

Promising Practice: Family Engagement in SLIFE Education

Family engagement refers to active collaboration between families/caretakers and educators to support students' learning and growth. For students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and their families—who may be navigating multiple transitions, including a new country, language, and education system—strong school efforts to engage them are crucial. Schools must proactively remove barriers to SLIFE family participation, whether linguistic, cultural, logistical, or systemic. Family engagement for SLIFE extends beyond traditional parent–teacher conferences or school events; it involves creating multiple pathways for families to engage with schools, clearly communicating about the U.S. education system, and empowering them as active partners in their children's education. This engagement values the knowledge, skills, and perspectives to the educational partnership. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key supports for family engagement have emerged:

- **Culturally and linguistically responsive communication strategies**, including the use of translation services, can help overcome barriers arising from linguistic and cultural differences, which often hinder family engagement (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).
- **Orientation to the education system and ongoing support** can help SLIFE families—who may be unfamiliar with U.S. school systems and expectations—understand school policies, procedures, and ways to support learning at home (Umansky et al., 2018).
- **Building trusting relationships** with SLIFE families—e.g., conducting culturally responsive home visits, organizing community events, and hiring family liaison staff—can help foster connections and honor families' cultural backgrounds (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018).
- **Opportunities for SLIFE families to share their knowledge and experiences** position them as educational partners and recognize their strengths and cultural assets (López et al., 2020).
- **Partnerships with community organizations** can help connect families with essential resources and services. Addressing basic needs is often a prerequisite for meaningful engagement (Umansky et al., 2018).

Related Resources from the Massachusetts (MA) Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)

- **SLIFE Guidance:** Explore Step 4 of DESE's [Guidance for SLIFE Identification, Services, and Support](#), paying special attention to pp. 37–39 on family and community connections.
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [Family and Community](#) section of the MA SLIFE Toolkit for practical strategies and resources.
- **Blueprint for English Learner (EL) Success:** Review the [Interactive Blueprint for English Learner Success](#), focusing on Building Block 2: Academic and Linguistic Supports. Discover strategies for implementation at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.
- **Family Resources:** Access a wealth of information on the [Family Resources](#) page, to support multilingual families.
- **Family Voice:** Visit OLA's [English Learner Parent Advisory Councils](#) page.

Research Corner

- [Learning With the Field: Understanding “Promising Practices” for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts Schools](#) (Kray & Burns, 2024)
- [Understanding and Supporting Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts: A Review of Literature](#) (CAL, 2024)

Stronger Together: Family Engagement in SLIFE Education

This vignette is based primarily on interviews with educators from two different districts, with additional insights from interviews with other members of the MA SLIFE Community of Practice (CoP). While district names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity, the strategies, challenges, and successes described here are based on real experiences of CoP members. The composite nature of this vignette allows us to showcase a range of approaches and ideas that can be adapted to various contexts across Massachusetts.



Setting: *Riverside Public Schools is a large urban district. It has seen significant demographic shifts in recent years, with ELs now accounting for over 33% of students. Spanish, Cape Verdean Creole, and Haitian Creole are the most common languages spoken by ELs. The SLIFE population makes up a small percentage of ELs, but their numbers are growing.*

Harbor City Public Schools serves about 12,500 students. Approximately 26% of the students are ELs, and Spanish is the predominant language. The district has seen an increase in newcomers in recent years, including a growing number of SLIFE, many of whom are unaccompanied minors.

Riverside’s Multilingual Family Communication Center

Ella Harper, director of bilingual education for Riverside Public Schools, recognized that traditional family engagement strategies (e.g., relying solely on written communications or expecting families to come to the school for meetings during work hours) were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of their growing and diversifying multilingual student body. “As of today, we have over 5,000 English learners, which is over a third of our total students,” Ms. Harper explains. “We had to think about working differently to include more families from more language groups, especially those for whom schooling had been an inconsistent experience in their home countries. Some of the students’ parents would be identified as SLIFE themselves due to war, poverty, or limited education options.”

Two years ago, Riverside established a **centralized Multilingual Family Communication Center** with a dedicated call center. The center is staffed by **bilingual community relations facilitators** who speak Spanish, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, French, Haitian Creole, and several other languages. These **staff members are equipped with district-provided cell phones**—an innovative approach that dramatically improves family access to school support. “We have staff who speak the languages of our communities,” Ms. Harper shares. “By giving them district cell phones, we’ve made our staff incredibly accessible to families at times that work for them. This simple but powerful change has transformed how we communicate with families.”

The district also implemented an **online conference booking system with integrated interpretation services**. This system allows families to schedule parent-teacher conferences at convenient times while simultaneously requesting an interpreter if needed. Teachers can also initiate conference requests through the same system. “Now, whether it’s a family booking a conference or a teacher requesting one, they can indicate the need for interpretation services right in the booking system,” Ms. Harper explains. “The system automatically notifies our language team, and we can arrange for a staff member who speaks that language to join the meeting. They can participate in a three-way conversation virtually.” To further support families, Riverside expanded its **family advocacy program**. Originally funded through a grant for immigrants, the district now budgets to employ full-time family advocates who help families navigate external systems, such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, food pantries, medical services, and housing.

One of Riverside’s most successful initiatives is its annual **Bilingual Parent Advisory Council Resource Fair**. Ms. Harper describes the event as follows: “We chose our most geographically central school, where the majority of students live, to host this fair, and we brought all the resources to them. We brought the library, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, SNAP registration, neighborhood health services giving COVID and flu shots, and various community organizations.” The fair also includes cultural elements, such as traditional foods and music, to celebrate the diversity of the community. “One of our events was right before Thanksgiving, so we put together turkey dinners as an incentive for folks to come. We also had a little dance party at the end,” Ms. Harper adds. The event has grown each year, with over 300 people attending the most recent fair.

Harbor City’s Targeted Supports for SLIFE Families

In Harbor City, the district has focused on providing targeted support for SLIFE and their families, recognizing the unique challenges they face. Many of their SLIFE are unaccompanied minors, which presents additional complexities for family engagement.

The district has transformed its **family liaison program** in two ways. First, it increased the number of liaisons from just a few districtwide positions to having one dedicated liaison per school. Second, it prioritized hiring bilingual staff for these positions. Bilingual family liaisons play a crucial role in building relationships with families and connecting them to both school and community resources. “Having bilingual liaisons in every school, rather than just a few serving the whole district, has dramatically improved our family engagement and support,” explains Elena Marquez, the content instructional leader of Harbor City’s English as a second language department.

Harbor City has also made strides in improving **communication with families who speak indigenous languages**. The district now provides materials and interpreters in K’iche’, a Mayan language spoken by many Guatemalan families. This effort has contributed to building trust and has supported many families in engaging more meaningfully with the school system. “We’ve made progress in improving communication by providing materials and interpreters in K’iche’,” Ms. Marquez shares. “This helps families feel more comfortable and willing to engage with the school.”

The district has also focused on **educating all families about the U.S. education system and graduation requirements**. This is particularly important for SLIFE families who may be unfamiliar with these concepts. The district offers workshops and information sessions to help families understand academic expectations, extracurricular activities, and post-graduation options. “Graduation has become more relevant to families,” Ms. Marquez notes. “A few years ago, we struggled to retain students, but last year we graduated 17 SLIFE students with diplomas. Families now see graduation as a tangible goal.”

Both Riverside and Harbor City emphasize the importance of **ongoing, two-way communication with families**. They recognize that strong family engagement is not just about providing information, but also about listening to families’ needs, concerns, and aspirations for their children.

Reflection Questions: Family Connections



1. How do your current family engagement practices address the unique needs and challenges of SLIFE families, such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system, or potential trauma experiences?
2. What are the primary languages and cultures represented among SLIFE in your district, and how well equipped is your district to communicate and engage with these families?
3. What existing resources (staff, technology, community partnerships) could be leveraged to enhance family engagement for SLIFE in your district?
4. What barriers (e.g., linguistic, cultural, logistical) might SLIFE families in your community face in engaging with the school, and how can these be addressed?
5. How can you ensure that your family engagement strategies are culturally responsive and respectful of the diverse experiences and strengths of SLIFE families?

Actions to Consider: Family Connections

✪ Explore guidance and practical resources in the **MA SLIFE Toolkit**, [Step 4: Family and Community Supports](#).



- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify the languages spoken by SLIFE families and ensure appropriate translation and interpretation services are available.
- **Create a welcome packet for SLIFE families** that includes information about the U.S. education system, school expectations, and school and community resources.
- **Establish regular opportunities for SLIFE families to provide feedback** on policies and programs.
- **Create a mentorship program pairing established families with newcomer families** to provide peer support and guidance. Alternatively, create a “buddy system” pairing SLIFE families with volunteer local families to help with cultural integration and community connections.
- **Organize opportunities to foster SLIFE community connections.** For example, organize a resource fair that brings together school and community services to support SLIFE families, or bimonthly potluck dinners at the school, featuring dishes from families’ cultures, to foster community connections and cultural exchange.
- **Implement a bilingual family liaison program**, ensuring each school has dedicated staff to support SLIFE families.
- **Develop partnerships with local organizations** that can provide additional support services for SLIFE families (e.g., legal aid, healthcare, job training).
- **Establish a centralized multilingual communication system**, similar to Riverside’s, to improve accessibility for families.
- **Provide professional development** on culturally responsive family engagement practices.
- **Offer workshops or classes for families** on topics such as navigating the U.S. education system, services for SLIFE, English language development and academic expectations, postsecondary pathways, and digital literacy. s