

AIM Early Literacy Modules

Strengthening Evidence-Based Early Literacy Instruction Across Pre-K–3

Performance period 10/2021–4/2026

High-quality professional development is a core strategy for strengthening early childhood systems and supporting children’s learning from Pre-K through Grade 3. Effective PD provides coherent, research-aligned opportunities that build educator knowledge and leadership capacity across settings. Within the PDG-R initiatives, professional learning efforts are designed to promote integrated, equitable, and developmentally appropriate early learning environments statewide.

The **AIM Early Literacy Modules** are a series of eight self-paced, online professional learning modules designed to build Pre-K–3 educator knowledge of evidence-based early literacy practices aligned with the science of reading. Developed by the **AIM Institute for Learning and Research**¹, the modules were made available to Maine educators through a partnership with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) with support from the Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R). The initiative aims to strengthen the implementation of structured literacy by providing consistent, high-quality learning opportunities across schools and grade levels.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of PDG-R grant. Drawing on diverse data,² the report examines the AIM Early Literacy Modules initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes, participant-reported changes in knowledge and confidence, and learning activities identified as most valuable.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among DOE, the AIM Institute, and school-based teams.
- **System building**, including contributions to statewide literacy infrastructure and alignment with Maine’s State Literacy Action Plan.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, adaptations made in response to early implementation experience, and barriers identified by participants.

²Data sources for this report include participation records, post-participation surveys of educators who completed modules, Communities of Practice session documentation, interviews with initiative leads Renee Reilly and Dee Saucier, and CoP participants’ written responses.

During the PDG-R performance period, the Department of Education implemented the AIM Early Literacy Modules through two delivery models. In Summer 2024, educators accessed the modules individually through a self-paced format. DOE purchased licenses from the AIM Institute and released them to educators statewide, with stipends provided for module completion. Participants completed modules independently and engaged with embedded quizzes and assessments.

¹AIM Institute for Learning and Research. (n.d.). *Literacy Modules*. <https://institute.aimpa.org/who-we-serve/state-training-partnerships/maine>

In 2025, DOE shifted to a team-based implementation model. Schools applied for participation grants, and teams of educators completed modules together. DOE introduced facilitated Communities of Practice (CoPs), led by the DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist, to support shared learning. CoP sessions included discussion of module content, reflection on current literacy practices, and identification of areas for improvement. Participation incentives were provided in both phases of implementation: individual stipends during the initial self-paced rollout and a reimbursement upon completion model during the team-based phase.

Across both phases, the DOE coordinated registration, managed license distribution, and provided technical assistance. The initiative leads oversaw fiscal management, facilitation, and communication with participating schools.

What was the impact of the learning modules?

The evaluation examined early evidence related to implementation and intended outcomes.

The AIM Early Literacy Modules were designed to support the following **intended outcomes**:

- **Increased educator knowledge of early literacy practices** aligned with the science of reading.
- **Strengthened confidence and preparedness** to institute structured literacy practices in the classroom.
- **Statewide access** to consistent, high-quality literacy professional development for PreK–3 educators.
- **Team-based learning structures** supporting ongoing application rather than one-time training.
- **Shared understanding** and common language around structured literacy.

AIM EARLY LITERACY MODULES FEATURES

Participation: 978 educators registered (Summer 2024); 650 completed at least one module; 52 teams participated across both CoP cohorts, with approximately 300 educators.

Format: Eight self-paced, online modules; 21,000+ hours of professional learning logged.

Module Topics:

- Overview of the Science of Reading
- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding & Spelling
- Vocabulary
- Language Comprehension & Written Expression
- Demystifying Dyslexia
- Growing Proficient Readers: Dr. Ehri's Phases of Development
- Specialized Reading Knowledge Bundle: English Learners

Participants: General education teachers, instructional coaches, interventionists, special educators, and administrators serving PreK–3; majority teaching K–2

Incentives: Stipends (Summer 2024); team-based reimbursement model (2025)

Initiative Leads: DOE Early Learning Team Coordinator Renee Reilly (fiscal and administrative oversight); DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist Dee Saucier (technical lead, CoP facilitation)

The initiative lead emphasized that the goal was to build a sustained professional community rather than isolated training:

“The goal of this whole thing is to build a community of practice, to build growth, to build change, and not just be a one-and-done, so that it's not just another sit-and-get. I wanted them to network and learn as a team and learn from each other.”

Outcomes associated with the AIM Early Literacy Modules were most evident at the level of educators' knowledge, confidence, and shared understanding, with less evidence of sustained instructional change. Table 1 summarizes evidence across each outcome area; findings are discussed in the sections that follow.

Table 1. AIM Early Literacy Modules: Impact Summary

Outcome	Evidence Summary
Increased educator knowledge	Strong evidence of progress. 75–80% reported increased knowledge across all eight modules; <1% reported no gain; this pattern was consistent across both foundational and specialized content. CoP participants discussed their understanding of frameworks (e.g., Scarborough's Reading Rope) and articulated connections between literacy components.
Confidence to shift practice	Moderate evidence; varied by content area. Confidence declined as content became more specialized: 56% felt adequately prepared for Modules 1–2, declining to 28% for Module 8; <5% felt unprepared. CoP participants identified both current strengths and areas for development.
Statewide access	Achieved. 978 registered; 650 completed at least one module; 52 teams participated across both CoP cohorts, with approximately 300 educators.
Team-based learning	Achieved. Teams assessed current literacy systems and identified gaps in morphology, vocabulary, writing, and supports for older struggling readers.
Common language	Emerging evidence. Participants used shared terminology and referenced common frameworks; sustainability depends on follow-through at the school level.

Educator Knowledge and Confidence to Apply Learning

Survey findings and CoP documentation indicate meaningful self-reported increases in knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices across all modules, including: the role of phonological awareness in decoding, the relationship between word recognition and language comprehension, the phases of reading development, and indicators of reading difficulties such as dyslexia.

Notably, 74% of survey respondents reported 10 or more years of experience yet consistently identified the module content as new, pointing to **gaps in prior preparation across the workforce**.

The quote below is representative of themes that emerged consistently across open-ended survey responses and Communities of Practice documentation.

“I learned many new things that, unfortunately, are not taught in preparatory teacher education programs but should be.”

Educators who frequently work with specialized populations—English Language Learners, New Mainers, and children with disabilities—reported smaller gains in knowledge. At the same time, specialists rated the later modules as highly valuable (91–100% reported that the content was worth the time investment), despite reporting smaller personal gains, suggesting that the modules supported shared understanding and capacity-building across roles rather than individual skill acquisition.

Confidence to Shift Practice

While knowledge gains were consistent across all modules, **confidence in applying the learning declined as the content became more specialized.**

CoP participants described feeling more grounded in research-based practice and acknowledged ongoing learning:

“Using scripts, I feel more empowered because I know I am teaching students using a research-based method that works, rather than something I am throwing together and hoping it works.”

Team-Based Learning and Gap Identification

In the CoP sessions, school teams moved beyond individual knowledge gains to collective assessment and planning. Participants reported strong existing implementation of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction:

“We use UFLI² and Heggerty in all the classroom instruction. We also use SPIRE in the special education classrooms.”

Teams identified specific gaps—most commonly in morphology, vocabulary, writing, and supports for older struggling readers. This form of **collective gap identification** reflects early awareness of the system and readiness for improvement.

Application to Practice

Evidence of classroom application is limited but present. Some participants described deepening their understanding of tools already in use rather than adopting entirely new practices:

“The daily integration of phonics and phonemic awareness using skills I have learned through Heggerty and UFLI is gradually proving to be effective. Students are benefiting from hands-on, engaging activities like phoneme manipulation, sound boxes, and decodable practice.”

²University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations Toolbox

Overall, available evidence reflects early application and instructional reflection rather than documented, sustained changes in classroom practice.

How did AIM Early Learning Modules support collaboration and coordination?

Collaboration was **primarily situated within the public-school context** rather than across multiple sectors. AIM supported collaboration through team-based participation and facilitated Communities of Practice within and across schools and school administrative units (SAUs).

Team-Based Participation and Shared Learning

Across both CoP cohorts, approximately 52 teams participated (some representing individual schools, others multiple schools within an SAU), with approximately 300 educators. Teams typically included classroom teachers across grade levels, literacy interventionists, special education teachers, instructional coaches, and building administrators. This cross-role composition encouraged dialogue among educators and leaders responsible for instruction, intervention, and oversight, and provided structured opportunities to reflect on module content and future development within their schools.

Collaboration Within and Across Schools

Documentation from CoP sessions indicates that collaboration extended beyond facilitated meetings. Teams reported meeting independently to discuss learning and consider next steps within their local contexts. Facilitated discussions also enabled participants from different schools and SAUs to exchange perspectives and discuss common challenges in implementing structured literacy. While collaboration remained largely school-based, the team-oriented structure fostered connections across sites, supporting shared language and collective reflection.

How has AIM Early Literacy Modules contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system, and will it continue to do so?

The AIM Early Literacy Modules contributed to system capacity by **establishing infrastructure that supports continued access** to evidence-based literacy professional learning beyond the PDG-R performance period. The DOE negotiated master agreements with AIM Pathways and Keys to Literacy, enabling SAUs statewide to purchase modules at reduced cost. These agreements support infrastructure sustainability and promote consistency in access across districts.

The initiative is also aligned with *Maine's State Literacy Action Plan*, which identifies expanded access to evidence-based literacy professional learning for Pre-K–3 educators as a statewide priority.

Addressing the Preservice Gap

Findings from the AIM evaluation point to gaps in preservice preparation. Even experienced educators consistently identified foundational literacy content as new. In response, the DOE extended access to

the AIM and Keys to Literacy modules to institutions of higher education across the state. **Seven instructors across six Maine institutions**, representing both four-year universities and community colleges, requested **nearly 700 module licenses** for use in preservice coursework.

The scale and distribution of this effort represent a meaningful system-building contribution by **addressing educator preparation upstream** and strengthening coherence across preparation and practice.

In what ways did the design of AIM Early Learning Modules facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

The evaluation team examined whether the initiative's design facilitated participation, which factors helped or created barriers, and the adaptations made in response to implementation experience.

Design Features That Facilitated Participation

The self-paced, online format allowed educators to access professional learning regardless of location or schedule. Survey respondents described the modules as well-structured, with clear explanations, multiple modalities, and built-in accountability through quizzes. The asynchronous design enabled participation across rural, suburban, and urban communities statewide.

Participation incentives also contributed to engagement. **Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents** reported that compensation influenced their decision to enroll and complete modules, particularly given the expectation that coursework be completed outside of contracted work hours:

“I honestly only considered doing the modules because of the stipend. I am glad I did it for other reasons, though, now that I completed them.”

Barriers and Limitations

Time was the primary barrier to completion, particularly for later modules. Non-completion rates increased from 4% for Module 1 to 37% for Module 8—a pattern consistent with qualitative feedback about the substantial time investment required. Despite this, nearly all educators who completed each module (99%) reported that it was worth the time investment.

Design Adaptations Over Time

The initiative evolved in response to early implementation experience. In Summer 2024, approximately one-third of registered participants did not complete a module, prompting a shift to team-based participation with facilitated Communities of Practice and a reimbursement-upon-completion model, as described above. These adjustments supported sustained engagement and more efficient use of licenses.

Lessons Learned

Several design-level insights emerged from implementation of the AIM Early Literacy Modules:

- **Self-paced professional learning benefits from accountability structures.** Early participation patterns indicated that asynchronous formats alone were insufficient to sustain engagement across all modules.
- **Experienced educators continue to need foundational literacy content.** Participant feedback highlighted persistent gaps in preparation related to the science of reading, underscoring the importance of accessible, system-wide professional learning.
- **Knowledge gains do not automatically translate to changes in practice.** Findings reinforce the need for ongoing supports that help educators move from understanding concepts to applying them in instructional settings.
- **Team-based learning supports readiness for system-level improvement.** The CoP model enabled teams to collectively assess current practice and identify gaps in ways that individual module completion did not.

Summary

From participants' perspectives, the AIM Early Literacy Modules addressed a significant gap in educator preparation by providing foundational knowledge about how children learn to read that many had not encountered in preservice training. Survey findings indicate strong self-reported knowledge gains across all modules, alongside more moderate confidence to apply learning.

While evidence of sustained classroom implementation is limited, at the system level, the initiative contributed to alignment and readiness by supporting shared reflection through team-based Communities of Practice and extending structured literacy content into higher education coursework.