

Promising Practice: Progress Monitoring in SLIFE Education

Progress monitoring is the ongoing assessment of students' academic performance and growth to inform teaching, learning, and programming. Research shows that regular progress monitoring can lead to improved student outcomes, more appropriate instruction, and better-informed educational decisions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Progress monitoring allows educators to recognize and leverage the unique learning trajectories of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), which are shaped by their rich life experiences. Progress monitoring practices for students identified as SLIFE should aim to document growth in foundational skills, language development, and grade-level content knowledge. Although there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key supports for progress monitoring have emerged:

- **Comprehensive assessment of multiple domains**—including literacy, numeracy, and language proficiency—provides a holistic view of student progress (Short & Boyson, 2012).
- **Frequent and systematic data collection** allows for timely adjustments to instruction and intervention (Echevarria & Vogt, 2010).
- **The use of appropriate assessment tools** that account for students' language proficiency and cultural backgrounds ensures that valid and reliable data are collected (Abedi, 2006).
- **Collaborative data analysis** involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., content and language teachers, students) can lead to more informed decision making and tailored support for students (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).
- **Realistic and attainable goals** that consider students' starting points and potential for growth are crucial for supporting student motivation and success (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

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

- **SLIFE Guidance:** Explore Step 4 of the DESE [Guidance for SLIFE Identification, Services, and Support](#), paying special attention to pp. 40–44 on progress monitoring.
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [progress monitoring](#) section of the MA SLIFE Toolkit for practical strategies and resources.

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 From the Field Through Portraits of Practice: Progress Monitoring Strategies in Cedar Valley and Summit

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: Cedar Valley Public Schools is a suburban district serving approximately 5,500 students. The district has seen a growing number of English learners (ELs) in recent years, who now account for about 25% of the student body. Spanish is the most common language spoken by ELs, followed by Portuguese. While SLIFE make up a small percentage of ELs, their numbers are growing.

Summit Academy is a specialized high school program within another large urban district in Massachusetts. It serves fewer than 300 students who are all ELs, with a significant portion identified as SLIFE. The academy focuses on providing targeted support for newcomers and SLIFE, with the goal of preparing them for success in mainstream high school programs or alternative pathways to graduation.

Cedar Valley's Collaborative Approach to Progress Monitoring

Patricia Turner, the middle school mathematics coach for Cedar Valley Public Schools, saw an opportunity to innovate in assessing the progress of SLIFE. “We were excited to develop new ways to capture students’ unique growth trajectories,” Ms. Turner explains. “We wanted to **shine a light on their progress** in foundational skills, which often shows remarkable acceleration but might not be immediately apparent in standard grade-level assessments.” In collaboration with Lorena Quispe, the district’s middle school SLIFE teacher, Ms. Turner developed a comprehensive progress monitoring system integrated into their multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. The system includes the following components:

- **Pre-assessment and skills tracker.** “We start with a pre-assessment to determine if students should be in the newcomer/SLIFE math class,” Ms. Turner shares. “We write down the skills we’re teaching, then we assess students at least every 2 weeks using a skills tracker to monitor progress. We use a numbering system of 1 to 5, where 1 means they don’t quite understand the concept yet and 5 means they’ve mastered it. Together, we look at the work, give them a number, and use that to help us plan.” The tracker allows teachers to see granular progress in specific mathematics skills, even if students are not yet performing at grade level.
- **Regular team meetings.** “We meet every 6-day cycle to analyze data and plan differentiation,” Ms. Turner explains. These meetings may bring together content and English as a second language (ESL) teachers, coaches, and bilingual paraprofessionals to examine student progress holistically. The team reviews academic data and social-emotional indicators to inform instructional decisions.
- **Flexible grouping.** Based on consistent progress in daily work and formal assessments, students can move between different levels of mathematics support. “When a student demonstrates mastery of foundational concepts in our SLIFE math class, we begin transitioning them into our sheltered content classes with continued progress monitoring,” Ms. Turner notes. “The goal is to provide the right level of challenge while maintaining appropriate support.”

- **Coaching cycles.** To support successful transitions between program levels, Ms. Turner develops individualized coaching plans with both SLIFE and general education content teachers who receive transitioning students. Each plan includes regular classroom observations, co-planning sessions, and feedback meetings. “I visit classes and debrief with teachers, helping them analyze student work, reflect on practice, and plan targeted supports,” she explains. “Together we identify specific areas to focus on, whether it’s developing academic language scaffolds or adapting content instruction for SLIFE learners.”

Lorena emphasizes the importance of **making progress visible to students and families**. “We use concrete data to show growth during our family conferences,” Ms. Quispe notes. “I sit with students and families to review their progress charts. Being able to show the data makes these discussions powerful because everyone can see the growth. We’ve learned to be explicit about goals and next steps—you can’t assume families are familiar with U.S. grade-level expectations or program transitions.” These regular check-ins help inform the school’s MTSS process while encouraging families to understand and participate in educational decisions.

Summit Academy’s Comprehensive Progress Monitoring System

At Summit Academy, Principal Jessica Dubois has implemented a **multifaceted approach to progress monitoring** that connects assessment, instruction, and student transitions. “While our program’s core pillar is social-emotional learning, which is crucial for students coming from traumatic backgrounds, we also need to ensure we’re tracking academic progress rigorously,” Ms. Dubois explains. “We’ve developed an integrated system where multiple data points inform our decisions about student support and program placement.”

The academy’s progress monitoring system includes six key components that all work together:

- **Literacy assessments.** “We use the University of Chicago’s Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) assessment in English three or four times a year,” Ms. Dubois says. “It gives us detailed data about students’ English literacy development—from letter recognition and phonics to comprehension. Teachers review these results during weekly grade-level meetings to adjust their instruction and grouping.” As the Chicago STEP tool is being phased out by the University of Chicago, staff at Summit are now internally adjusting literacy assessments. They are incorporating elements of the Quick Phonics Screener to obtain a phonetic awareness inventory and are exploring other fluency and comprehension assessments to gather and use more data. In addition, they are delving deeper into NWEA’s Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) reading data to guide intervention needs.
- **Mathematics benchmarking.** “The NWEA MAP math assessment, given in English three times yearly, helps us track students’ mathematical concept development,” Ms. Dubois explains. “We compare this data with classroom performance to ensure students are getting appropriate support in both foundational and grade-level math skills.”
- **Daily feedback.** Teachers use exit tickets aligned with lesson objectives to gather immediate data on student understanding. “These quick checks tell us if we need to adjust tomorrow’s lesson or pull small groups for targeted support during the intervention block,” Ms. Dubois notes.
- **Data management.** The academy uses Dean’s List software to compile various data points. “Teachers enter daily notes about classwork, participation, and exit ticket results,” Ms. Dubois explains. “During our weekly grade-level meetings, teams examine this data alongside benchmark assessments to identify patterns and adjust supports.”

- **Attendance monitoring.** “Regular attendance is crucial for academic progress,” Ms. Dubois emphasizes. “Our attendance team meets weekly to review individual student data. When we notice patterns, we work with families and community partners to address barriers to attendance before they impact learning.”
- **Grade-level team meetings.** “Our weekly grade-level meetings are where all this data comes together,” Ms. Dubois explains. “Teams look at everything from attendance to assessment results to make decisions about student placement and support.”

The academy uses this data picture to structure their daily intervention blocks, which run Monday through Thursday from 1:15 p.m. to 2:55 p.m. “These blocks are built into everyone’s schedule—all teachers teach an intervention, and all students participate,” says Ms. Dubois. “We offer targeted support in English language development, phonics, and math. Students move between interventions based on their progress data. For example, when our STEP assessment shows a student has mastered basic phonics, they might transition to a comprehension-focused group.”

Both Cedar Valley and Summit emphasize the importance of using multiple data points to make informed decisions about student placement and support. They also recognize the need for ongoing refinement of their progress monitoring systems to better serve SLIFE.

Reflection Questions: Progress Monitoring



1. What types of data collection methods and assessments are currently used in your school or district to monitor the progress of students identified as SLIFE? How do these align with the unique strengths and needs of SLIFE?
2. How do teams in your school organize and analyze multiple sources of SLIFE data? What processes exist for turning these data into actionable instructional decisions?
3. How often do teams meet to discuss SLIFE progress data, and what protocols guide these discussions? Who participates in these meetings?
4. In what ways does your current progress monitoring system account for the diverse starting points and potential growth trajectories of SLIFE? How do you use this information to adjust instruction and support?
5. What challenges have you encountered in implementing progress monitoring for SLIFE, and how have you addressed (or how do you plan to address) these challenges?

Actions to Consider: Progress Monitoring

- ✦ Explore guidance and practical resources in the **MA SLIFE Toolkit**, [Step 4: Progress Monitoring](#).



- **Adopt or develop a comprehensive intake assessment** for students newly identified as SLIFE to establish accurate baselines for progress monitoring. Consider how the intake assessment can align with existing district screening processes.
- **Develop or adopt a skills tracker** specific to foundational literacy and numeracy skills that integrates with your existing program’s benchmark assessments and allows for granular progress monitoring of SLIFE.
- **Implement regular data meetings** involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., content teachers, ESL specialists, administrators) to analyze progress within your school’s MTSS framework.
- **Create individualized learning plans for SLIFE** that include specific, measurable goals based on their unique starting points and needs, aligned with districtwide student success planning.
- **Create a system for flexible grouping and scheduling** that allows SLIFE to move between levels of support based on their progress data.
- **Establish regular progress conferences with students and families** to review growth, set goals, and make shared decisions about program transitions. Consider scheduling these alongside existing parent–teacher conferences.
- **Implement peer observation or coaching cycles** to support teachers in using strong progress monitoring practices for SLIFE.
- **Leverage existing management systems** to track multiple measures of SLIFE progress and generate easy-to-interpret reports that can be shared across teaching teams.
- **Provide targeted professional development on progress monitoring strategies** for SLIFE, building on your district’s current assessment and data analysis practices.