

## Promising Practice: Social-Emotional Learning in SLIFE Education

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals develop skills to manage emotions, achieve goals, appreciate others' perspectives, maintain relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (CASEL, 2020). For students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), who may have experienced trauma, displacement, and significant cultural transitions, SEL support—delivered through a culturally and linguistically responsive lens—is crucial. Integrating SEL throughout SLIFE programming (rather than as an add-on) is essential to best support SLIFE's needs. While research on SLIFE education is limited, some key SEL supports have emerged:

- **A welcoming school environment** that honors students' cultural backgrounds can help SLIFE feel valued, affirm their heritage, foster a sense of belonging, and support their transition to a new context (DeCapua et al., 2020; Mendez & Barko-Alva, 2022).
- **Explicit instruction in social-emotional skills** such as stress management, problem solving, and cross-cultural communication can support SLIFE's resilience and social-emotional development (Castro-Olivo, 2014; Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012).
- **Trauma-informed approaches** in schools can help address the impact of adverse experiences on SLIFE's learning and well-being (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Merrell, 2010; Saulsbury-Molina, 2019).
- **Culturally and linguistically responsive SEL practices** that emphasize maintaining ethnic pride and cultural and linguistic identities can support SLIFE's psychosocial adjustment and increased resilience (Casanova & Alvarez, 2014, 2022; Castro-Olivo, 2014).
- **Asset-based instructional approaches** that recognize the strengths and knowledge SLIFE bring to the classroom improve student engagement and self-esteem (López et al., 2020).
- **Caring teacher–student relationships** greatly benefit SLIFE, as having a trusted adult at school can be crucial to their success (Hos, 2020; Saulsbury-Molina, 2019).

### 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. 34–36 on social-emotional support.
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [Step 4: Social Emotional Support](#) 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 strategies for implementation at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.
- **SEL in Massachusetts:** Access a wealth of information on DESE's [Social and Emotional Learning](#) page.

### 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)

# Supporting Hearts and Minds: Social Emotional Learning 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). Although district names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity, the strategies, challenges, and successes described here reflect 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:** Meadowbrook is a large, diverse urban district, where ELs account for about 33% of the student body. The district has seen a significant increase in SLIFE enrollment in the past 5 years, particularly among students from Central America and Haiti.

Pinewood is a suburban district of about 5,000 students, with a growing number of ELs from over 30 countries now making up 15% of enrollment. While the district has long served a diverse student body, it has only recently begun to see an influx of SLIFE, many of whom have experienced significant trauma. Many SLIFE come from Latin America. At the secondary level, many of these students are unaccompanied minors. The district is also seeing a demographic shift, with some older SLIFE arriving from Arabic-speaking countries and various African nations.

## Meadowbrook’s Comprehensive Approach

When Dr. Jean-Louis Desrosiers became Meadowbrook’s district social worker for SLIFE 3 years ago, he recognized the need for a **coordinated, districtwide approach to SEL** that addressed the unique needs of SLIFE. “Our students face complex challenges,” Dr. Desrosiers explains. “Many are unaccompanied minors, dealing with trauma from their home countries or migration experiences, and trying to balance work and school. We needed a multifaceted approach to support them.”

Despite challenges like insufficient funding for comprehensive SEL support, as well as difficulties hiring bilingual counselors with appropriate training to meet student needs, one of Dr. Desrosiers’s first initiatives was to adopt the Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) curriculum for counselors and school mental health providers across the district. This program helps students understand stress, define feelings, and develop problem-solving skills. “STRONG has been incredibly helpful,” says Elena Rodriguez, a bilingual counselor at one of Meadowbrook’s high schools. “It gives our SLIFE tools to cope with stress and anxiety, and it helps them build resilience. We’ve seen students become more engaged in their classes and more confident in navigating their new environment.”

The district has also focused on providing **comprehensive wraparound services for SLIFE and their families**. Dr. Desrosiers and his team have established partnerships with local organizations such as the Massachusetts Alliance for Children to address basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare. “We realized that we couldn’t expect students to focus on learning if they were worried about where they were going to sleep or if they had enough to eat,” Dr. Desrosiers explains. “By connecting families with resources in the community, we’re creating a more stable foundation for academic success.”

Meadowbrook has also implemented **innovative scheduling options** to support SLIFE who are working to support themselves or their families (see the [academic support vignette](#) for examples). The district offers evening classes that accommodate students trying to balance educational and work responsibilities. “Many of our SLIFE are working full-time jobs,” says James Chen, a high school English as a second language teacher. “The

flexible scheduling has been a game-changer. We're seeing better attendance and engagement because students feel listened to."

Another key aspect of Meadowbrook's approach is **cultural responsiveness**. The district has invested in professional development for all staff on culturally responsive practices. "Having staff who understand our students' cultural backgrounds and can communicate in their home languages has made a huge difference," Dr. Desrosiers notes. "It helps build trust with students and families, and it allows us to provide stronger support."

## Pinewood's Targeted Interventions

In Pinewood, the approach to SEL for SLIFE has focused on **targeted interventions** and **staff capacity building**. The district has hired dedicated **multilingual adjustment counselors** who work specifically with SLIFE across all schools. "These counselors have transformed our ability to provide timely support," says Sarah Thompson, Pinewood's EL coordinator. "When students are struggling, they know there's always someone available who can help them work through challenges."

Pinewood has also implemented regular **advisory periods** for all middle and high school students, with a **specialized SEL curriculum**. This curriculum, modified in collaboration with SLIFE teachers and counselors, focuses on topics like cultural adjustment, goal setting, and building relationships. "The advisory period gives us **dedicated time each day to check in with our students**," explains David Nguyen, a middle school teacher. "We can address any immediate concerns and help students develop the social-emotional skills they need to navigate their new environment."

Pinewood has also prioritized **professional development for staff on trauma-informed practices, restorative justice, and culturally responsive teaching**. The district offers a series of workshops throughout the year and provides ongoing coaching support. "Professional development has transformed how I approach my teaching," says Lisa Etienne, a high school teacher. "I'm much more attuned to the social-emotional needs of my SLIFE now, and I've learned strategies to make my classroom a more supportive environment for them."

Both Meadowbrook and Pinewood have found that prioritizing SEL support for SLIFE has had positive impacts beyond SLIFE. Teachers report improved classroom climates overall, and both districts have seen increases in SLIFE attendance and academic engagement. As Dr. Desrosiers from Meadowbrook notes, "Supporting the social-emotional needs of our students isn't just about helping them feel better—it's about giving them the tools they need to succeed academically and in life. When we invest in their well-being, we're investing in their future."

## Reflection: Social-Emotional Support



1. How does your district currently address the social-emotional needs of SLIFE? What strengths and gaps can you identify in your approach?
2. What training or professional development do staff in your district need to better support the social-emotional needs of SLIFE?
3. How can your district create more opportunities for SLIFE to build connections with peers and feel a sense of belonging in the school community?
4. In what ways could your district better incorporate students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into SEL support?
5. How might you adapt or implement some of the strategies described in the vignette to fit your district's context and resources?

## Actions to Consider: Social-Emotional Support

✦ Explore guidance and practical resources in the **MA SLIFE Toolkit**, [Step 4: Social Emotional Support](#).



- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify the most pressing social-emotional needs of SLIFE in your district.
- **Implement a peer mentoring program** pairing SLIFE with bilingual students who have been in the district longer. *Note: Trained adults can use the STRONG for Schools framework to facilitate better student-to-student connections.*
- **Establish a system for regular check-ins** with SLIFE to monitor their social-emotional well-being and provide support as needed.
- **Create a dedicated advisory period** or seminar class for SLIFE focusing on social-emotional skills and cultural adjustment.
- **Develop a professional development series** for all teachers on trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive teaching.
- **Build cultural and linguistic bridges** by hiring bilingual staff in key roles (counselors, family liaisons, instructional assistants) who can support students' transition while maintaining connections to their cultural identity.
- **Establish a multilingual counseling team** or hire bilingual counselors who can work specifically with SLIFE and their families.
- **Implement a structured SEL curriculum** designed for newcomer students (e.g., the STRONG program).
- **Create meaningful opportunities for cultural exchange** through structured programs, such as cross-cultural dialogue groups facilitated by trained staff, student-led initiatives that leverage SLIFE experiences and knowledge, and curriculum integration that authentically incorporates students' cultural perspectives and experiences.
- **Explore partnerships** with local mental health organizations or universities to provide critical services and specialized training for staff working with SLIFE.