

An Integrated Literacy Model: A Private-Public Partnership

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Literacy is a national priority. Several years of disappointing and dismal assessment results have prompted policymakers, practitioners and the public to demand changes in how we teach all of our students to read and write proficiently. The research in the field of literacy and dyslexia has provided direction for creating change, but implementing evidence-based practices has proven challenging.

Perhaps the most influential reading framework for evidence-based practices is the Reading Rope developed by Hollis Scarborough, Ph.D., which outlines the importance of eight integrated word recognition and language comprehension strands that come together to develop skilled readers. The lower strands of the reading rope focus on decoding and encoding words and phonological awareness, while the upper strands of the rope focus on developing background knowledge, vocabulary, syntax, verbal reasoning and literary knowledge. Here is the critical challenge: if one or more strands of the reading rope are not fully developed or

become frayed, it is difficult for a child to develop fluent and strategic reading skills.

Models of excellence do exist, however. Individuals with vision have identified an essential knowledge base and best practices for instruction from the research but have also recognized the importance of implementation science, which underscores the role of leadership, training and ongoing support. Innovative thinking and approaches have allowed some to create environments that support and sustain change that makes a difference. The AIM Academy is one of these models in the Philadelphia region.

Taking the construct of the Reading Rope developed by Dr. Scarborough and the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling framework, developed by Dr. Louisa Moats, AIM Academy developed the Integrated Literacy Model of instruction in a college preparatory school for students with language-based learning disabilities in grades 1–12. Providing faculty with ongoing access to the latest research, best practices, technological resources and experts in their field, coupled with opportunities for consultation, coaching and curriculum design, became the cornerstone of highly effective instruction for their students as measured by ongoing progress monitoring and benchmarking. Today AIM Academy serves almost 300 students.

From its inception, AIM's approach to curriculum design

and instruction has been innovative. Literacy is at the heart of instructional practice and is taught throughout the day, every day. The curriculum, which is interdisciplinary in nature and rigorous, not only addresses the foundational skills for reading and writing such as word recognition, spelling and handwriting but also develops the language processes and skills necessary for comprehension and written expression in all areas. The curriculum aligns with the standards while attention is given to remediation, accommodation and content. Experts who visit AIM as well as an advisory board of world-renowned researchers inform decision-making and design, and thought leaders in literacy, mathematics and neuroscience including Kate Cain, Ken Pugh, Barbara Wilson, Louisa Moats, Steve Graham, and Dan Berch have all contributed to AIM's thinking. These resources have uniquely positioned the organization to be at the forefront of cutting-edge advances in educating children who learn differently.

AIM also wholeheartedly believes that learning is not only the work of students but also of educators. As a result, the organization has developed a professional learning system grounded in research and effective professional learning practices that is sustained, content-embedded and collegial. This means that AIM faculty and staff have access to a continuum of real and virtual learning opportunities that allow them to acquire, integrate and apply the research-based knowledge, skills and attitudes

necessary for student achievement. While a knowledge base is critical, opportunities such as consultation, coaching and discussion are necessary for successful implementation. Standards for educators also play an important role in identifying meaningful literacy learning opportunities. AIM's practices are aligned with the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading, which specify what all reading teachers should know and be able to do.

Developing a knowledge base, along with integrating implementation science, is particularly critical because AIM addresses the needs of students with language-based learning disabilities including dyslexia. The research in the field of dyslexia has formed the foundation of much of what we know about how children learn to read. And, perhaps most importantly, it has provided the drivers for the importance of teacher training. Consider this: 70% of third-graders who read below grade level never catch up. With estimates of 15–20% of all children having dyslexia, early identification and intervention are critical because it takes four times as long to remediate reading difficulties after fourth grade. Time is not on the side of our children.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, the success of children with learning disabilities rests on well-prepared general and special education teachers who can address the needs of students who struggle and deliver effective instruction designed to enable these

students to master grade-level academic content, progress through school successfully and earn regular high school diplomas that ensure that they are college- and career-ready. At the same time, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 colleges and departments of education are doing what U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has termed "a mediocre job" of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

This may be especially true of preparing instructors to teach reading, and in 2006, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) provided evidence of this situation. The NCTQ randomly sampled 72 elementary education programs across the United States and examined syllabi from 223 required reading courses. Their data suggested that courses in only 11 of the 72 schools included instruction on the research-based practices for teaching all five components of early reading.

Barbara A. Wilson, M.Ed., the cofounder and president of Wilson Language Training, stated on behalf of the IDA in February 2015: "When considering supports for individuals with dyslexia, it is critical to attend to the research of implementation science. To become literate, individuals with dyslexia need intervention clearly defined by extensive research and proven over time. Still, choice of an appropriate teaching methodology alone will not ensure development of adequate literacy skills. Teachers must be able to deliver the intervention instruction with

fidelity. Mastery of both content knowledge and skilled instructional strategies requires time and effort: coursework completion and practicum experience supervised by a highly qualified trainer of teachers" (Wilson, 2015).

From its inception, AIM has reached out to other professionals, schools, universities and organizations that recognize the value of partnership. AIM's current literacy project with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) exemplifies the importance of providing teachers with the knowledge base, curriculum, training and coaching that are so critical in ensuring that top diagnostic and prescriptive teachers are being developed to best serve all of the students in our schools. AIM Academy, SDP, the Olitsky Family Foundation and the Philadelphia Burger Brawl joined forces for a multiyear commitment to a district-wide K-3 literacy program in Philadelphia in the fall of 2014.

Dr Hite's READ! by 4th Initiative, which is designed to ensure that all children in the SDP read at grade level by grade 4, set the stage for this collaboration. The recognition that educational opportunity is not equally accessible to all Philadelphia children, with 51% of Philadelphia's 13,855 public school third-graders not reading at grade level, prompted this action. Tamar Olitsky, a visionary community leader and philanthropist, served as the catalyst for bringing everyone together to initiate this four-year literacy pilot project. The Olitsky

Family Foundation and Rob Wasserman's Philadelphia Burger Brawl agreed to provide the funding to implement the AIM Integrated Literacy Model, which comprises professional learning opportunities including workshops, webinars, consultation and coaching and provision of a literacy curriculum and recommended student materials for reading comprehension, writing and interactive history teaching. Two SDP elementary schools, Andrew Jackson and William H. Ziegler Elementary, were chosen for this project and are also implementing Foundations in their K-1 classrooms this year as part of the model. Teachers have also received 200 iPad minis, 20 MacBooks and Foss Science Kits this year for use in their classrooms.

Nichole Pugliese, the AIM Coordinator for this exciting project, has witnessed the AIM model come to life in these schools. Students are actively engaged and excited about attending school, and the schools report that absenteeism has been reduced. Administrative support in both schools has been essential to implementation in addition to teacher willingness to learn and implement new practices. SDP principals Lisa Ciaranca Kaplan of the Andrew Jackson School and Paul T. Spina of the William H. Ziegler Elementary School have been essential to the success of this project, as has the leadership of Dr. Fran Newburg, Deputy Chief of the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Educational Technology.

AIM will continue to support this project as it moves into grades 2 and 3 over the next three years. AIM is grateful

to the inspired generosity of donors Tamar Olitsky and Rob and Maggie Wasserman for their critical financial support for making this project a reality. More details can be found in news stories about this important program in the media including the Philadelphia Daily News and the Philadelphia Tribune and on CBS3, and links to these stories can be found on the AIM website at www.aimpa.org.

References

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