

# Transforming Literacy Instruction at DeSoto County Schools with AIM Pathways



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Discover how Mississippi's largest school district is transforming literacy instruction through a strategic partnership with AIM Institute and a commitment to evidence-based professional learning.

## Introduction

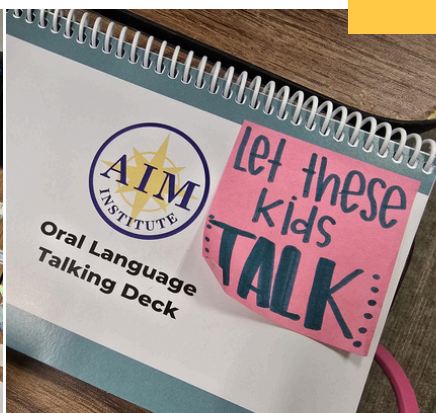
When Jeannie Treadway looked across her district and saw the wide variation in how teachers understood reading instruction, she knew something had to change. Many educators, she observed, had never been taught how the brain learns to read, and without that foundational knowledge, they struggled to implement literacy practices with confidence or consistency.

As the Director of Primary Schools for DeSoto County Schools (DCS)—Mississippi’s largest public school district—Treadway led the decision to prioritize district-wide training through AIM Pathways. In the wake of teacher shortages, rising turnover, and inconsistent preparation from undergraduate programs, she saw the urgent need for professional learning that was evidence-based, practical, and accessible.



**“AIM took the research and put it together in a pretty package with a bow [creating] something teachers at all levels and content areas could actually use.”**

For Treadway and the DCS team, the goal wasn’t just better test scores. It was to ensure that every child could learn to read and navigate life with confidence. “We have to model lifelong learning,” she added, a belief that shaped her decision to have district leaders complete the training alongside their teachers.



## Mississippi's Momentum: A Literacy Movement Takes Hold

DCS' transformation is part of a statewide literacy success story often referred to as the "Mississippi Miracle", but more accurately described as the "Mississippi Marathon" to reflect the years of dedication and sustained effort that made it possible. Over the past decade, Mississippi has gained national recognition for its significant gains in literacy, fueled by its commitment to evidence-based practices and robust state-funded professional learning through [AIM Pathways](#). This progress continued with the 2024 Nation's Report Card results showing that Mississippi has progressed from the second-worst in fourth-grade reading in 2013 to 9th in the nation in 2024. When measuring reading scores and adjusting for demographics from 2013 to 2024, Mississippi leads the nation in progress. ([The Nation's Report Card](#)).

Serving over 35,000 students across 42 schools—with 60% minority enrollment and 68.1% of students who are economically disadvantaged—DCS recognized the critical need to deepen its impact ([U.S. News & World Report](#)). Thanks to a [continuing three-year partnership](#) between AIM Institute and the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), DCS has transformed literacy outcomes using state-funded AIM Pathways professional learning courses. Throughout the partnership, MDE has expanded its state-funded course offerings, initially focused on Pathways to Proficient Reading (PPR) and Pathways to Literacy Leadership (PLL), to include Pathways to Proficient Reading: Secondary (PPR-S), the Specialized Reading Knowledge Bundle for English Learners (EL), Pathways to Proficient Writing (PPW), Pathways to Structured Literacy (PSL) and Demystifying Dyslexia (DD) as of 2025.

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## Building a Foundation for Literacy Success

Mississippi's literacy journey began in 2013, when the state legislature set the stage for improvement by passing the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA). This landmark law was designed to ensure that all students could read proficiently by the end of third grade.

The LBPA ensured students could read at grade-level before advancing to fourth grade, and mandated targeted interventions and support for struggling readers as early as kindergarten ([MS Senate Bill 2347](#)).

MDE played a key role in implementing the act, providing resources and professional development to help districts meet their goals. These efforts fostered a culture of support and intentionality, paving the way for Mississippi's significant literacy gains over the past decade. The LBPA's success positioned the state as a leader in evidence-based literacy reform and set the stage for impactful collaborations like the partnership with AIM Institute which began in 2022.

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## Challenges

Like many districts nationwide, DCS faced significant literacy challenges:

- **Shifting to Structured Literacy:** Like many other states, Mississippi's educators had predominantly relied on balanced literacy, which often lacked the explicit, evidence-based instruction necessary to address the needs of all learners. While the LBPA provided a critical framework for improving literacy outcomes, educators needed access to comprehensive training in structured literacy practices to fully support the act's goals.
- **Gaps in Teacher Preparedness:** Many educators entered classrooms without training in structured literacy practices. Treadway explained, "Preparatory programs are not teaching structured literacy and preparing teachers with that [fundamental] knowledge."



- **Pandemic Related Setbacks:** DCS was faced with teacher shortages and disruptions to professional learning programs post-pandemic. Many educators faced the dual challenge of addressing heightened student needs while lacking access to the ongoing training and support required to implement effective instructional strategies to support Mississippi's LBPA.

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## AIM Pathways: A State-Funded Solution

Building on the strong foundation established by LBPA, which includes comprehensive statewide training and coaching, MDE partnered with AIM Institute through the Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) to provide state-funded AIM Pathways professional learning to districts like DCS. This partnership reflects MDE's commitment to funding high-quality professional development for educators at all levels, providing them with evidence-based training to drive student literacy gains.

DCS prioritized AIM Pathways training for its K-2 educators, understanding the pivotal role early literacy plays in long-term success. AIM Pathways' flexible, asynchronous format allowed educators to complete the coursework at their own pace, making it easier for them to balance the time commitment with their daily responsibilities. This structure, combined with the depth of content, created by educators with literacy researchers, helped teachers overcome initial hesitations about time investment.

DCS' strategic focus extended to district leaders, who also participated in the training. This collaborative effort fostered a unified district-wide approach to literacy improvement, with leaders fully engaged and understanding the principles behind the Science of Reading. The district's investment in AIM Pathways enabled a cohesive approach to literacy instruction, creating a culture where both teachers and leaders were aligned in their mission to transform students' lives through literacy.

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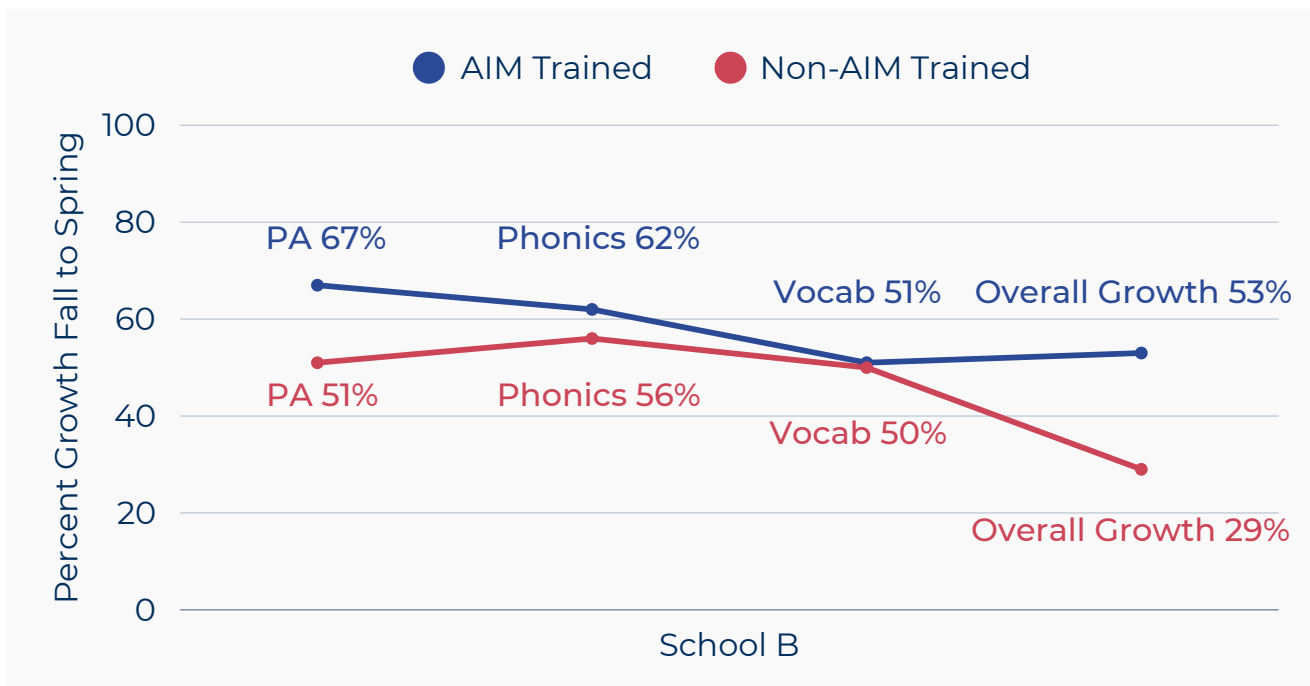
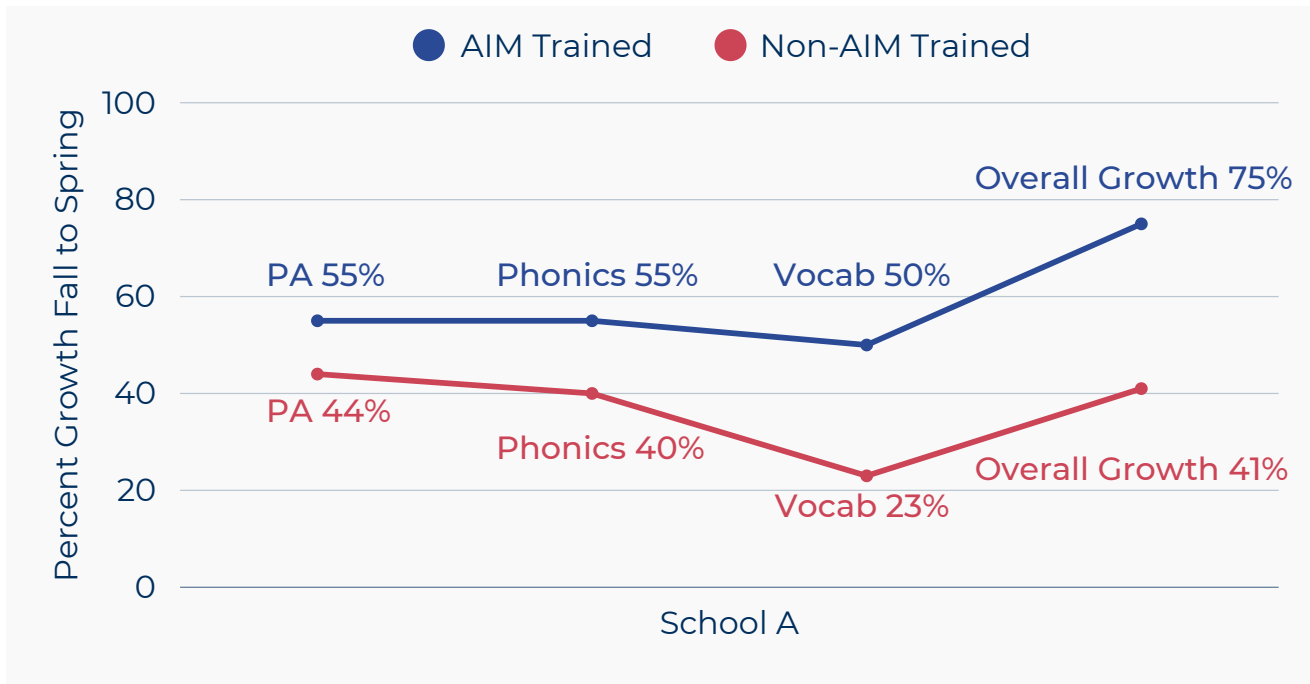
## Key Results

Since implementing AIM Pathways, DeSoto County Schools has achieved remarkable outcomes. Comparing teachers that have completed AIM Pathways training to those who are not trained in AIM Pathways, the 2023-2024 school year revealed:

<b>+23%</b>	<b>Phonemic Awareness Growth</b> Students exhibited an average of 23% increase in phonemic awareness skills across three schools. One school showed an improvement of 43%.
<b>+16%</b>	<b>Phonics Mastery</b> An average 16% improvement in phonics mastery was reported, giving students the foundational skills needed to decode and read fluently.
<b>+21%</b>	<b>Vocabulary Expansion</b> Vocabulary scores saw a significant average 21% rise, equipping students with the tools to comprehend more complex texts.
<b>+19%</b>	<b>Overall Literacy Growth</b> Students showed an average 19% increase in overall literacy, underscoring the effectiveness of the AIM Pathways 'learn, practice, apply' model.



## AIM Trained vs. Non-AIM Trained Educators



Further exemplifying DCS' commitment to literacy excellence, **Chickasaw Elementary School** was designated as a **Mississippi Emerging Science of Reading School** during the 2024-25 school year. This prestigious recognition is awarded to schools that have:

- **Literacy Outcomes:** Significant reading growth is demonstrated on the Universal Screener, Kindergarten Readiness, and/or 3rd grade Mississippi Academic Assessment Program ELA.
- **Trained Educators:** At least 80% of teachers and school leaders have completed state-approved literacy professional development, such as AIM Pathways.
- **Instructional Practice Shift:** Implemented High-Quality Instructional Materials or demonstrated a significant change in instructional materials aligned with the Science of Reading.
- **Culture of Literacy:** Fostered a school-wide culture dedicated to developing proficient readers with a plan for continued implementation and improvement.

Chickasaw Elementary's achievement underscores the transformative impact of AIM Pathways training and highlights DCS' leadership in advancing literacy education.

The success of AIM Pathways at DCS has generated strong interest among teachers, with a waitlist now in place for grades 3-5. Educators across the district are eager to deepen their knowledge and bring these transformative practices to their classrooms.





## Educator Testimonials: Impact on Teaching and Learning

The enthusiasm for AIM Pathways among Mississippi educators is evident. They have found the training to be unlike anything they have experienced before, and the value it brings to their classrooms is clear.

“This training is **top-notch**. I’m in my third course covering info on supporting ELs in classrooms I support. If you are a Mississippi educator and have not taken the opportunity for this PD, I highly encourage you to check it out!”

“This course was **full of information**. I thoroughly enjoyed [the] learning and can’t wait to implement this in my classroom!”

“I know that I’m walking away with a huge toolbox of resources to **create change in my building**.”

“Very informational and **needed by all teachers and administrators** responsible for teaching children how to read.”

## Proven Success, Collaborative Results

DCS’ partnership with AIM Institute demonstrates how targeted, evidence-based training can make a substantial difference in literacy outcomes. AIM Pathways training has empowered educators to apply the Science of Reading effectively, resulting in improved test scores and, more importantly, equipping students with the foundational skills needed for a better future.

A significant factor in DCS's success was the participation of district leaders in AIM Pathways training. By engaging directly with the structured literacy principles, leaders set an example for their educators. As Kristy Dunning, Director of Intermediate Schools, noted:



**“We have to model what we expect from our teachers. I am never going to ask a teacher to do something I am not going to do myself.”**

The district's comprehensive commitment has shown that aligning leadership and educators in a shared mission can drive significant progress in student literacy outcomes.

## What's Next for DeSoto County Schools?

With the continued support of AIM Pathways, DeSoto County Schools remains committed to expanding its literacy gains. As the waitlist for AIM Pathways training grows and interest among educators deepens, DCS looks forward to building on the solid foundation they have established, ensuring that more students benefit from the life-changing power of literacy.

## Partner with AIM Institute

DCS' story highlights how state-funded professional learning and a shared commitment to evidence-based practices can create outstanding literacy change. To learn how AIM Institute can help your state or district achieve similar success, [contact our Growth & Impact team today](#). Together, we can close literacy gaps and transform lives through literacy.