curriculum
- Differentiation
- Practice & Corrective Feedback
- **Oral language proficiency**
- **Cross-language connections**



National Reading Panel (2000), National Literacy Panel (2006)

The National Reading Panel of the National Institute of Child Health and Development (2000) issued a report that identified five key areas that are critical for effective reading instruction. These core components are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These are the non-negotiable, “what to teach,” in every structured literacy classroom.

In addition, well-designed structured literacy instruction places an emphasis not only on “what” needs to be taught to students, meaning these 5 key pillars of literacy, but also “how” it is taught to students. These evidence-based principles of structured literacy, such as explicit instruction, systematic and cumulative teaching, practice and corrective feedback opportunities, and differentiation, apply to all populations of students, including culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

While the original National Reading Panel report did not include research on ELs, the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (NLP) reviewed extensive research on this population and affirmed these components for ELs in 2006. In addition, the panel affirmed the effectiveness of explicit, systematic instruction that can help bridge knowledge and skills to meet grade-level expectations. Important to note are the two additional findings that the NLP put forth: 1) emphasis on oral language development as the foundation for acquiring language and literacy in English and 2) the importance of cross-language connections that connect students' first language assets to their literacy development in English.



BRIDGING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Learning how to bridge these research findings and include them in classroom practice can have a dramatic impact on English learners. The AIM Institute for Learning & Research curated five marginal shifts that teachers can apply immediately to further enhance the high-quality instruction that is delivered to culturally and linguistically diverse learners that honors their heritage language strengths and bridges connections to support their acquisition of language and literacy in English.

5 SHIFTS TO IMPACT ENGLISH LEARNERS IMMEDIATELY

#1 PRIORITIZE ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

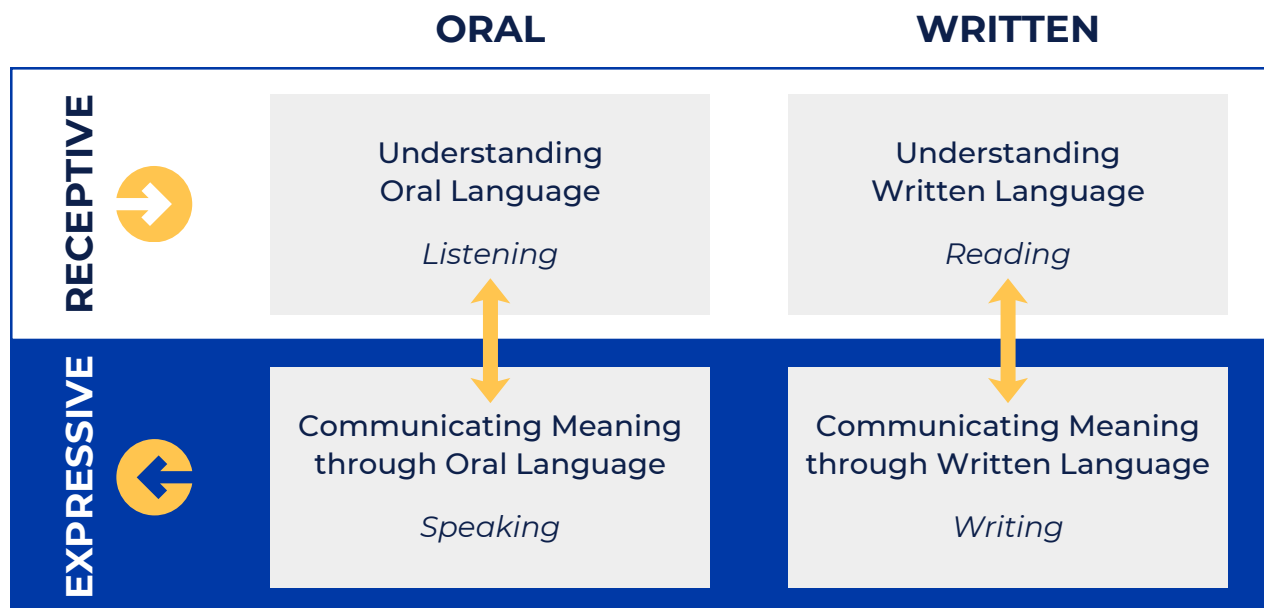
Language and literacy are closely connected, as oral language lays the foundation for students to develop reading and writing skills. As the guidelines of the American Speech Language-Hearing Association (2001) suggest, “Reading takes advantage of the linguistic knowledge and processes that have evolved primarily for speaking and listening.” Thus, oral language development is foundational for ELs' literacy development and overall academic success.

Bloom and Lahey (1978) describe language as five systems: phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics, which relate to language form, content, and/or use.

- **Phonology** - the study of the speech sound system of a language
 - As students acquire English, error patterns may appear due to cross-language transfer or overgeneralization from their native language to spoken English.
- **Morphology** - the smallest units of meaning in a language and how the units are combined to change the meaning of words
 - Some words share a root across languages which supports a more rapid acquisition of those words for English learners when that connection is directly made.
- **Semantics** - the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, and their relationship in a language
 - English learners often understand more words than they can produce and, therefore, require instruction to support their use of precise ‘labels.’
- **Syntax** - the rules for organizing words, phrases, and clauses to form sentences in a language
 - Teachers must be aware of the similarities and differences between the native syntax and classroom English syntax in order to support the acquisition of this language system
- **Pragmatics** - the rules for the use of language for social purposes and effective communication
 - English learners will require opportunities to learn and practice pragmatic norms of the classroom so they can better comprehend and understand the teacher and their peers (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2020).

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFT

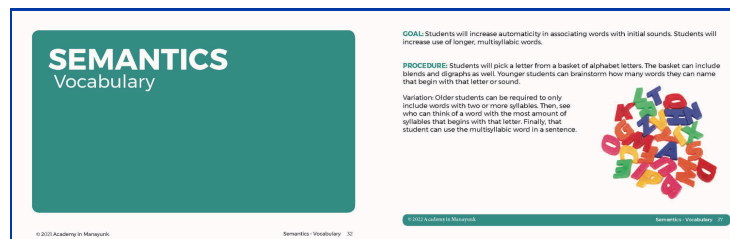
Creating opportunities for students to engage in meaningful conversations, both in structured settings and informal interactions, is critical for learning and practice among English learners.



ASK YOURSELF:

- Who does most of the talking in my classroom?
- Is there a balance of expressive and receptive tasks?
- Do I include both oral and written activities?

AIM Institute's Oral Language Talking Deck is filled with quick, easy-to-implement oral language activities designed to engage specific language systems. Each activity provides a detailed procedure that includes the teacher role, student role, and any teacher preparation that needs to be done prior to use.



“ AIM has a very user-friendly way of introducing this huge shift in the way that we teach reading now. I think it was very comprehensive. It was very up to date. One of my favorite [AIM resources] is the Oral Language Talking Deck. I use that weekly [even two years after my training] with a lot of my small groups and a lot of my EL learners.”

-Audra Haas, 5th Grade Teacher at Bryant Elementary, Kearney, NE

#2 TEACH TRANSFERS TO ACQUIRE THE CODE

Cross-language transfer occurs when skills and knowledge from a student's first language support the learning of a second language. Teachers can facilitate this by drawing explicit connections between the two languages, highlighting similarities and differences in phonology, orthography, syntax, and semantics. This approach not only validates students' linguistic backgrounds but also leverages their existing knowledge to aid in acquiring new language skills.

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFT

Teachers can become aware of the sounds that transfer between languages and the sounds that are novel to the English learner so that extra instruction and support can be directed to these new sounds. Furthermore, while sounds may transfer, the letters that represent the sounds (orthography) may differ. This is another opportunity to extend students' learning by validating the connection in sounds but explicitly teaching the difference in grapheme representation.

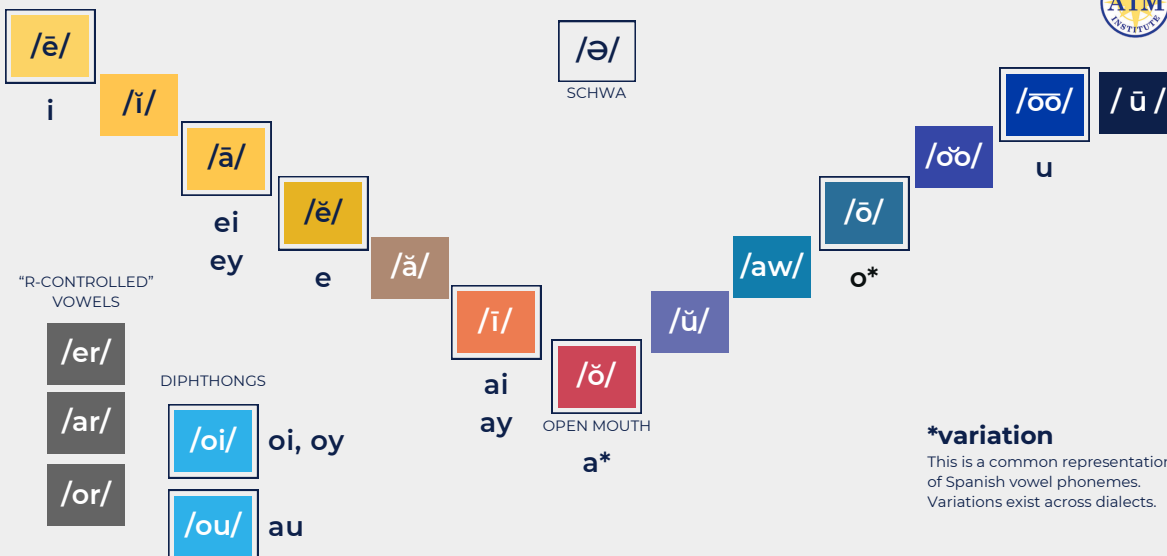
With the help of bilingual speech-language pathologist Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, AIM Institute illustrated which sounds transfer directly or indirectly between Spanish and English. Using this information, teachers utilize instructional time to explicitly hone in on the sounds that indirectly transfer and the novel sounds with no transfer.

VOWEL PHONEMES: CROSS-LANGUAGE TRANSFERS IN SPANISH

Direct transfers: Vowel sounds that transfer from Spanish to English are boxed. Extra instruction and practice should be directed to novel sounds.

Partial or no transfer: While sounds may transfer, the correspondence used to represent that sound in Spanish may differ (listed below the sound).

SMILING LIPS



CONSONANT PHONEMES: CROSS-LANGUAGE TRANSFERS IN SPANISH

Direct transfers: Consonant sounds that transfer from Spanish to English are boxed.

Partial or no transfer: If the grapheme used to represent a sound is different in the second language, it is written underneath the sound.



		PLACE OF ARTICULATION					
MANNER OF ARTICULATION	unvoiced						
	voiced						
		Both Lips Together	Teeth on Lower Lip	Tongue Between Teeth	Ridge Behind Teeth	Tongue Pulled Back Toward Roof of Mouth	Back of Mouth; Top of Throat
	Nasals	/m/			/n/		/ɲ/
	Stops	/p/			/t/		/k/
		/b/			/d/		k or q
		b or v					/g/
	Fricatives		/f/	/th/	/s/	/sh/	
			/v/	/th/*	s or z	/zh/	/h/
					/z/		silent or j
	Affricates					/ch/	
						/j/	
	Liquids				/l/	/r/*	
	Glides	/hw/				/y/	
		/w/					

*variation

This is a common representation of Spanish consonant phonemes. Variations exist across dialects.

#3 BUILD WORD AND WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Vocabulary knowledge, or 'word knowledge,' is crucial for ELs academic success and overall language development. 'World knowledge,' most frequently referred to as background knowledge, helps students connect new information to their existing understanding, facilitating more meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, every lesson, including phonics, should aim to build both word knowledge and world knowledge. Collaborative activities that examine words and concepts through visuals and peer discussions can facilitate the sharing of diverse perspectives, enriching the learning experience for all students.

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFT

Using tools like semantic maps and visuals can deepen students' understanding of words, concepts, and various connections across content areas. For instance, in a phonics lesson when reading the word "pen," a culturally responsive teacher may encourage students to share related experiences from their lives or heritage. Some students may notice "pen" as a writing utensil, while another may explain that it is the internal shell of a squid.



Cognates provide another wonderful opportunity to bridge connections between languages, affirming the similarities between the spelling, pronunciation, and/or meaning of words. Taking time to explore cognates allows teachers to explicitly bridge connections, strengthening language and literacy in both languages, as opposed to assuming students will make the connection without support.

AIM Institute recommends resources like the [New York State Bilingual Glossary](#)* or the [Colorin Colorado Cognates](#)* list to teachers who are exploring cognates related to specific classroom units or concepts.

*Links to external site.

#4 INTENTIONALLY INCORPORATE CULTURAL CONNECTIONS TO LEARNING

Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum helps make learning more relevant and meaningful. Teachers can include culturally diverse materials, celebrate cultural events, and integrate students' personal experiences into lessons. This not only enhances engagement but also fosters a sense of belonging and respect within the classroom.

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”

-Rudine Sims Bishop (1990)

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFT

Teachers can examine their lesson plans with a checklist and intentionally incorporate various connections that honor and affirm cultural and linguistic diversity.

AIM Institute recommends a checklist like this to support teachers evaluation and enhancements to daily lesson plans.

EVALUATION AND ENHANCEMENT CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS' DAILY LESSON PLANS

- ☐ What is the language and learning objective for this lesson?
- ☐ How can this lesson support students learning about their own culture and other diverse cultures?
- ☐ How can students use this knowledge to improve their community and make the world a better place?
- ☐ How will this lesson help my students to understand the power, inequality, equity, and oppression dynamics of our current world?
- ☐ How can I check in on my students' wellness and encourage a positive, joyful learning experience?

#5 OFFER CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AND SCAFFOLDING TO REACH TARGET RESPONSES

All learners benefit from frequent, distributed, and varied opportunities to execute a targeted skill with increasing independence and automaticity. The amount of practice can vary among populations – typically English learners will need more reinforcement than native English speakers. During these practice opportunities, it is especially critical that teachers become skilled in offering corrective feedback. Corrective feedback is supportive and targeted, utilizing upward and downward scaffolded questions and immediately following a student's execution of tasks to support their ability to achieve targeted responses. Upward scaffolds challenge the students to expand their understanding through questions that require elaborating knowledge or extending a specific skill. Downward scaffolds provide support to students who are having difficulty demonstrating understanding or applying a learned skill. These scaffolding questions may give students two choices, only one of which is the correct response.

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFT

When supporting English learners, corrective feedback should affirm any connections to home language and be responsive with upward or downward scaffolding questions depending on how the student responds.

For example, when Manuel says 'I go bus yellow,' the teacher issues corrective feedback that affirms his usage of a describing word, and determines whether to issue an upward or downward scaffolding questions to support his understanding of adjective placement in English:

DOWNWARD SCAFFOLD EXAMPLE:

- **Teacher:** "Excellent job describing the bus as yellow. When we use describing words in English, is it placed before the noun bus or after the noun bus?"
- **Student:** "Before."
- **Teacher:** "Yes! I go on a yellow bus. Repeat."
- **Student:** "I go on a yellow bus."

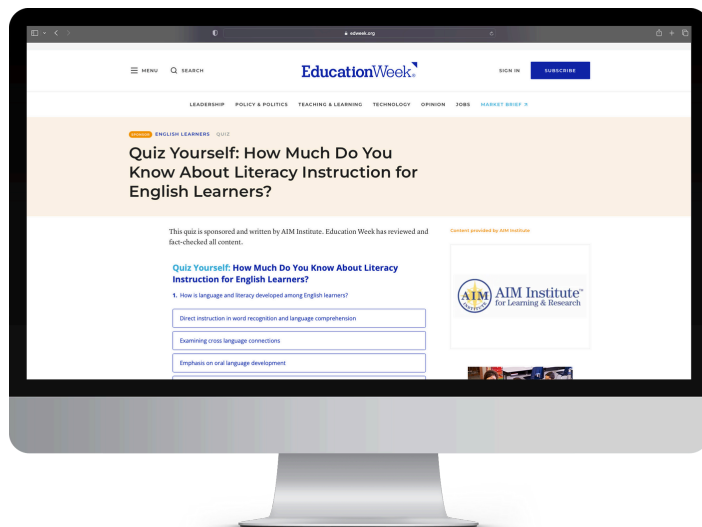
UPWARD SCAFFOLD EXAMPLE:

- **Teacher:** "Remember, the adjective is placed before the noun. Try again."
- **Student:** "I go on yellow bus."
- **Teacher:** "You got it! How else can you describe the bus? We can give two describing words in a row."
- **Student:** "I go on the huge yellow bus."

AIM recommends exploring the work of Tricia Zucker and Sonia Cabell for more information on upward and downward scaffolds.

CONCLUSION

The number of English learners is on the rise, so all teachers have a duty to understand how to best support these learners. Structured literacy instruction ensures all students develop literacy proficiency. The marginal shifts in this article are concrete ways that teachers can adjust instruction immediately to further language and literacy development among English learners within their structured literacy approach. By implementing these five shifts, teachers can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment for English Learners that honors and affirms their home language expertise and extends their proficiency in English.



**How Much Do You
Know About Literacy
Instruction for
English Learners?**

**TAKE THE
EDWEEK QUIZ!**



“ Sometimes as teachers, we feel so overwhelmed with, ‘Oh, I don't know that language. How in the world am I going to introduce a whole new thing?’. Instead we should be starting to understand connections.

-Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan





LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT ENGLISH LEARNERS WITH AIM PATHWAYS

Transform your approach to teaching English Learners with AIM Institute's online English Learners course, created in collaboration with Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan. This comprehensive program equips educators to boost language and literacy proficiency for English learners, featuring exclusive content recorded by Dr. Cárdenas-Hagan, assessment resources, implementation tools, and printables for instant classroom application. In just six weeks, gain the specialized skills needed to implement evidence-based structured literacy instruction and drive student success.

WHAT EDUCATORS HAVE TO SAY

"I love that this course was self-paced in between each meeting. It gave me flexibility to complete the work when I had time. The content was highly interesting and applicable to my work. I am so grateful to have access to the content for awhile after because I would like to review my learning."

"Truly, this was incredibly worthwhile and useful. I would like it if all our educators could participate as our school has many languages and cultures to support."

"AIM continues to be a leader in professional learning. Thank you!"

"Thank you. Very informative with great resources to share with classroom teachers, classified personnel and administrators on how to support ELs."

"Thank you again for this amazing course. Best one yet!!!"

"This course could facilitate immediate compliance with the new TPE 7 for TEPs instructors and students alike. The bilingual dictionaries are phenomenal. They are comprehensive across content areas, grade spans, and languages. A resource like this has only lived in theory for so long, or something educators needed to source through painful Google Drives and/or create themselves. This is an amazing way to move theory to practice. THANK YOU!"



LEARN MORE AT
[INFO.INSTITUTE.AIMPA.ORG/ENGLISHLEARNERS](https://info.institute.aimpa.org/englishlearners)

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ABOUT AIM INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING AND RESEARCH

AIM Institute for Learning & Research was launched alongside AIM Academy in 2006 with a vision to bridge the gap between research and classroom practice. We recognized that literacy research could help teachers better serve children struggling to read, but it wasn't reaching the classroom. AIM strives to connect research to practice through AIM Pathways educator training rooted in evidence-based best practices, creating a hub where top researchers and practitioners can advance literacy together.

MISSION

Develop a center for educational excellence and professional development to disseminate best practices to educators by providing access to the latest research-based curriculum, technology, and training.

Provide extraordinary educational opportunities to children with language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, utilizing research-based intervention strategies and an arts-based learning environment that is college preparatory in scope and sequence.

CORE PURPOSE

We transform and empower lives through literacy.

CORE VALUES

- Research to Practice
- Fearless Innovation
- Partner for Impact
- Transform the Future of Education



CONNECT WITH US!

