SLIFE Research Project: Executive Summary

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The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®), an independent third-party research organization, conducted this study for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to document field-based promising practices for supporting **Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education** (SLIFE) across Massachusetts. This research captured the perspectives of practicing educators during a period of significant demographic change, with more than 2,000 migrant students added to 74 Massachusetts districts in 2023–24 (Sacharczyk, 2024). Rather than prescribing solutions, this study aimed to learn from practitioners actively developing and implementing SLIFE support strategies.

> **Why This Research Matters**
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> Massachusetts has seen unprecedented growth in SLIFE enrollment:
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> - More than 2,000 migrant students added to 74 districts in 2023–24
> - The "Right-to-Shelter" law (MA General Law Chapter 23B, Section 30, Part 1, Title II) significantly impacts settlement patterns.
> - Districts from across the Commonwealth are increasingly serving SLIFE.

This study is one of four interconnected efforts to address the growing needs of SLIFE in Massachusetts (Exhibit 1).

- SLIFE Community of Practice (SLIFE CoP): A thriving network of educators learning together, sharing promising practices and experiences.

- SLIFE Guidance: Comprehensive, user-friendly guidance for identifying and supporting SLIFE.

- SLIFE Toolkit: An interactive companion resource offering practical implementation tools.

- *Learning With the Field: Understanding "Promising Practices" for Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in Massachusetts Schools* (Kray & Burns, 2024): A new study on school- and district-based promising practices for SLIFE.

Exhibit 1. A SLIFE Support Ecosystem

New SLIFE Guidance

Community of Practice

Research

New SLIFE Toolkit

A SLIFE Support Ecosystem

These initiatives are complementary: the CoP informs research and tests guidance in real-world settings; research findings shape guidance and CoP discussions; and guidance documents frame CoP activities and research dissemination. The SLIFE Toolkit adds tools and resources for districts to implement the guidance. Together, these efforts create an ecosystem of support for SLIFE education in Massachusetts.

Methodology

The study emphasized practitioner perspectives and real-world implementation through several complementary qualitative approaches:

- Targeted literature scan and ongoing news monitoring for context

- Survey of 52 SLIFE CoP members

- In-depth interviews with 21 educators across 16 districts

- Continuous dialogue with the SLIFE CoP

- Analysis of program documents and local news coverage

Study Limitations

Our methodology provided valuable insights, but it is important to acknowledge certain limitations.

- CoP-based recruitment may not represent all district experiences.

- Self-reported data from educators already engaged in SLIFE work may differ from the experiences of other educators.

- Geographic representation varies.

- Rapidly changing context affects finding applicability.
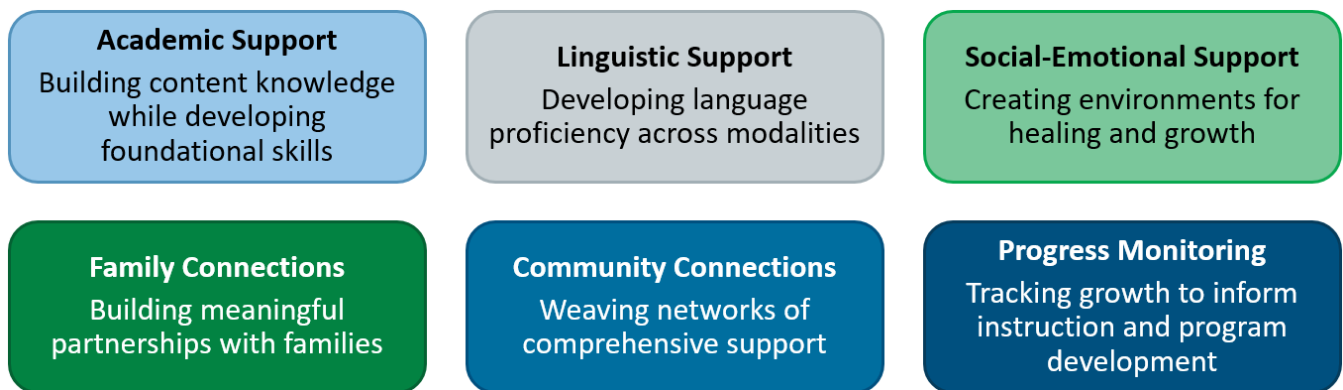
- Student and family voices are not directly included.

Study Design and Priority Areas

Despite these limitations, our study focused on six priority areas to support SLIFE success (Exhibit 2). The six priority areas were determined through the target literature scan, interviews with educators, ongoing dialogue with the SLIFE CoP, and in relation to state policy and guidance documents.

These six priority areas are deeply interconnected in practice. Even though the findings are organized by area to aid implementation, educators emphasized that effective SLIFE support requires coordinated attention to all areas. For example, academic success depends on social-emotional well-being, which in turn is strengthened through family and community connections. Progress monitoring informs adjustments across all areas while considering multiple aspects of student development.

Exhibit 2. Six Priority Areas of SLIFE Education Related to DESE's SLIFE Guidance (2024)

Academic Support Building content knowledge while developing foundational skills	**Linguistic Support** Developing language proficiency across modalities	**Social-Emotional Support** Creating environments for healing and growth
Family Connections Building meaningful partnerships with families	**Community Connections** Weaving networks of comprehensive support	**Progress Monitoring** Tracking growth to inform instruction and program development

Two Complementary Resources

To address these priority areas, we developed two complementary resources (Exhibit 3), designed to serve different purposes while telling a cohesive story:

- **Field Study Report.** This comprehensive report synthesizes findings across districts and contexts, documenting what educators identify as field-based promising practices. It provides an analysis of current approaches and recommendations for future support.

- **Practitioner Vignettes.** A series of eight vignettes translate the study's findings into accessible, actionable guidance. They provide practical insights through real district examples, concrete action steps, and implementation suggestions that other districts can customize for their contexts. In addition to the six priority areas, two bonus vignettes were developed in response to specific CoP educator needs:

  - Approaches for districts with low SLIFE enrollment and/or in rural settings
  - Strategies for developing a new integrated SLIFE pathway into an existing program

These complementary resources recognize that educators need both strong theoretical foundations and practical implementation guidance to effectively support SLIFE.

Exhibit 3. Project Deliverables: Two Complementary Resources Tell a Cohesive Story

📚 Two Complementary Resources Telling a Cohesive Story 📚	
📑 **Field Study Report**	💡 **Practitioner Vignettes**
• Synthesizes findings across districts and contexts. • Documents field-recommended promising practices.	• Translates research findings into accessible, actionable guidance. • Provides practical insights based on real-world examples.

Through a field-based, qualitative research design, several key findings emerged about SLIFE strengths and promising educational practices. These findings are organized to first highlight the assets and capabilities that SLIFE bring to their school communities and then to examine how districts are developing programs that build on these strengths while addressing the challenges.

Key Findings: Student Stories, Student Assets

Although SLIFE often are characterized primarily by their educational gaps, educators consistently commented on students' remarkable capabilities, rich life experiences, and profound determination to succeed. Although individual students' circumstances vary greatly, educators shared observations about common strengths they witnessed.

Journey Experiences

Educators described diverse student journeys to Massachusetts. For example, one district noted: "One group consists of students who come from nontraditional immigration channels with disrupted education caused by their migration. The other group includes students from refugee camps, primarily from African countries like the Congo and Somalia."

Complex Lives and Responsibilities

Educators observed students managing multiple responsibilities:

• Working multiple jobs, often 60–70 hours per week

• Supporting families back home financially

• Taking on educational roles with younger siblings

• Navigating health care needs for themselves and family members

Educational Persistence

Educators noted strong motivation among many students who previously lacked access to education. As one district observed, many students demonstrated particular appreciation for educational opportunities once they became available.

Professional Capabilities

Districts highlighted various professional strengths:

- Prior work experience and technical skills
- Strong social awareness and maturity
- Ability to navigate complex situations
- Leadership capabilities in workplace settings

Language and Cultural Assets

Educators observed

- multilingual abilities, with some students speaking three or four languages;
- strong storytelling capabilities;
- community-building skills; and
- a willingness to help new students adjust.

Community Leadership

Districts noted that students

- volunteer to give tours to new students,
- help peers learn school routines,
- demonstrate strong community-focused values, and
- sharing resources and support with others.

Impact When Supported

When provided appropriate support, educators reported that students

- build connections between work and academic learning,
- achieve high pass rates in coursework,
- participate in college preparation programs, and
- succeed in dual enrollment college courses.

We've had students from Afghanistan affected by war. The boys often have some schooling, but the girls have missed out. We also have students from Syria with similar situations. Despite these earlier restrictions, many girls thrive academically once given educational opportunities."
—District M Director

Students from Haiti, for instance, may speak Haitian Creole, Spanish, and Portuguese because they lived in Brazil, and now they're learning English. It's impressive!
—District B Director

It's a very community-focused culture . . . If you have food that you bring in, you don't just eat it yourself. You share with everyone . . . that's the way it is, like anything you get, you automatically share, and I saw that back in their home village, and we've seen it here as well."
—District A Director

These student strengths and experiences provide the foundation for robust SLIFE support. Drawing from interviews and site visits, educators shared how they develop programs and practices that recognize and build on these assets while addressing the complex realities of students' lives. The key findings section illustrates key principles and practices that educators found beneficial across the six priority areas.

Key Findings: Promising District Practices

By analyzing data from educator interviews, site visit data, and ongoing dialogue with the SLIFE CoP, several promising approaches emerged for supporting SLIFE. These practices align with the six priority areas identified in DESE's guidance while responding to local contexts and student needs. The following examples illustrate key principles that educators found successful.

Academic Support

- **Connect academic concepts to students' lived experiences.** At District A, the biology department developed a foundations course in which students learn core scientific concepts through connections to their work experiences. For example, one teacher helped students understand cell organelles by relating them to restaurant operations—comparing mitochondria to a kitchen's power source and the cell membrane to a host stand controlling entry and exit.

- **Maintain high expectations with strategic scaffolds.** District B demonstrated how to maintain high academic expectations while providing support. For instance, ninth-grade students reading several years below grade level engaged with Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, not a simplified version, but the actual text, with carefully planned scaffolds connecting their lived experiences to complex ideas.

  If we never put grade-level text in front of them, it's an equity issue. These students can solve complex problems because they've had to.

  —District B Director

- **Create flexible pathways to mastery.** District M implemented flexible intervention blocks that allow students multiple ways to demonstrate content understanding while accommodating work schedules.

Linguistic Support

- **Create authentic opportunities for language practice.** District L structures peer teaching opportunities in which students teach concepts to classmates in small groups, increasing authentic language use while building confidence.

- **Develop systematic foundational skills.** District E implements evidence-based phonics instruction integrated with grade-level content, using age-appropriate materials drawn from students' interests.

- **Support bilingual development.** District K developed heritage language classes paralleling English language arts content, allowing students to build academic concepts in both languages simultaneously.

Social-Emotional Support

- **Address trauma through structured support.** Districts F and G partner with Boston Children's Hospital to address core stressors, including premigration trauma, isolation, resettlement challenges, and cultural transition.

- **Prioritize relationships and joy.** District M establishes strong student-teacher connections, creating an environment in which students feel valued and supported.

- **Foster peer support networks.** District B developed peer support systems in which current students welcome newcomers, give tours, and help them learn school routines. This creates natural support networks while providing leadership opportunities.

> *Students need a lot of love, support, care. And then comes the curriculum. There's a lot of joy that we infuse into [our school] because of how much we know our students have worked to even get to this point.*
>
> *—District M Administrator*

Family Connections

- **Create comprehensive communication systems.** District I invested in a comprehensive family communication system, including

  – bilingual community facilitators collectively speaking more than eight languages,

  – a 24/7 multilingual call center,

  – staff cell phones for flexible parent communication, and

  – regular resource fairs bringing services directly to families.

- **Meet families where they are.** District Z reimagined engagement by connecting with families during laundromat visits and shopping trips, rather than expecting families to come to school.

Community Connections

- **Build coordinated support networks**: District B established partnerships with refugee agencies, medical providers, and food programs to address multiple student needs comprehensively.

> *We had a student missing school because of toothaches. It's hard to focus on learning when you're in pain.*
>
> *—District F Coach*

- **Create school-based service hubs.** District G developed on-site health centers that provide medical, dental, and mental health services alongside educational programming.

- **Leverage community expertise.** District I maintains a directory of family businesses and skills, creating reciprocal support between schools and community members.

Progress Monitoring

- **Implement team-based monitoring.** District L's grade-level teams meet in regular cycles to review student progress across content areas and adjust support accordingly.

- **Use data to drive decisions.** District M conducts weekly data reviews that examine attendance, engagement, and academic progress to continuously refine interventions.

- **Track holistic development.** District K developed protocols for monitoring academic, linguistic, and social-emotional growth through multiple measures and perspectives.

Districts are encouraged to review the accompanying vignettes for more practical examples of implementation.

- The **academic support** vignette shows how one district created flexible scheduling for working students.

- The **linguistic support** vignette demonstrates successful co-teaching approaches.

- The **social-emotional** vignette illustrates trauma-informed practices.

- The **family connections** vignette details a structured liaison program.

- The **community connections** vignette shows successful partnership development.

- The **progress monitoring** vignette demonstrates data-driven decision making.

Although these vignettes provide valuable insights and practical examples, educators also face several significant ongoing challenges in implementing effective SLIFE support.

Implementation Challenges

Educators identified several significant and ongoing challenges. These challenges often intersect and compound each other, requiring districts to develop creative solutions while advocating for systemic change and additional resources to better serve SLIFE.

- **Staffing and Resources.** Districts face significant ongoing challenges in securing appropriate staffing and maintaining necessary resources across roles, such as

  - limited availability of qualified bilingual staff, particularly in rural areas;

  - difficulty maintaining counselor positions despite recognized need; and

  - training needs for existing staff to effectively support SLIFE.

- **Work-School Balance.** Districts described complex situations in balancing education with economic necessities, including

  - students working 40–60 hours per week to support families;

  - evening and weekend work schedules conflicting with traditional school hours;

  - the need to send money to support family members in home countries; and

  - limited transportation options affecting both work and school attendance.

- **Materials and Assessment.** Districts struggle with fundamental mismatches between available resources and student needs, including

  - limited availability of age-appropriate foundational materials,

  - a lack of assessment tools in many home languages, and

  - the need for specialized curricula that bridge skill gaps while maintaining grade-level rigor.

- **Geographic and Resource Distribution.** Resource distribution creates particular challenges for districts based on location and available services:

  - Rural districts face compound challenges given their geographic isolation.

  - There is uneven access to specialized services across regions.

  - Maintain community partnerships is difficult in some areas.

  - Transportation barriers affect access to services and opportunities.

Although districts have developed creative solutions to these issues, educators identified several areas in which additional state-level support could strengthen SLIFE activities across Massachusetts. Drawing from their experiences implementing promising practices and navigating persistent challenges, the following recommendations emerged for enhancing DESE's guidance, resources, and technical assistance.

Recommendations for DESE SLIFE Guidance, Resources, and Support

Based on educator experiences and identified needs, several key themes emerged for strengthening state-level SLIFE support. These recommendations focus on developing resources, building capacity, and fostering collaboration across districts. For each recommendation area, specific suggestions are provided for implementation. Some recommendations require significant resource investment, whereas others could be implemented more immediately through existing structures and partnerships.

1. Academic and Linguistic Support

- Create a repository of age-appropriate materials for older SLIFE developing foundational skills.
- Offer training on integrating foundational content and language instruction while developing grade-level rigor.
- Provide guidance on appropriate literacy instruction approaches for adolescent SLIFE.
- Provide access to assessment tools in multiple languages beyond Spanish, particularly for languages common among SLIFE.

2. Social-Emotional Support

- Create training modules on trauma-informed practices specific to SLIFE contexts.
- Facilitate partnerships between districts and mental health organizations that can provide multilingual services or with organizations such as Boston Children's Hospital's Trauma and Resilience Center to provide statewide training.
- Provide guidance on using online therapy and telehealth services, particularly for rural districts with limited access to bilingual mental health providers.
- Address staff secondary trauma through professional development.

3. Family/Caretaker and Community Engagement

- Provide templates and protocols for SLIFE multilingual family communication.
- Create guidance on connecting SLIFE families with social services and community resources.
- Create protocols for supporting unaccompanied minors who may lack traditional family support systems.
- Share examples of successful district-community partnerships that serve SLIFE, particularly for rural districts.
- Share strategies for building cultural broker networks, particularly for emerging language groups.

4. Progress Monitoring

- Share models and protocols for monitoring academic, linguistic, and social-emotional progress.
- Develop guidelines for monitoring SLIFE progress that account for varied educational backgrounds.
- Model data systems for monitoring SLIFE outcomes to inform continuous program improvement.
- Support development of internal assessment tools when vendor products are unavailable.

5. Program Implementation Support

- Document varied successful program models with implementation guidance for different district contexts.
- Provide recommendations for staffing structures and resource allocation strategies to support SLIFE.
- Share strategies for maximizing resources, particularly for smaller districts.
- Create guidance on implementing flexible scheduling and alternative pathways while maintaining program quality.
- Provide guidance on balancing students' immediate needs and goals with long-term educational objectives.

6. Cross-District Collaboration and Regional Partnerships

- Create vetted repositories for districts to share locally developed assessment tools, curriculum materials, and multilingual or translated resources.
- Document examples of successful adaptations across contexts.
- Structure resource-pooling systems for professional learning.
- Coordinate regional training approaches and facilitate cross-district learning communities.
- Guide districts to develop regional approaches and partnerships to maximize impact and overcome resource limitations, particularly to support those with lower SLIFE enrollment.

These recommendations aim to strengthen DESE's support while acknowledging the diverse contexts of Massachusetts districts serving SLIFE.

Conclusion

This study comes at a critical time as Massachusetts districts experience increasing enrollment numbers of SLIFE. The findings demonstrate both the immediate need for enhanced support and the long-term opportunity to build more responsive educational systems. Individual district approaches vary based on local contexts, but several common themes emerged related to building comprehensive support systems, implementing flexible programs, and learning continuously from experience.

The promising practices documented here provide concrete strategies that districts can implement now, whereas the recommendations outline a path for strengthening state-level support across time. Success requires ongoing commitment to building on student strengths while addressing systemic challenges through collaborative, adaptable approaches. These insights from practicing educators provide a foundation for supporting SLIFE while acknowledging that practices will continue to evolve as districts respond to changing student needs and circumstances.

References

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