

Promising Practice: Community Partnerships in SLIFE Education

Community partnerships are collaborative relationships between schools and local organizations that aim to support students' academic success and well-being. For students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), these partnerships can be especially valuable in addressing needs that extend beyond the classroom. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key considerations for community partnerships have emerged. For example, they may offer the following critical supports:

- **Support for meeting basic needs, like food, clothing, and healthcare**, which may be prerequisites for learning (Umansky et al., 2018)
- **Specialized support services** like mental health counseling or legal aid, which schools may not be equipped to offer (Saulsbury-Molina, 2019)
- **Expanded learning opportunities**, delivered through afterschool and summer programs tailored for SLIFE (López et al., 2020)
- **Culturally and linguistically appropriate services** to bridge gaps between schools and SLIFE families, which may also help to maintain, strengthen, and (in some cases) re-establish ties to the home country or culture (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Falikov, 2007)
- **Opportunities for SLIFE to build social connections and develop a sense of belonging** in their new communities (Mendez & Barko-Alva, 2022)

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 Pillar 3, Building Block 3: Social-Emotional Supports. Discover information about community partnerships at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.

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: Building Bridges for SLIFE Success

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: *Elmwood is a densely populated urban community. Over the past 5 years, its school district has seen a significant increase in ELs, who now account for 45% of the district’s 6,000 students. A notable portion of these ELs are SLIFE, with many recent arrivals coming from Central America.*

Oakridge is a suburban district of about 5,000 students, where ELs make up 30% of enrollment. While the district has long served a diverse student body, it has only recently begun to see a growing number of SLIFE, many of whom are secondary students working full-time jobs in addition to attending school.

Elmwood’s Collaborative Approach

When Mariana Reyes became Elmwood’s new multilingual learner director 3 years ago, she quickly realized that successfully supporting SLIFE would require looking beyond the school walls. “We have so many community organizations here that want to help,” Ms. Reyes explains. “The challenge was coordinating all those efforts and making sure families knew how to access them.”

Ms. Reyes’s solution was to establish a **dedicated Newcomer Support Team**, including a full-time community liaison position. The team’s first action was to conduct asset mapping of local organizations and the services they could provide. It then organized a districtwide Newcomer Resource Fair, inviting over 20 community partners to share information with families.

One key partnership that emerged for Elmwood was with the **local community health center**. The center now provides a mobile health clinic that visits Elmwood schools twice a month, offering basic medical and dental care. This service has been transformative for SLIFE who have had limited access to healthcare. “We had a student who kept missing school because of toothaches,” recalls Maria Sanchez, an English as a second language teacher. “Once he was able to see the dentist right here at school, his attendance improved dramatically. It’s hard to focus on learning when you’re in pain.”

The district has also partnered with a local nonprofit to offer an **afterschool homework help** program specifically for SLIFE. Staffed by bilingual tutors, many of whom are former SLIFE themselves, the program provides academic support while also fostering a sense of community. “It’s not just about the homework,” says Juan Gomez, one of the tutors. “We’re also mentors. We can relate to what these students are going through because we’ve been there ourselves.”

Oakridge's Evening Engagement

In Oakridge, the challenge was finding ways to engage older SLIFE at Oakridge High School who were balancing full-time jobs with their education. "Many of our SLIFE are working during the day to support their families. We had to find a way to bring education and resources to them when they were available," said Sarah Ward, the program director. In response, the district created an **evening program** called the Program for Academic Triumph and Hope (PATH). PATH integrates community partners into its evening classes, which are offered 4 days a week and focus on English language development, core academic subjects, and life skills.

Each month, PATH hosts a **Community Night** where local organizations set up information booths and offer workshops on topics from financial literacy to healthcare access. The district has cultivated partnerships with the public library, local banks, healthcare providers, and legal aid services. "It's like a one-stop shop," says Roberto Alvarez, a PATH teacher. "Students can work on their English, get help with assignments, and learn about things like how to open a bank account or apply for health insurance." "It's all in one place for students," Mr. Alvarez adds, emphasizing that many of these students not only need to navigate these tasks for themselves but often take responsibility for helping family members as well.

Additionally, PATH students can participate in a **job shadowing program with partners from local businesses**. This allows SLIFE to explore potential career paths and at the same time practice their English in real-world settings. "We want our students to see that their multilingualism is an asset," Ms. Ward explains. "By connecting them with local businesses, we're not only helping them improve their language skills, but also opening doors to future opportunities."

Both Elmwood and Oakridge have found that strong community partnerships are essential for providing comprehensive support to SLIFE. By leveraging local resources and expertise, these districts are creating more inclusive and supportive environments for some of their most vulnerable students.

Reflection Questions: Community Partnerships



1. What community organizations in your area might be potential partners in supporting SLIFE? What resources or expertise could they offer?
2. How can your district create opportunities for SLIFE to engage with the broader community and develop a sense of belonging?
3. What barriers might prevent SLIFE and their families from accessing existing community resources? How can these barriers be addressed?
4. How can community partnerships be leveraged to provide support for SLIFE outside of regular school hours?
5. In what ways could former SLIFE or other members of immigrant communities be engaged as mentors or resources for current students?

Actions to Consider: Community Partnerships

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



- **Conduct asset mapping** of local organizations and the services they could potentially offer SLIFE and their families.
- **Develop a community partnership handbook**, translated into families' preferred languages, as part of student intake.
- **Organize a resource fair** to introduce families to local organizations and services or establish regular **community nights** during which local organizations can offer workshops and information to SLIFE and their families.
- **Partner with local businesses** to create job shadowing or student internship opportunities.
- **Establish a volunteer transportation network** of community members to help SLIFE families access essential services.
- **Explore partnerships with local health providers** to offer on-site or mobile health services for students and families.
- **Collaborate with the public library** to offer targeted programs and resources for students identified as SLIFE and their families, such as multilingual materials, English conversation groups, or internet access.
- **Develop an afterschool or evening program** that integrates academic support with access to community resources.
- **Establish a dedicated position** or team responsible for coordinating community partnerships and ensuring strong communication between schools, families, and community organizations.