

Promising Practice: Academic Support in SLIFE Education

Providing academic support for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) involves creating a personalized, holistic, and linguistically and culturally responsive approach to foster success. By building on students’ background knowledge and life experiences, academic support leverages their strengths and connects learning to real-life contexts, making it meaningful and relevant to students. While research on SLIFE education is limited, the literature highlights key considerations for academic support:

- **Targeted literacy instruction.** Explicit teaching of foundational skills—including at the secondary level—is crucial for SLIFE, who may have limited literacy (DeCapua et al., 2020).
- **Content-based language instruction.** Integrating language development with content learning helps SLIFE develop language while accessing grade-level content (Short & Boyson, 2012).
- **Scaffolding.** Providing appropriate scaffolds and differentiating instruction based on individual student needs is crucial for supporting SLIFE in accessing challenging content (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017).
- **Use of students’ home languages.** Leveraging students’ first language skills supports content learning and transfer of skills to English (Cummins, 2001).
- **Project-based learning.** Hands-on, experiential learning approaches make content more accessible and engaging for SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).
- **Culturally responsive teaching.** Incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences into instruction enhances engagement and learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).
- **Extended learning time.** Additional instructional time, such as afterschool programs or summer academies, provides SLIFE with opportunities to accelerate their learning (Umansky et al., 2018).

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

- **Guidance:** Explore Step 4 of DESE’s [Guidance for SLIFE Identification, Services, and Support](#), paying special attention to pp. 27–33 on academic support.
- **Toolkit:** Visit the [academic support section](#) of the MA SLIFE Toolkit for practical strategies and resources.
- **Blueprint for EL Success:** Review the [Interactive Blueprint for English Learner Success](#), focusing on Pillar 3: Opportunity and Support, Building Block 2: Academic and Linguistic Supports. Discover strategies for implementation at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.
- **Protecting Access to Education for Unaccompanied Children:** Review this resource for families and educators from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (available in [various languages](#)).

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)

Learning Together: Academic Support 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: Rivercross Public Schools is a suburban district serving approximately 3,500 students. The district has experienced a significant increase in English learners (ELs) over the past decade, with ELs now accounting for about 9% of the student body. Of these, 44% are identified as SLIFE.

Evergreen Public Schools is a large urban district. It has a long history of serving diverse students, with ELs accounting for about 20% of total enrollment. Evergreen has a dedicated SLIFE program at the secondary level, serving students from various countries including Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Eritrea.

Rivercross’s Integrated Support Model

Megan Ellison, director of English language education for Rivercross, recognized that existing EL structures were not fully addressing the needs of SLIFE. “We needed to think differently about how to support students who have had varying trajectories in life and in formal education,” Ms. Ellison explains. “It’s not just about learning English; it’s about building foundational skills and accessing grade-level content simultaneously.”

As Rivercross SLIFE build their skills, many are also holding down full-time jobs. In recognition of this, the district offers **alternative scheduling options**, allowing students to choose between different start times and course blocks that accommodate their work schedules. Many, like 18-year-old Miguel, balance adult responsibilities with their education. Miguel works 50–60 hours a week across two restaurant jobs, often not finishing his shift until midnight. “Our students are the ones serving food at many of our local restaurants,” Ms. Ellison notes. “It’s inspiring to see them applying their developing skills in real-world settings.”

The program offers a late-start option beginning at 11:00 a.m., allowing students like Miguel crucial hours of sleep between late-night work shifts and school. Students receive **work–study credit** for their employment, completing biweekly time sheets and journal prompts to **document their learning**. “These students are incredibly resilient,” Ms. Ellison shares. “They’re not just students; they’re breadwinners, caretakers, and sometimes the sole support for family back home. Our job is to make education accessible without forcing them to choose between survival and learning.” The program maintains connections with students year-round, including **summer check-ins** and **home visits** to identify and address ongoing needs.

The daily schedule includes three **core content classes** (mathematics, science, and social studies), along with **electives** like physical education, art, and self-management. A typical day begins with lunch at 11:15 a.m., followed by a **morning meeting** where students practice English speaking and listening skills. The program operates with a **carefully balanced staffing approach**, providing **multiple levels of support** throughout the day:

- Every class is co-taught by Sheltered-English-Immersion-endorsed content teachers and an English as a second language (ESL) teacher.

- A bilingual instructional assistant stays with students throughout the day.
- Teachers from the general education staff rotate in to teach specific content areas.

This **co-teaching model** allows SLIFE to benefit from **specialized language support** while also **accessing grade-level content** taught by subject matter experts. The presence of **bilingual staff** throughout the day provides crucial linguistic and cultural support, helping students navigate the complexities of academic content in their new language.

Rivercross emphasizes **hands-on, experiential learning** to make content accessible and relevant for SLIFE. In science class, students created a model grocery store to learn about nutrition and practice mathematics skills. In another lesson, they explored cell biology by comparing class dynamics to the interdependent parts of a restaurant. “We’re always looking for ways to connect learning to students’ real-life experiences,” Ms. Ellison explains. “It helps make the content more relevant and engaging.”

The students’ reflections show how the program has shaped their journeys. As one graduating student expressed, “Leaving Guatemala and coming to the United States wasn’t just for us, but for our family. We came here to work hard, support our loved ones, and strive for a better future. And today, I feel really proud to graduate with all of you.”

To support these innovative approaches, Rivercross **partners** with the Simon Youth Foundation, which provides resources including scholarships and grants. The district also invests in **teacher development** and **technology**. “We realized that many of our secondary teachers weren’t **trained in literacy instruction**,” Ms. Ellison says. The district provided training in structured literacy programs to address this. Additionally, technology-based interventions like Imagine Math and Imagine Language & Literacy are integrated into classroom instruction, rather than used in isolation. Teachers guide students through the programs, which include home language support and allow students to work at their own pace while receiving immediate feedback.

Evergreen’s Comprehensive SLIFE Academy

Evergreen takes a different approach with its SLIFE Academy, a **dedicated program** within one of its high schools where SLIFE students spend their full school day in a specialized learning environment. Dr. Sofia Ramirez, the academy’s principal, describes the program as follows: “Our academy is designed to provide intensive support for students identified as SLIFE in all areas—language, academics, and social-emotional learning.” The program has several key features:

- **SLIFE-specific curricula.** Grade-level content is made accessible through scaffolding and home language support. “Grade-level curriculum is an equity issue: We need to make sure SLIFE students are on track to graduate high school by giving them access to grade-level classes,” Dr. Ramirez explains. “We don’t water down the content. Instead, we find ways to make it accessible through visuals, graphic organizers, and use of students’ home languages. At the same time, students are developing English as a new language.”
- **Thematic, project-based approach.** Units integrate language, literacy, and content learning. For example, a recent unit on immigration combined English language arts, social studies, and digital literacy skills as students researched and presented their family histories.
- **Oral language focus.** Daily morning meetings emphasize oral skills in English. “It’s a low-stakes way for students to build confidence in using English,” Dr. Ramirez says. “We know that many of our students have strong oral traditions, so we leverage that strength.”

- **Scheduling.** “Many of our students work to support their families, so we needed a schedule that accommodates their needs,” Dr. Ramirez explains. The program operates on a modified schedule designed to support working students, with classes running from 7:15 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and from 7:15 a.m. to 1:05 p.m. on Fridays. This allows students who work to have flexibility, especially on Fridays when they can start work earlier. The program includes morning content classes with planned scaffolds, where students engage with grade-level texts, ensuring equitable access to curricula. In the **afternoon, intervention blocks** provide targeted support in subjects like reading and mathematics, tailored to meet students at their level of understanding. A **focus block at the end of the day** provides homework help and additional support, including snacks to ensure that students are not distracted by hunger. The school’s flexible scheduling options are crucial for students who need to work, allowing them to leave early if necessary. This approach is supported by daily **100-minute intervention sessions** and **100 minutes of prep time for teachers**, ensuring students and staff have the time and resources they need to succeed.
- **Transportation support.** Passenger vans were purchased with **Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief** funds to help with attendance and appointments, ensuring students can get to school even if they have other commitments.
- **Extended learning.** Partnerships with colleges offer dual enrollment opportunities. “We have a program where college professors come to our school to teach classes,” Dr. Ramirez says. “It’s a way for our students to earn college credits and envision themselves in higher education.”

Both Rivercross and Evergreen emphasize the importance of **ongoing assessment and progress monitoring** to inform their approaches to academic support. They use a combination of standardized assessments, teacher-created measures, and student portfolios to monitor progress and adjust instruction accordingly. “It’s not just about where students start,” Dr. Ramirez notes. “It’s about celebrating their growth and continually adapting our support to meet their changing needs.”

Note: If you are considering developing an alternative SLIFE program, districts must complete and submit a new program proposal to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for approval. Refer to the [Quick Reference Guide: Starting a New English Learner Education Program](#).

Reflection Questions: Academic Support



1. How does your current instructional model address the unique academic needs of students identified as SLIFE, particularly in developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills?
2. In what ways could co-teaching or collaboration between content teachers and ESL specialists enhance academic support for SLIFE in your district?
3. How do you balance the need for targeted interventions with providing access to grade-level content for SLIFE?
4. How are you currently leveraging hands-on learning experiences and technology to support SLIFE in accessing grade-level content?
5. What opportunities exist in your district for extended learning time or alternative scheduling to provide additional academic support for SLIFE?

Actions to Consider: Academic Support

✦ Explore guidance and practical resources in the **MA SLIFE Toolkit**, [Step 4: Academic and Linguistic Supports](#).



- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify areas for growth in your program’s academic support for SLIFE across grade levels and content areas.
- **Use common instructional routines** across classrooms to build familiarity and reduce cognitive load.
- **Incorporate daily oral language development activities** into the instructional schedule.
- **Create opportunities for hands-on, project-based, and thematic learning** that integrates language development with content area instruction. Focus on culturally responsive teaching practices that incorporate students’ real-life experiences into lesson content.
- **Implement a progress monitoring system** that includes both academic and language development measures.
- **Develop specialized curricula** that accelerate learning by establishing a strong foundation and transitioning to grade-level rigor through differentiation and scaffolding. Consider the creation of “bridge” classes to prepare SLIFE for mainstream content classes.
- **Consider alternative scheduling options** to accommodate the needs of working students.
- **Provide extended learning opportunities.** For example, establish partnerships with local colleges to provide dual enrollment opportunities.
- **Implement a co-teaching model** that pairs content area teachers with ESL specialists in core subjects.
- **Provide professional development** on foundational literacy instruction for secondary teachers working with SLIFE.