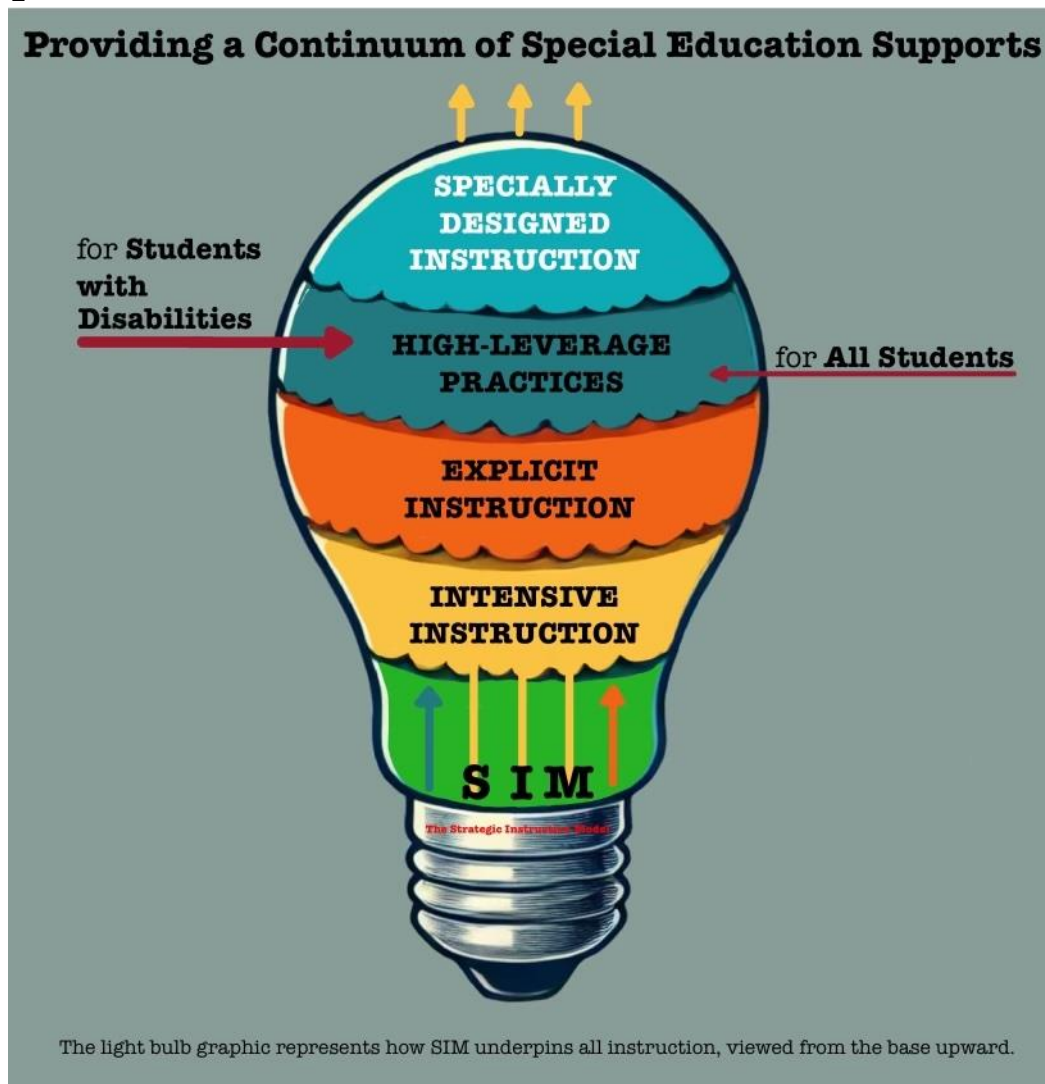


Providing a Continuum of Special Education Supports

By Dana McCaleb, SIM Professional Development Leader, Virginia

In “Big Ideas in Special Education: Specially Designed Instruction, High-leverage Practices, Explicit Instruction, and Intensive Instruction,” the authors (2017) support educators' understanding the relationships and hierarchies among key special education concepts. They include a visual guide (i.e., nested structure of special education terms) to illustrate how special education terms interconnect to support effective educational support for students with disabilities. [The Strategic Instruction Model \(SIM\)](#) provides a foundation for instruction, beginning with targeted interventions and strengthening less intensive levels of support throughout the continuum. SIM, a comprehensive approach to adolescent literacy, includes evidence-based instructional tools and interventions to help students succeed. The light bulb graphic, in Figure 1, represents how SIM underpins all instruction, viewed from the base upward.

Figure 1



Note: Adapted from “Big Ideas in Special Education: Specially Designed Instruction, High-leverage Practices, Explicit Instruction, and Intensive Instruction,” by P. J. Riccomini, S. Morano, and C. A. Hughes, 2017, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 50(1), p. 22. Adapted with permission.

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SIM Learning Strategies (LS) provide **intensive instruction** through targeted, systematic, evidence-based practices designed to address the specific learning skills of students needing additional support to achieve academic success. SIM LS begin with a pretest to identify students' strengths and areas of need. The pretest provides educators with valuable information to target and customize instruction. Based on the pretest data, students and teachers develop specific learning goals. SIM LS offer step-by-step guidance, modeling, and structured practice opportunities to help students develop essential skills and concepts. They include ongoing progress monitoring and data analysis to assess student growth and adjust instruction accordingly. Educators assess student performance, analyze data, and make informed decisions about instructional support to ensure progress toward learning goals.

Explicit instruction is the foundation of SIM through clear, specific, and measurable learning objectives. SIM provides structured lesson plans, instructional scripts, and teaching routines and strategies, emphasizing clear, systematic teaching of specific skills or concepts. With all Content Enhancement Routines (CER) and LS, the educator describes to the students what they are expected to learn and be able to do by the end of the lesson, unit, course, or strategy. Modeling and think-aloud are critical components of SIM LS. During the modeling stage, the educator demonstrates how to perform the strategy steps while verbally "thinking aloud," allowing students to observe the cognitive processes and overt behaviors associated with the skill or strategy. With guided support, students then engage in guided practice to apply the new skill or strategy. The teacher offers prompts, cues, and feedback to help students apply the skill correctly. Gradually, as students become more proficient, they move from guided to independent practice, applying the skill independently. Providing timely and specific feedback to students during explicit instruction is another component of SIM. Educators using SIM closely monitor students' understanding and progress, providing corrective feedback to address misunderstandings, errors, or areas of difficulty. This feedback loop supports continual learning and improvement. SIM recognizes that students have diverse learning needs and may need different levels of support during explicit instruction to master the content.

SIM provides a comprehensive framework, instructional strategies, and routines that align with high-leverage practices in special and general education. **High-Leverage Practices (HLPs)** emphasize collaboration between general and special educators and other professionals to design and implement effective instruction. Using CER and LS supports student success by analyzing student data to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. SIM CER and LS align with HLPs for Students with Disabilities and HLPs for All Students to promote student success by providing a framework that supports educators in effectively meeting the needs of students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers while promoting their academic and social-emotional growth.

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) can be provided through SIM by offering educators a flexible framework of evidence-based LS and CERs aligned with HLPs for Students with Disabilities and HLPs for All Students to support the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities. SIM promotes explicit, scaffolded instruction with clear, step-by-step explanations and repeated practice to master academic content, which is particularly beneficial for students with disabilities in accessing the grade-level curriculum and achieving educational success. Educators gradually reduce support by scaffolding instruction as students become more

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proficient, promoting independence and self-regulation. SIM emphasizes the importance of ongoing assessment and progress monitoring to inform instructional decision-making and ensure progress toward learning goals. Educators can provide targeted interventions and support to address individual needs and maximize learning outcomes by collecting data on student performance and adjusting instruction accordingly. SIM helps ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction that meets their needs and fosters academic success.

Educators can enhance their instructional practices by integrating intensive and explicit instruction with HLPs to provide SDI to deliver and significantly improve outcomes for students with disabilities. SIM provides evidence-based CERs and LS to offer a continuum of special education instruction tailored to the diverse needs of students, particularly those with disabilities.