

## Program Portrait: A Middle School's New SLIFE Support Pathway

Creating a new program or pathway for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) involves developing specialized curricula, instructional approaches, and support structures to meet their unique needs. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, key considerations include the following:

- **Strategic language and content learning.** SLIFE benefit from targeted support to develop academic language proficiency while simultaneously learning priority grade-level content (Short & Boyson, 2012). This requires a review of existing grade-level standards and content to identify essential skills and concepts that serve as a foundation for future learning and will develop cumulatively over multiple years. The process may also require de-emphasizing or eliminating skills and concepts that will be reintroduced in later grades or are less essential for core conceptual learning.
- **Foundational literacy and numeracy skills.** SLIFE benefit from explicit instruction in foundational literacy and numeracy skills that they may have missed due to interruptions in schooling, including skills and concepts that may be associated with earlier grades in the United States (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).
- **Culturally responsive pedagogy.** Instruction should leverage students' rich knowledge and experiences while creating a bridge to U.S. academic norms and expectations (Hos, 2016).
- **Social-emotional support.** SLIFE often benefit from trauma-informed approaches and intentional instruction in school-based social skills and routines, fostering a supportive learning environment (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017).
- **Flexible programming.** Programs with individualized pacing and fluid transitions allow SLIFE to make progress while honoring their diverse backgrounds and prior learning experiences (Umansky et al., 2018). A school-based team should develop a plan with clear criteria for how SLIFE will demonstrate readiness for increasing grade-level expectations, as well as a process for how students will be presented for progress monitoring.

### Strong SLIFE programs typically incorporate the following:

- Intensive English language development and sheltered or bilingual content instruction
- Culturally responsive approaches to teaching and navigating new school norms (e.g., Welcome Class or SLIFE advisory)
- Home language support, including multilingual counselors and family liaisons
- Low student–teacher ratios and extended learning time
- Ongoing assessment and progress monitoring
- Family engagement initiatives and partnerships with community organizations

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

- **SLIFE Guidance:** Explore DESE's [Guidance for SLIFE Identification, Services, and Support](#).
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [MA SLIFE Toolkit](#) for practical strategies and resources.
- **Blueprint for English Learner (EL) Success:** Review the [Interactive Blueprint for English Learner Success](#).

### 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)

While models vary, research suggests that SLIFE benefit from some degree of specialized programming, even within integrated school settings (Menken, 2013). The key is to provide targeted support while also ensuring access to grade-level content and interactions with peers.

## Developing a New Embedded SLIFE Pathway

*This vignette is based primarily on interviews with several educators from one district. 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 members of the MA SLIFE Community of Practice (CoP).*



**Setting:** Woodham Middle School is in a mid-sized urban district. It serves just under 700 students in Grades 6–8, with ELs accounting for about 23% of the student body. In recent years, Woodham has seen an increase in newcomer students, including a growing number of SLIFE. The school is developing an embedded pathway to support both SLIFE and newcomers within its existing Sheltered English Immersion Program.

Adriana Varela, Woodham’s EL instructional coach, had been working to find better ways to support SLIFE. “We were seeing more and more students coming in with significant interruptions in their formal education,” she explains. “While our existing ESL [English as a second language] program was strong, we needed to create more targeted supports within our structure to meet these students’ unique needs, particularly in foundational numeracy and literacy skills, as well as common academic thinking habits, such as interpreting information in a table.”

The turning point came when Adriana and colleagues joined the MA SLIFE CoP in fall 2022. Through the CoP, they had the opportunity to learn from other districts and visit schools with established SLIFE programs. “It was eye-opening,” says Isabel Castillo, Woodham’s Grade 7 ESL teacher, who also participated in the CoP. “We saw how other schools were structuring their days and adapting curriculum. It made us realize we could better support SLIFE by consolidating them with newcomers in a single cohort at each grade level.”

Inspired by what they had learned, the Woodham team developed a proposal for integrating specialized SLIFE supports within their newcomer program. They presented their ideas to Principal Marcus Thompson and other district leaders. “We framed it as a pilot pathway,” Ms. Varela explains. “We showed how we could repurpose existing resources and staffing to create more targeted approaches for both SLIFE and newcomers. The data we gathered through the CoP helped make our case.” Now entering its second year, the SLIFE pathway continues to evolve based on ongoing reflection and feedback. Some key features of Woodham’s approach are described below.

### Intake and Identification Process

“We start with the SLIFE Pre-Screener provided by DESE, followed by academic screenings in math and literacy,” Ms. Varela explains. “The math screener, developed by the school’s math coach, is skills-based with minimal language requirements. For literacy, students read a passage in their home language from Reading A-Z, answer comprehension questions, and then engage in two writing prompts developed by our educators. This process helps us identify students’ strengths and needs right from the start,” Mr. Thompson adds.

## A Flexible, Embedded Cohort Model

The school uses a cohort system, where each grade level is divided into three cluster teams, which share most of the same core content teachers. Each cluster is further divided into four class sections for mathematics, English language arts (ELA) or ESL, science, and social studies. SLIFE and newcomers are assigned to one of the grade-level clusters and start the year together in the same section for most core content classes. “We wanted to provide intensive support without segregating students,” Mr. Thompson explains. “The cohort model allows us to really focus on their unique needs, but they still have opportunities to interact with the broader school community.”

In each grade level, data indicate which students would be best served by being grouped together for mathematics, science, and social studies. Woodham offers two options for newcomer English language development classes: SLIFE ESL and literacy classes for students who qualify, and ESL 1 for non-SLIFE newcomers. Students in these cohorts join peers from the school at large for electives, lunch, and other cluster and grade-level activities. This allows for targeted support while maintaining meaningful integration with peers. The school’s cohort system allows some flexibility for transitions (e.g., SLIFE to ESL 1 to ESL 2) and for welcoming and orienting new students throughout the year. The structure enables efficient use of co-teaching resources and specialized instruction.

## Co-Teaching and Collaboration

Each core content class in the SLIFE/newcomer pathway is staffed by a content teacher and an ESL specialist (or when ESL staff are at capacity, an ELA or mathematics co-teacher). Content teachers lead instruction of content standards while collaborating with ESL teachers to highlight language expectations and design appropriate language scaffolding and support. Coaches check in regularly to support differentiation and foundational skills development. Woodham strives to offer dedicated weekly common planning time so teachers can align curriculum and discuss student progress. This model allows for more individualized support and helps content teachers develop strategies for working with SLIFE. “It was a big shift for some of our content teachers,” Ms. Varela acknowledges. “But we’ve seen tremendous growth in teachers’ ability to scaffold instruction and make content accessible for SLIFE, as well as huge increases in newcomer student engagement and active learning.”

In practice, the co-teaching model varies by subject and student needs. For example, Hannah Kensington, the middle school mathematics coach, describes how they approach co-teaching in mathematics: “Sometimes the math teacher or I lead the content instruction while our ESL specialist supports with language scaffolding. Other times, we break into small groups, with each of us taking a group based on specific skill needs.”

## Targeted Curriculum and Instruction

Woodham educators use the following to adapt grade-level curriculum:

- Explicit instruction in foundational literacy and numeracy skills
- Intentional teaching, modeling, and reinforcement of school norms and routines
- Hands-on, experiential learning, including the use of visual aids and manipulatives
- Strategic use of students’ home languages and cultural experiences
- Project-based learning opportunities to build on students’ existing knowledge
- Strategic content learning of priority content standards and skills with appropriate scaffolding

For instance, in science class, students engage in lab-based activities that allow them to develop academic vocabulary through direct experience with concepts. “In math, we use a lot of visual aids, realia, and manipulatives,” says Ms. Kensington. “We’re constantly looking for ways to make abstract concepts more concrete and relatable for our students.”

## Progress Monitoring and Flexible Transitions

Woodham has developed a system for monitoring SLIFE progress across multiple domains:

- Academic: Modified benchmark assessments in content areas
- Language: Classroom observations, WIDA-aligned ESL benchmark assessments
- Literacy: Independent Reading Level Assessments (IRLA), administered regularly in ESL classes, with two more comprehensive assessment cycles per year
- Social-emotional: Teacher and counselor observations, student self-assessments

“Grade-level teams review data every 6 weeks in our SLIFE team meetings,” Mr. Thompson explains. “This allows us to make adjustments to student schedules and supports as needed. In math, we use a skills tracker to monitor progress on specific competencies. We color-code skills on a scale of 1 to 5,” Ms. Kensington shares. “This helps us see at a glance where students are making progress and where they might need additional support.”

The school has also established criteria for when students are ready to transition out of SLIFE-specific classes. However, they maintain flexibility, allowing students to move at their own pace. “Some students might be ready for general education science and social studies but still need newcomer [and SLIFE] support in math and ESL 1,” Ms. Varela notes. “Our system allows for that kind of individualization. Because our core content teachers teach one section of newcomer content and three sections of grade-level content, students transitioning out of newcomer [and SLIFE] classes mid-year are often scheduled to another class section with the same teacher, who already knows them and is familiar with their abilities. This allows the teacher to continue offering targeted scaffolds to help bridge the transition and challenge our students appropriately.”

## Social-Emotional Support

Recognizing the unique social-emotional needs of SLIFE students, the school implemented Woodham Wellness Circles. These weekly, 45-minute sessions are integrated into the school schedule and facilitated by trained staff, including ESL teachers, counselors, and community partners. “Our Wellness Circles provide a dedicated space for students to process their experiences, build relationships, and develop crucial social-emotional skills,” explains Dr. Omar Hassan, the school psychologist. The circles rotate through three key themes: mental health and cultural adjustment, goal setting and reflection around attendance and academics, and community building. In one popular activity, students interview staff members about their roles, practicing English while also becoming more comfortable navigating the school environment. “We’ve seen remarkable growth in students’ confidence and sense of belonging,” Dr. Hassan notes. “It’s also given us valuable insights into their needs and experiences, which informs our broader support strategies.”

## Family and Community Engagement

Recognizing the importance of family involvement, Woodham has implemented several engagement initiatives:

- A part-time bilingual family liaison role
- Monthly Newcomer Nights with workshops on various topics (e.g., understanding report cards, college and career planning)

- A monthly Spanish-language coffee hour with the principal
- Partnerships with local organizations to provide wraparound services

“Many of our SLIFE families have also experienced interruptions with formal schooling themselves,” says Daniel Leclerc, SLIFE family and community liaison. “We are creating opportunities for them to learn about the U.S. system of schooling and dialoguing about how they can support their children’s education.” The school also has developed partnerships with local organizations to provide after-school tutoring and enrichment specifically for SLIFE.

## Ongoing Professional Development

The school strives to provide professional learning around SLIFE education for all staff, not just those directly teaching SLIFE. “We want everyone in the building to understand the SLIFE experience and how they can support these students,” Ms. Varela emphasizes. Professional development has included the following:

- Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) training
- Trauma-informed practices workshops
- Peer observation opportunities
- Regular coaching support

## Challenges and Future Directions

While implementing this embedded SLIFE/newcomer pathway has required creative scheduling and resource allocation, it allows Woodham to provide targeted SLIFE support while maintaining an inclusive learning environment. To make this happen, Ms. Varela explains that choices had to be made, saying that “‘push-in’ content support for ESL 2 and ESL 3 students was sacrificed to free up ESL staff for co-teaching in newcomer classes. Additionally, the increased demand for curriculum and lesson planning to launch newcomer content classes initially strained content teachers, who now teach one newcomer class in addition to three sections of grade-level general education classes. Despite these challenges, teachers entered year two of the pathway pilot feeling much more prepared and confident. They noted that the efforts and time invested in launching the first pilot year resulted in significant gains in newcomer engagement and learning compared to previous years.” Mr. Thompson adds, “We’re seeing strong growth in both academics and engagement. The key has been finding ways to provide intensive support while ensuring students remain connected to the broader school community.”

“We’re constantly learning and adapting,” Mr. Thompson reflects. “Our work with SLIFE is teaching us to become more responsive, flexible, and innovative educators for all students. It’s challenging, but it’s transforming our practice in ways we never anticipated.”

Note: While Woodhams’ SLIFE Support Pathway is an integrated aspect of a larger English Language Education program, when districts are considering developing a new SLIFE program (rather than an integrated pathway), they must complete and submit a new program proposal to DESE for approval. Refer to the [Quick Reference Guide: Starting a New English Learner Education Program](#).

## Reflection Questions: Developing a New SLIFE Program or Pathway



1. What existing structures or resources in your school or district could be leveraged to create a more targeted approach for students identified as SLIFE?
2. How might an SLIFE pathway be integrated into your current programming?
3. What data would you need to collect to make a case for an SLIFE pathway in your school or district?
4. What professional development would be necessary to prepare teachers and staff for working with SLIFE?
5. How can we ensure SLIFE have meaningful interactions with non-SLIFE peers while still providing targeted support?

## Action to Consider: Developing a New SLIFE Program or Pathway

✦ Explore guidance and practical resources in the [MA SLIFE Toolkit](#).



- **Form an SLIFE task force** with representatives from ESL, content areas, administration, and family and community engagement to develop a program proposal.
- **Research established SLIFE programs** in other districts to gather ideas and best practices.
- **Develop a proposal outline** for an SLIFE program, including goals and potential structures.
- **Analyze current resources and staffing** to identify potential reallocation for SLIFE support.
- **Create a data collection plan** to make a case for an SLIFE pathway in your school or district.
- **Develop a proposed schedule** for SLIFE students, balancing specialized and mainstream classes.
- **Develop a plan for co-teaching and collaboration** between ESL and content area teachers and cross-departmental teams.
- **Create a pilot program proposal** for a small-scale SLIFE initiative to test and refine approaches.
- **Develop a long-term implementation plan**, including scaling up the program and ongoing evaluation.
- **Outline a professional development plan** focused on SLIFE education for all staff involved in the program.