

Active Playful Learning at Lancaster ISD

April 2025 Newsletter



Active Playful Learning offers professional development to educators based on the latest evidence in the science of learning. APL is a program built from a three-part equation that embraces:
cultural and community beliefs
 + the **how** of learning + the **what** of learning



APL Teacher Spotlight

At the beginning of the semester, my goal was to “Enhance students’ creative innovation and critical thinking skills by incorporating Voice & Choice into reading lessons.” This challenge encouraged me to give students an opportunity to have a say in their learning. Students were offered choices in how they completed assigned tasks while maintaining the rigor of the concept. My next goal focused on “hands-on, minds-on” activities. This goal pushed me to think creatively and find ways to bring out-of-the-box thinking into my classroom. Students participated in a variety of activities such as Kahoots, Jeopardy games, Comprehension Connect 3, and educational TikTok trends. These activities helped students become critical thinkers, explore concepts, and transfer their understanding in engaging ways.

Overall, my experience with APL has been incredibly impactful, and what I have enjoyed most is seeing the boost in student engagement and the joy of learning in the classroom.

-Aliyah McGines, 2nd Grade Rolling Hills Elementary

Meet APL Observer, Martha!

Martha Velez is the Lead Observer for the Active Playful Learning (APL) project at SMU-Dallas. A UT Austin graduate and Oak Cliff native, she brings 16 years of experience as a bilingual classroom teacher, bilingual SPED inclusion teacher, instructional coach, and administrator in Irving and Denton ISD. After stepping away from education to run two small businesses with her husband, she felt a strong calling to return to the field.

Martha believes deeply in the APL framework, which is rooted in research on how children learn best—through active, meaningful, socially interactive, and joyful experiences. APL enhances learning by acknowledging students’ backgrounds, engaging them in guided play, and fostering intrinsic motivation while supporting academic growth in math, literacy, language, and spatial learning. She is proud to be part of a team that empowers educators and strengthens student learning through intentional, playful pedagogy.



Examples APL in action in our classrooms!

Communication

Two students help each other sound out words in a puzzle activity.

Critical Thinking

Students work together to program robots to get from one point to another on a map. They use trial and error to adjust the path of the robot using colored tiles.

Creativity

Teacher gives a lesson about home building in colonial times and discusses mortar, bricklayers and carpenters. Students then create their own home with a plan like carpenters do. Students choose the style of their home including a mermaid house, a strong house, a Hello Kitty house, a movie theater house, etc.

Teacher Testimonials

Teachers describe their experience putting APL into action in their classrooms



APL at Home: Modeling Math

Math is all around us! Discuss math with your child during daily activities.

"If we need two apples for breakfast every morning this week, how can we figure out how many apples we need to buy?"

Allow your child to share their strategy *first*. To extend their learning you can offer an additional strategy and then compare the two.

Mistakes you or your child make are ok! It's important for children to see that making mistakes is a normal part of the math process.



Staff Spotlight: Jade Robinson

Jade Robinson is a Graduate Research Assistant on the APL team. Jade plays a crucial role in managing website content, developing APL measures, and more. Her research interests include play-based learning, community learning spaces, and children's digital and print media.



Recent Publications

In Early Education and Development:
Feasibility and Acceptability of an Active Playful Learning Intervention for Kindergarten Teachers Using Instructional Coaching

In the Brookings blog:
We All Need a Little More Recess

Recent News

Our project is growing! In the 2024-25 academic year we added **over 200 classrooms** to the APL study in schools across the country.



This project is funded by:

The **LEGO** Foundation