

Introduction

These eight vignettes emerged from research conducted in 2024 by the American Institutes for Research® for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The vignettes document promising practices that support Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) during a period of increasing enrollment.

The vignettes serve as companion pieces to a larger field study report: [Learning With the Field: Understanding “Promising Practices” for SLIFE in Massachusetts Schools](#) (Kray & Burns, 2025), which offers accessible, concrete illustrations of how educators are implementing SLIFE support across different district contexts.

Drawing from interviews with 21 educators across 16 districts and ongoing dialogue with the [SLIFE Community of Practice](#)—a statewide professional learning network of approximately 60 districts collaborating to strengthen SLIFE programming—these vignettes spotlight eight programs and services in the education of SLIFE students:



Each vignette follows a consistent structure: research foundations and connections to DESE resources, a “portrait of practice” featuring real Massachusetts examples, and practical reflection questions and action steps for educators.

Suggestions for Using the Vignettes

- To guide discussion for professional learning communities
- To generate ideas for SLIFE program development or enhancement
- To reflect on current practices and identify areas for growth
- To understand how different districts approach similar challenges

Important Considerations

- These vignettes offer examples that can be adapted to meet the local context, student needs, and available resources; they are not prescriptions for wholesale adoption.
- The examples represent snapshots in time and may not capture all implementation details.
- Success requires ongoing adaptation and responsiveness to student needs.

Together with DESE’s new [SLIFE guidance](#) and [toolkit](#), these vignettes aim to support educators in developing responsive, effective programs for SLIFE. They remind us that although the challenges in SLIFE programming are complex, Massachusetts educators are developing creative, student-centered solutions that are worth sharing and learning from.

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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.

Promising Practice: Family Engagement in SLIFE Education

Family engagement refers to active collaboration between families/caretakers and educators to support students' learning and growth. For students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and their families—who may be navigating multiple transitions, including a new country, language, and education system—strong school efforts to engage them are crucial. Schools must proactively remove barriers to SLIFE family participation, whether linguistic, cultural, logistical, or systemic. Family engagement for SLIFE extends beyond traditional parent–teacher conferences or school events; it involves creating multiple pathways for families to engage with schools, clearly communicating about the U.S. education system, and empowering them as active partners in their children's education. This engagement values the knowledge, skills, and perspectives to the educational partnership. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key supports for family engagement have emerged:

- **Culturally and linguistically responsive communication strategies**, including the use of translation services, can help overcome barriers arising from linguistic and cultural differences, which often hinder family engagement (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).
- **Orientation to the education system and ongoing support** can help SLIFE families—who may be unfamiliar with U.S. school systems and expectations—understand school policies, procedures, and ways to support learning at home (Umansky et al., 2018).
- **Building trusting relationships** with SLIFE families—e.g., conducting culturally responsive home visits, organizing community events, and hiring family liaison staff—can help foster connections and honor families' cultural backgrounds (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018).
- **Opportunities for SLIFE families to share their knowledge and experiences** position them as educational partners and recognize their strengths and cultural assets (López et al., 2020).
- **Partnerships with community organizations** can help connect families with essential resources and services. Addressing basic needs is often a prerequisite for meaningful engagement (Umansky et al., 2018).

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 Building Block 2: Academic and Linguistic Supports. Discover strategies for implementation at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.
- **Family Resources:** Access a wealth of information on the [Family Resources](#) page, to support multilingual families.
- **Family Voice:** Visit OLA's [English Learner Parent Advisory Councils](#) page.

Research Corner

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- [Understanding and Supporting Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts: A Review of Literature](#) (CAL, 2024)

Stronger Together: Family Engagement 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: *Riverside Public Schools is a large urban district. It has seen significant demographic shifts in recent years, with ELs now accounting for over 33% of students. Spanish, Cape Verdean Creole, and Haitian Creole are the most common languages spoken by ELs. The SLIFE population makes up a small percentage of ELs, but their numbers are growing.*

Harbor City Public Schools serves about 12,500 students. Approximately 26% of the students are ELs, and Spanish is the predominant language. The district has seen an increase in newcomers in recent years, including a growing number of SLIFE, many of whom are unaccompanied minors.

Riverside’s Multilingual Family Communication Center

Ella Harper, director of bilingual education for Riverside Public Schools, recognized that traditional family engagement strategies (e.g., relying solely on written communications or expecting families to come to the school for meetings during work hours) were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of their growing and diversifying multilingual student body. “As of today, we have over 5,000 English learners, which is over a third of our total students,” Ms. Harper explains. “We had to think about working differently to include more families from more language groups, especially those for whom schooling had been an inconsistent experience in their home countries. Some of the students’ parents would be identified as SLIFE themselves due to war, poverty, or limited education options.”

Two years ago, Riverside established a **centralized Multilingual Family Communication Center** with a dedicated call center. The center is staffed by **bilingual community relations facilitators** who speak Spanish, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, French, Haitian Creole, and several other languages. These **staff members are equipped with district-provided cell phones**—an innovative approach that dramatically improves family access to school support. “We have staff who speak the languages of our communities,” Ms. Harper shares. “By giving them district cell phones, we’ve made our staff incredibly accessible to families at times that work for them. This simple but powerful change has transformed how we communicate with families.”

The district also implemented an **online conference booking system with integrated interpretation services**. This system allows families to schedule parent-teacher conferences at convenient times while simultaneously requesting an interpreter if needed. Teachers can also initiate conference requests through the same system. “Now, whether it’s a family booking a conference or a teacher requesting one, they can indicate the need for interpretation services right in the booking system,” Ms. Harper explains. “The system automatically notifies our language team, and we can arrange for a staff member who speaks that language to join the meeting. They can participate in a three-way conversation virtually.” To further support families, Riverside expanded its **family advocacy program**. Originally funded through a grant for immigrants, the district now budgets to employ full-time family advocates who help families navigate external systems, such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, food pantries, medical services, and housing.

One of Riverside's most successful initiatives is its annual **Bilingual Parent Advisory Council Resource Fair**. Ms. Harper describes the event as follows: "We chose our most geographically central school, where the majority of students live, to host this fair, and we brought all the resources to them. We brought the library, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, SNAP registration, neighborhood health services giving COVID and flu shots, and various community organizations." The fair also includes cultural elements, such as traditional foods and music, to celebrate the diversity of the community. "One of our events was right before Thanksgiving, so we put together turkey dinners as an incentive for folks to come. We also had a little dance party at the end," Ms. Harper adds. The event has grown each year, with over 300 people attending the most recent fair.

Harbor City's Targeted Supports for SLIFE Families

In Harbor City, the district has focused on providing targeted support for SLIFE and their families, recognizing the unique challenges they face. Many of their SLIFE are unaccompanied minors, which presents additional complexities for family engagement.

The district has transformed its **family liaison program** in two ways. First, it increased the number of liaisons from just a few districtwide positions to having one dedicated liaison per school. Second, it prioritized hiring bilingual staff for these positions. Bilingual family liaisons play a crucial role in building relationships with families and connecting them to both school and community resources. "Having bilingual liaisons in every school, rather than just a few serving the whole district, has dramatically improved our family engagement and support," explains Elena Marquez, the content instructional leader of Harbor City's English as a second language department.

Harbor City has also made strides in improving **communication with families who speak indigenous languages**. The district now provides materials and interpreters in K'iche', a Mayan language spoken by many Guatemalan families. This effort has contributed to building trust and has supported many families in engaging more meaningfully with the school system. "We've made progress in improving communication by providing materials and interpreters in K'iche'," Ms. Marquez shares. "This helps families feel more comfortable and willing to engage with the school."

The district has also focused on **educating all families about the U.S. education system and graduation requirements**. This is particularly important for SLIFE families who may be unfamiliar with these concepts. The district offers workshops and information sessions to help families understand academic expectations, extracurricular activities, and post-graduation options. "Graduation has become more relevant to families," Ms. Marquez notes. "A few years ago, we struggled to retain students, but last year we graduated 17 SLIFE students with diplomas. Families now see graduation as a tangible goal."

Both Riverside and Harbor City emphasize the importance of **ongoing, two-way communication with families**. They recognize that strong family engagement is not just about providing information, but also about listening to families' needs, concerns, and aspirations for their children.

Reflection Questions: Family Connections



1. How do your current family engagement practices address the unique needs and challenges of SLIFE families, such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system, or potential trauma experiences?
2. What are the primary languages and cultures represented among SLIFE in your district, and how well equipped is your district to communicate and engage with these families?
3. What existing resources (staff, technology, community partnerships) could be leveraged to enhance family engagement for SLIFE in your district?
4. What barriers (e.g., linguistic, cultural, logistical) might SLIFE families in your community face in engaging with the school, and how can these be addressed?
5. How can you ensure that your family engagement strategies are culturally responsive and respectful of the diverse experiences and strengths of SLIFE families?

Actions to Consider: Family Connections

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



- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify the languages spoken by SLIFE families and ensure appropriate translation and interpretation services are available.
- **Create a welcome packet for SLIFE families** that includes information about the U.S. education system, school expectations, and school and community resources.
- **Establish regular opportunities for SLIFE families to provide feedback** on policies and programs.
- **Create a mentorship program pairing established families with newcomer families** to provide peer support and guidance. Alternatively, create a “buddy system” pairing SLIFE families with volunteer local families to help with cultural integration and community connections.
- **Organize opportunities to foster SLIFE community connections.** For example, organize a resource fair that brings together school and community services to support SLIFE families, or bimonthly potluck dinners at the school, featuring dishes from families’ cultures, to foster community connections and cultural exchange.
- **Implement a bilingual family liaison program**, ensuring each school has dedicated staff to support SLIFE families.
- **Develop partnerships with local organizations** that can provide additional support services for SLIFE families (e.g., legal aid, healthcare, job training).
- **Establish a centralized multilingual communication system**, similar to Riverside’s, to improve accessibility for families.
- **Provide professional development** on culturally responsive family engagement practices.
- **Offer workshops or classes for families** on topics such as navigating the U.S. education system, services for SLIFE, English language development and academic expectations, postsecondary pathways, and digital literacy. s

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)

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- **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

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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.

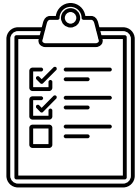
Reflection Questions: Community Partnerships



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.

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 (Honigfeld & 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.

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.

Promising Practice: Linguistic Support in SLIFE Education

Linguistic support for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) encompasses a range of instructional approaches to foster English development while nurturing students' home language skills. Students identified as SLIFE bring a rich tapestry of linguistic and cultural assets to their educational journey. Strong linguistic support leverages these assets, recognizing the value of students' diverse backgrounds. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key linguistic supports have emerged:

- **Build on students' existing linguistic knowledge.** Leveraging students' home language skills can facilitate English development and content learning (Cummins, 2001; Prevoo et al., 2016).
- **Provide explicit instruction in academic language.** SLIFE benefit from targeted support in developing academic language structures across content areas (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).
- **Integrate language and content instruction.** Approaches like sheltered instruction and content-based language teaching can help SLIFE develop English proficiency while learning grade-level content (Short & Boyson, 2012).
- **Focus on oral language development.** Many SLIFE have stronger oral language skills than literacy skills, so instruction should build on this strength while developing reading and writing (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).
- **Differentiate instruction.** Given the diverse backgrounds and needs of SLIFE, instruction should be tailored to individual students' language proficiency levels and educational experiences (DeCapua et al., 2020).
- **Use visual supports and realia.** Concrete objects, images, and graphic organizers can help make language and content more accessible to SLIFE (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017).
- **Provide structured opportunities for peer interaction.** Collaborative learning activities can provide authentic contexts for language use and support social integration (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

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. 27–33 on academic support.
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [academic and linguistic 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: Opportunity and Support, Building Block 2: Academic and Linguistic Supports. Discover strategies for implementation 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)

Language Foundations: Linguistic 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: Linden Public Schools is a large urban district serving approximately 13,000 students. About 42% of students are classified as ELs. The district has a long history of serving newcomers and SLIFE. Many students have experience in agricultural work or informal economies in their home countries.

Kingsley Public Schools serves about 8,000 students, approximately 13% of whom are ELs. Recent SLIFE arrivals include unaccompanied minors from El Salvador and Honduras, as well as Haitian students who lived in Chile or Brazil before coming to the United States. About 1% of the student body is identified as SLIFE.

Linden’s Comprehensive Approach to Language Development

Dr. Carla Mendoza, director of EL education, emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to language development for SLIFE. “Our students often have complex linguistic backgrounds,” she explains. “Many speak indigenous languages like Mam or K’iche’, with Spanish as their first language of formal instruction. Now they’re learning English as a third language. We need to consider all of these languages in our instruction.” In this context, Dr. Mendoza emphasizes the importance of **initial assessment** and **individual goal setting**. “Before we can provide robust linguistic support, we need to understand where each student is starting from,” she explains. “We conduct thorough assessments when students arrive, then set individual goals with each student. We **involve families** in this process and periodically revisit these goals to track progress.”

“We’ve created a teacher-made curriculum focusing on Spanish language development,” Dr. Mendoza shares. “While many of our students speak indigenous languages like Mam and K’iche’ as their first language, Spanish is often their language of prior academic instruction. The classes previously available were based on curricula for second language learners of Spanish, which wasn’t appropriate for our context. With our class, we focus on foundational skills using strategies in Spanish that we also apply in English language arts (ELA).” Teachers are trained to help students make connections between home language(s) and English. This includes explicit instruction in **cognates** and **contrastive analysis of language features**. “We encourage students to use their first or second language to understand similarities and differences,” Dr. Mendoza explains.

Recognizing the importance of **oral language development**, Linden has implemented a “**dialogic approach**” across classrooms. “We noticed that in our classes, over 50% of the discussion was teacher talk, meaning students were mostly listening,” Dr. Mendoza shares. “To address this, we are rethinking our lesson planning to better balance speaking and listening activities. Lessons now emphasize student conversation while remaining text-based, encouraging students to infer meaning from texts rather than just pictures.” One strategy teachers use is the “**language experience approach**,” where students dictate stories based on personal experiences, which are then used as reading material. This enhances reading skills while validating and building upon students’ own linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Linden also offers intensive English as a second language (ESL) classes. These classes, which meet daily, focus on accelerating English development through **explicit language instruction** and **content-based learning**. “Our ESL classes are designed to build students’ English proficiency while also developing key academic concepts,” Dr. Mendoza explains. “We use **high-interest, age-appropriate materials** and incorporate lots of **interactive** activities to keep students engaged.”

Teachers also use extensive **modeling** and demonstration. “We show students what we want them to do,” Dr. Mendoza notes. “This includes **guided reading sessions**, where we model reading strategies, and **demonstrations of academic tasks**.” At the high school level, Linden uses a reading intervention program designed specifically for SLIFE students, adapted from Reading Recovery principles. Linden has also **partnered with local organizations** to bring **volunteers** into SLIFE classrooms. “These volunteers don’t provide instruction,” Dr. Mendoza clarifies, “but they support independent work, guiding students and providing support when needed. This allows our teachers to work more intensively with small groups.”

Kingsley’s Targeted Approach for Secondary SLIFE

In Kingsley, the focus has been on developing targeted linguistic supports for secondary SLIFE. Florina Stanescu, ESL teacher for newcomer and SLIFE students at Kingsley High School, describes their approach as follows: “We’ve developed a program that addresses both the academic and practical needs of our SLIFE. Many of our students are working full-time jobs in addition to attending school, so we need to make every moment count.” Kingsley’s approach to differentiated instruction is highly **individualized**. “We see each student as an individual with unique strengths and needs,” says Ms. Stanescu. “Our instruction is tailored to meet these specific needs, whether it’s extra support in **phonics, vocabulary development, or academic language use**.”

Kingsley has recently adopted a structured approach to teaching **foundational literacy skills**. “We use a program called HD Word through Really Great Reading,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “It’s a 20-minute daily program that covers all 44 phonemes of the English language in 35 lessons.” Kingsley also uses a version of the Frayer model for **vocabulary development**, adapted specifically for SLIFE. “We provide a **translation** for each word that we introduce,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “And if we have multiple languages spoken in the classroom, we make sure that each language is mirrored.” Ms. Stanescu adds, “I often switch the order of languages because I do not want students to internalize that there is a hierarchy of languages. In other words, the Spanish does not always appear first. Sometimes it is Haitian Creole, sometimes it is Portuguese or Thai.”

Both Linden and Kingsley make extensive use of **visual supports**. Ms. Stanescu notes that in Kingsley, “We have visuals for common phrases newcomers might need, like asking to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. These visuals span all content areas and language domains, helping students navigate both social and academic aspects of school life.” Several Kingsley classrooms have also implemented a **“word wall” in multiple languages**, featuring high-frequency words and academic vocabulary. Teachers use **“sentence frames”** to move beyond the word/phrase dimension of language and support academic discourse. “We use a variety of strategies to accelerate English development, including **targeted vocabulary instruction, structured oral language practice, and intensive reading and writing activities**.”

Kingsley has also implemented a strategic **buddy system**. “We pair students thoughtfully,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “Sometimes we pair students who share a language, other times we create cross-language pairs. We’re very intentional about when and how we use these pairings to maximize language learning.” Both Ms. Stanescu and her co-teacher, Matthew Anderson, the ELA teacher, emphasize the importance of **peer-to-peer collaborative learning** for SLIFE. “The kids love helping and teaching each other,” Mr. Anderson shares. “We’ve

found that collaborative activities not only support language development but also help build a sense of community among students.”

The work done in Linden and Kingsley reminds us that linguistic support for SLIFE requires a multifaceted, flexible approach that honors students’ existing knowledge and experiences, while providing targeted instruction that expands what students can do with language in an ever-growing range of contexts. As demographics evolve and new challenges arise, Linden and Kingsley continually refine their practices, always prioritizing the unique strengths and needs of their students.

Reflection Questions: Linguistic Support



1. How does your current program address the specific linguistic needs of SLIFE? Are there elements from Linden's or Kingsley's approaches that could be adapted for your context?
2. In what ways does your curriculum make connections between content learning and language development for SLIFE? How might this be improved?
3. How are you currently promoting oral language development for SLIFE? Are there opportunities to increase student talk time in your classrooms?
4. How are you currently assessing and supporting home language literacy for SLIFE? What resources might you need to enhance this support?
5. What technology resources are available in your district to support SLIFE language development? How effectively are these being used?

Actions to Consider: Linguistic Support

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



- **Create space for ample oral practice.** Provide daily, sustained opportunities for SLIFE to develop oral language skills.
- **Form a bridge from oral language skills to written literacy.** Tap into student strengths with spoken communication and create pathways for them to transfer those abilities into the written word. This approach capitalizes on what students already know, providing a familiar foundation on which to build their literacy skills.
- **Implement a structured literacy program** to support foundational literacy skills.
- **Support student skill transfer.** While some SLIFE may have nascent literacy skills in their home languages, others may be able to transfer significant home language reading and writing skills to support the development of English.
- **Strategically support students** to access complex text.
- **Implement a cross-curricular, project-based learning initiative** with a focus on language development—for example, through a multilingual digital storytelling project.
- **Promote the development and use of multiple languages.** Create a multilingual resource hub for teachers to share materials and strategies. For example, establish a multilingual book club or create a multilingual student newspaper or podcast.
- **Consider implementing a co-teaching model** in core content areas to provide integrated language and content instruction.
- **Develop a summer intensive language program** to provide additional learning opportunities.

Program Portrait: Low-Enrollment Settings

In low-enrollment settings, English learners (ELs) and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) account for only a small portion of the student population. According to DESE's [Low Enrollment Network](#) criteria, these districts typically have fewer than 100 EL students, with SLIFE often numbering in the single digits or low teens. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key themes have emerged in relation to low-enrollment settings:

- Opportunities for individualized attention and tailored instruction (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017)
- The potential for greater flexibility in programming and scheduling (Hos, 2020)
- Challenges in providing a wide range of specialized services (DeCapua et al., 2020)
- A need for creative approaches to professional development (Short & Boyson, 2012)
- The importance of regional collaboration and community partnerships (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010)

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 EL Success:** Review the [Interactive Blueprint for English Learner Success](#).

Low-enrollment settings can offer unique advantages for SLIFE, including closer relationships between staff and students, increased family engagement opportunities, and the ability to quickly adapt to changing student needs (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). However, several challenges have also been documented in the literature, including the following:

- Limited resources and staffing dedicated to SLIFE education (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010)
- Difficulty providing targeted instruction and programs because of small numbers (DeCapua et al., 2020)
- Lack of professional development opportunities specific to SLIFE (Short & Boyson, 2012)
- Isolation of SLIFE, who may be the only students from their language or cultural background (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017)

Successful approaches in low-enrollment settings often involve creative scheduling, collaborating across districts, and leveraging community partnerships (Hos, 2020). Many solutions developed for SLIFE can benefit all students in a district, aligning with Universal Design for Learning principles and helping to build broader support for these initiatives.

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)

Small Numbers, Big Impact: SLIFE Education in Low-Enrollment Settings

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: *Low-enrollment districts serving SLIFE vary across Massachusetts. Green Valley Regional School District serves three small towns, with about 1,200 students in total. Of these, about 10% are ELs and a little over 2% are SLIFE. SLIFE primarily speak Spanish and indigenous Mayan languages such as K'iche' and Mam. Many are unaccompanied minors who work in landscaping or food service.*

Old Wharf Public Schools also serves approximately 1,200 students, including 200 ELs and three SLIFE. Old Wharf has recently received Afghan refugee students speaking Dari and Pashto, many coming with their entire families. Old Wharf has also seen an increase in Portuguese speakers.

Promising Approaches Reported Through Interviews

Flexible Programming and Scheduling

Low-enrollment districts emphasize the need for flexibility in serving SLIFE. “We can’t fit our students into a fixed program; we have to be flexible and responsive,” explains Natalie Brooks, EL teacher at Green Valley High School. The district takes an individualized approach, adapting instruction and schedules to meet each student’s unique needs. It has also implemented an innovative approach to mathematics instruction, where students attend both their grade-level Algebra I class and a supplemental foundational mathematics class that provides targeted support for prerequisite skills. This ensures students can access grade-level content while building fundamental mathematical understanding.

Collaboration Across Departments and Districts

With limited EL-specific staff, low-enrollment districts emphasize collaboration. Green Valley focuses on collaborative teaching models, where EL teachers work alongside content teachers in general education classrooms. “It’s not always easy, but it helps ensure our students can access the general curriculum,” says Ms. Brooks. “Last year, I co-planned and co-taught a unit on the American Revolution with the history teacher. Our SLIFE students were able to engage with the content while receiving language support.” Districts also collaborate regionally. Ms. Brooks shares, “We have a county-wide Green Valley Professional Learning Network where EL teachers meet five times a year. We support each other, which is crucial. We’ve developed shared curricula and assessment tools that have been invaluable.”

Community Partnerships

Low-enrollment districts leverage community partnerships to expand services. Old Wharf collaborates with a local adult English as a second language (ESL) program to offer additional language classes to SLIFE enrolled in Grades 11 and 12. “We have a memorandum of understanding with the community college,” explains Alba Pérez, EL coordinator. “Our students can attend evening ESL classes there for free, which has been especially helpful for our older SLIFE who need more intensive language support.”

Old Wharf also works with refugee resettlement agencies to support newcomer families. “These partnerships are crucial,” says Ms. Pérez. “They allow us to offer services we couldn’t on our own, given our small size and limited resources. For example, the resettlement agency provides cultural orientation sessions for our staff and helps connect families to essential services.”

Professional Development

Recognizing the need for SLIFE-specific training, low-enrollment district leaders find additional ways to offer professional development. They participate in regional EL networks, leverage online training modules, and take advantage of state-offered opportunities like the MA SLIFE CoP. “We can’t always bring in big-name consultants,” notes Ms. Brooks, “but we make the most of what’s available virtually and through collaboration. Last summer, we organized a districtwide book study on *Breaking New Ground for SLIFE: The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm* by DeCapua and Marshall. It really helped build our collective understanding and skills.”

Competency- and Project-Based Learning

Old Wharf has implemented a competency-based program where students can earn credits through project-based learning. This benefits both SLIFE and other students who may thrive in alternative learning environments. Ms. Pérez explains, “This alternative allows students to progress at their own pace while still meeting standards. For example, Fatima, an 18-year-old from Afghanistan, was able to demonstrate her math skills through a project on budgeting and personal finance rather than a traditional Algebra II course.”

Challenges

Despite these efforts, low-enrollment districts still face challenges. Scheduling remains difficult, with SLIFE sometimes unable to access certain electives or career/technical education programs due to conflicts with ESL classes. Districts also struggle with consistent identification of SLIFE status. “With such small numbers, it’s hard to develop expertise in SLIFE-specific screening tools,” notes Ms. Brooks. “We’re constantly learning and adapting our processes.” Staff burnout is another concern, as the few EL teachers often take on multiple roles to meet student needs. “It’s rewarding work,” says Ms. Brooks, “but it can be exhausting trying to be everything to everyone. Last year, I was the only EL teacher for our high school SLIFE, which meant I was responsible for their English instruction, content support, family communication, and even some social-emotional counseling.”

Looking Ahead

Despite the challenges, educators in low-enrollment settings remain committed to serving SLIFE. “These students bring such incredible strengths and perspectives to our schools,” reflects Ms. Brooks. “It’s our responsibility to find creative ways to support them.” Ms. Pérez echoes this sentiment, adding, “Every small success motivates us to keep improving.” As districts continue to collaborate, share resources, and advocate for SLIFE, they are gradually building more robust programs. While the path forward may not always be clear, the dedication of these educators and the resilience of their students provide reason for optimism. As one student in Old Wharf put it, “It’s hard, but I’m learning every day. I know I can do this.” This spirit of determination, shared by students and educators alike, continues to drive progress in SLIFE education across low-enrollment settings in Massachusetts.

Reflection Questions: Low-Enrollment Settings



1. What systems do you have in place to identify, monitor, and support SLIFE progress given your low SLIFE enrollment numbers? How could you improve these systems while remaining manageable for limited staff?
2. What systems do you have in place to support content teachers working with small SLIFE numbers? How could collaboration between EL and content teachers be enhanced given limited planning time and resources?
3. How are you addressing the social-emotional needs of SLIFE students who may be isolated due to small numbers? How could peer mentoring or other approaches help build connections and support networks?
4. What collaborative partnerships (in your district, neighboring districts, and community organizations) could you develop or strengthen to expand SLIFE services? What specific needs could these partnerships address?
5. Given limited staffing and resources, how can your district creatively approach professional development related to SLIFE? What virtual, asynchronous, or shared learning opportunities could be leveraged?

Actions to Consider: Low-Enrollment Settings

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



- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify specific advantages and challenges in serving students identified as SLIFE in your low-enrollment setting.
- **Review master scheduling processes** to create equitable access and support for SLIFE.
- **Develop a collaborative system for regular check-ins** between EL staff and content teachers to support SLIFE in general education classes.
- **Develop a system for monitoring and sharing student progress** that allows for flexible pacing and individualized goal setting (for example, a [SLIFE Success Portfolio](#)).
- **Create a resource guide of SLIFE-specific instructional strategies** that can be shared across departments.
- **Explore competency- or project-based learning models** that might offer alternative pathways for SLIFE.
- **Investigate online resources and virtual professional learning opportunities** focused on SLIFE education (like the [Massachusetts SLIFE CoP](#) and [learning modules](#) in the SLIFE Toolkit).
- **Reach out to nearby districts** to explore possibilities for shared professional development or programming focused on SLIFE.
- **Implement a mentoring program** pairing SLIFE with peers or community members to support language development and cultural adaptation.
- **Meet with local community organizations** to identify potential partnerships that could enhance services for students.

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.