

Supporting Multilingual Learners Identified as Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)



Who Are Our Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education?

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) is an overarching term used to describe a diverse subset of learners among the larger multilingual learner population. Currently, no federally recognized definition or data collection mechanism exists for this subset of multilingual learners, but most states assign this status to students missing two or more years of academic schooling throughout their educational history. Estimates on the number of students currently identified as SLIFE in classrooms in the United States are inexact but predicted to range between 10%–20% of identified multilingual learner students.

Considering that each student's journey is unique, this demographic includes refugee students, migrant students, or students born in the U.S. who have experienced limited or interrupted access to school. Students who are monolingual English speakers may also have experienced limited or interrupted schooling due to homelessness, medical fragility, or a community health crisis. However, these students are not identified as SLIFE precisely because they are not English language learners.

Typically, multilingual learners identified as SLIFE are recent arrivals to the U.S. school system with varying factors influencing their interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their native countries or during an extended immigration journey. Common variables contributing to such circumstances include isolated geographic locales, restricted access to transportation, societal/cultural expectations including discrimination based on gender and ethnic identity, a need to enter the workforce and contribute to the family income, natural disasters, war, or civil strife. As a result, such circumstances often lead to limited formal background on academic content skills, even in students' heritage languages.

Knowing and understanding your multilingual learners identified as SLIFE is essential for ensuring their success in your teaching and learning context and their new communities at large. Alarming data indicates that nearly 25% of our nation's teen school dropouts were foreign-born youths and 40% of those dropouts were recent arrivals already behind in school before they entered U.S. classrooms. This begs the question, how can we get to know our multilingual learners identified as SLIFE and best support them through their personal and educational journeys?

How Are Multilingual Learners Identified as SLIFE Showing Up in Our Classrooms?

Because of limited and/or interrupted exposure to formal education, multilingual learners identified as SLIFE often face challenges that are more complex and varied than other multilingual learners, with more nuanced potential for linguistic, cultural, and academic implications. Certain commonalities among state qualifications for who is considered SLIFE include multilingual learners recently registered or reentering U.S. schools with beginning English language proficiency, often typically performing below grade level in reading and/or math, often by two or more years.



Importantly, data indicates multilingual learners identified as SLIFE are concentrated more heavily at the secondary levels. While this subset of students might be performing two or more years below grade level, their interests, experiences, and curriculum are certainly not elementary. This disconnect can result in a dynamic set of challenges for delivery and instruction that supports students in their academic and social development while maintaining high expectations and engagement with grade-level, content area materials. To learn more about effective classroom practices to address this particular challenge, check out the section entitled Essential Classroom Strategies for Multilingual Learners Identified as SLIFE.

Not all multilingual learners identified as SLIFE have experienced trauma and not all multilingual learners who have experienced trauma are identified as SLIFE. However, this subset of students is disproportionately exposed to trauma-related events through their unique lived experiences. Trauma is a reaction to being exposed to an event that results in emotional disturbance and has lasting adverse effects on a person's health or well-being. Not all trauma is the same and not all individuals react to trauma in the same manner. Therefore, it can often be difficult to identify.

In the classroom, trauma can manifest as disengagement from learning and the school community, disruptive and challenging behavior patterns, difficulty forming relationships with teachers or peers, persistent anxiousness, and/or negative thinking. Moreover, due to a triggering event or prolonged suffering of stress, trauma can also frequently result in physical and neurological ailments such as stomachaches, headaches, and panic attacks. Such consequences often result in a disproportionate impact on participation and attendance. If you suspect a student might be experiencing trauma, there are many resources available to you. As you get to know students' individual stories and observe patterns of behavior, you can consider if a student might need support in this area. You might not be the best person to address potential trauma directly, but you are the best person to get to know your students and connect them with resources available in your setting!

How Can I Build a Responsive Classroom?

While some situations will benefit from resources beyond the classroom, teachers of SLIFE can build resilience and self-efficacy through providing opportunities for students to identify and express their emotions during classroom learning.

Effective practices to build a responsive classroom include the following:

- Use a mood meter or emoji board for a "temperature check."
- Ask daily questions that share students' interest and lived experiences and connect them to content.
- Engage in role-play around best courses of action across different classroom and schoolwide procedures and events.
- Ensure the cultural and linguistic identities of all learners are present and reflected positively in classroom decor and curricular materials.
- Welcome and affirm the expression of students' personal stories through platforms such as question prompts, journaling, writing or speaking prompts, arts integration, and more.

Programming Considerations

Tailored programs to support newcomers identified as SLIFE have been described as, “a program that, in a special academic environment for a limited period of time, educates recent immigrant students who have no or very limited English language proficiency and who may have had limited formal education in their native countries” (Short & Boyson, 2004, as cited in Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, 2018). While varying to a great degree, common characteristics of these programs include a focus on orienting students to U.S. schools and their new community, instructional practices toward literacy development, and the integration of content and language, as well as fostering a collaboration of learning with strong family involvement. Regardless of the setting, it is critical that teachers are designing instruction with the specific goal that students increase English language proficiency alongside content knowledge. Without the increased English proficiency, students can find it difficult to listen and read in order to learn in their classes beyond the SLIFE program, but without acquiring some grade-level content knowledge, students are unlikely to be able to make meaning from the language to which they are exposed during a lesson on grade-level content.

In 2018, the Council of Chief State School Officers released a report, *Understanding and Supporting the Educational Needs of Recently Arrived Immigrant English Learner Students (RAIELs): Lessons for State and Local Education Agencies*. Their ultimate findings support the notion that there is not a one-size-fits-all model for newcomer programming. However, patterns do exist. Elementary schools often place identified students in general education classes, with some interaction with an English as a Second Language (ESL) certified educator throughout their day. High school settings place identified students in more separated and specialized courses, including newcomer centers, or clustered in sheltered or transition courses at specific neighborhood schools. Beyond grade-level differences, all districts described the challenge of addressing competing needs from the linguistic, academic, social, psychological, and life skills areas (Umanski et al., 2018).

These competing needs can often lead to inconsistent school attendance, especially when combined with particular variables that resulted in a student’s interrupted formal education experiences in the first place (i.e., societal expectations about schooling, pressure to contribute financially to one’s family) and that are not mitigated simply by moving to the U.S. When combined with factors such as being over-aged and under-credited, inconsistent school attendance at the secondary level creates a high likelihood of dropout. While there has been little academic research on the prevention of dropout in the SLIFE population, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance’s *Preventing dropouts in secondary schools* provides a summary of interventions that are likely to be effective with students; however, these interventions were not developed specifically for this population and may require adjustment depending on the individual context and needs.

One District's Success Story

While many resources detail the steps to create successful SLIFE programs (DeCapua et al., 2020), educators have not received much guidance on how to best transition students out of newcomer programs and into grade-level, content classrooms.

Beginning in the 2023–2024 school year, Metro Nashville Public Schools launched a program to explore a unique approach to supporting students' academic, social-emotional, and subsistence needs through a case management model in their first year after completing a newcomer program. Drawing from practices developed to reduce dropouts in secondary schools, the SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) Transition Facilitator program assigned a "single person to be the student's primary advocate [who could use and] develop a menu of support options" (Rumberger et al., 2017, p. iii).

At the beginning of the school year following completion of the newcomer program, the transition facilitator is responsible for communicating attendance expectations to the student and their guardians, which extends naturally to providing information about how to access transportation and the general rules (i.e., dress code, code of conduct, tardy policy, etc.) of the new school. Throughout the school year, the transition facilitator conducts frequent check-ins with the student and works to meet the academic, social-emotional, and subsistence needs that are shared during these informal conversations.

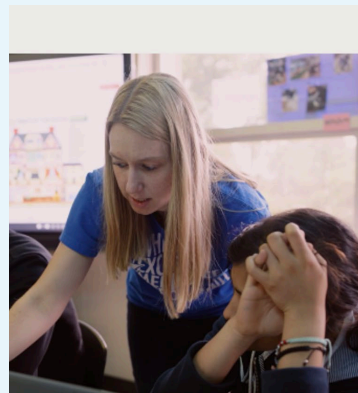
In addition to providing weekly academic tutoring after school, a transition facilitator may interview a family to determine wraparound supports that could be provided by the community, drive one student to the doctor's office to receive a sports physical so they can join the soccer team, and engage another student in a goal-setting protocol to determine a plan to increase their grades. All of these supports are implemented with the goal of increasing the students' school connectedness in order to decrease the likelihood of dropout, reduce truancy, and increase the number of credits earned.

At the end of the program's first year, data was analyzed to determine the program's effectiveness, including a comparison of two Spanish-speaking males who were attending the same zoned high school after completing a specialized out-of-zone SLIFE program.

WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> CLOSER LOOK

Student Receiving Services From a Transition Facilitator	Student Not Receiving Services From a Transition Facilitator
5 days absent	25 days absent
0 tardies	23 tardies
15.5 credits earned	3 credits earned
0 behavior referrals	11 behavior referrals
0 days out-of-school suspension	4 days out-of-school suspension

Although funding for this type of casework may be limited, teachers can accomplish many of these tasks during the school day if they are provided with additional planning time or if schools are able to compensate teachers for their time outside of contract hours by applying for grants.



Transition facilitators support students in building connections between schools, families, and community partners through a series of needs assessments. Source: Nashville Public Education Foundation

Hi, School, Nice To Meet You!

Why do students raise their hands, walk in a line, and always write their name in the top-left corner of a paper? The school day presents numerous perplexing moments for multilingual learners identified as SLIFE that extend beyond the cultural differences between their home countries and the U.S. If they are to be successful in the fast-paced environment of formal education in the U.S., there is a very specific culture and language with which students identified as SLIFE must rapidly be introduced to and become fluent in: the U.S. school.

By explicitly teaching “how to school,” educators must pull back the veil on these norms that seem intuitive to the majority of the student population in the U.S. after attending kindergarten. As always, context is essential when deciding how to best support the newcomers in your school community while acquiring the necessary knowledge to navigate the culture of schooling. In high incidence settings, these lessons may take place during a designated time of the day within a clustered class, but in low incidence settings, these lessons may primarily be offered during a preliminary orientation and sustained with regular check-ins from a mentor educator or school study buddy.



Essential Classroom Strategies for Multilingual Learners Identified as SLIFE

What can reinforcement of belonging, learning, and growing look like during instructional time? While working with multilingual learners identified as SLIFE, especially at the secondary level, it is essential to balance foundational academic instruction with relevant, age-appropriate materials that demonstrate respect for their lived experiences.

Instructional practices to support the needs of multilingual students identified as SLIFE include the following:

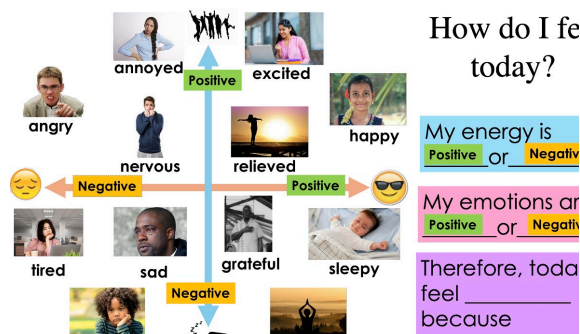
- Set students up for success to “do school” in your local setting. This includes general organizational strategies, writing emails, downloading/saving/uploading files to your school’s learning management system, grading procedures, attendance expectations, bathroom and behavioral policies, cafeteria norms, emergency drills, and locating familiar and trusted adults throughout the building.
- Clearly identify lesson and unit level language goals that explicitly name the area and type of language aligned with current content learning. Consider these



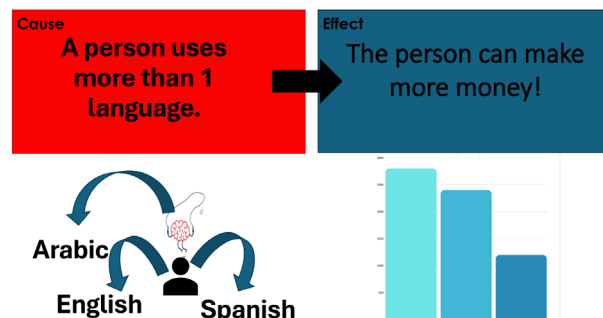
Creating alphabet cards using community landmarks with which students are familiar is one way to value the knowledge SLIFE students bring into the classroom and to provide age-appropriate materials for secondary learners. Source: Addison Barrack

goals when prioritizing what language to surface in curricular materials and practice in classroom learning.

- Teach foundational literacy with letters, sounds, and language tied to meaningful and local community landmarks.
- Update visuals on curricular materials to use examples of students of similar ages engaged in activities of similar interests, even when the content of the lesson is foundational.
- Ensure the social and instructional language of school is reinforced. It is easy to become focused on setting students up for academic language development, but equally critical is access to the language of lesson and activity instructions as well as classroom conversations, expectations, and routines. For instance, do students know what a “quick write” or “turn and talk” or “annotate with symbols” or “summarize using the 5Ws” means? Can we model this? Practice together as a class? Check for understanding with a thumbs-up/thumbs-down? Provide word banks, stems, and paragraph frames to set students up for authentic participation?
- Work collaboratively with literacy and math interventionists to assess where students’ foundational literacy and math skills currently are and develop a plan to strengthen them utilizing resources available in your district.
- Explicitly teach identification and labeling of emotions within oneself and others, healthy coping mechanisms within the school setting, goal setting, self-reflection, positive and negative consequences of specific actions within the school setting, circle of control, and benefits of multilingualism in a global society.



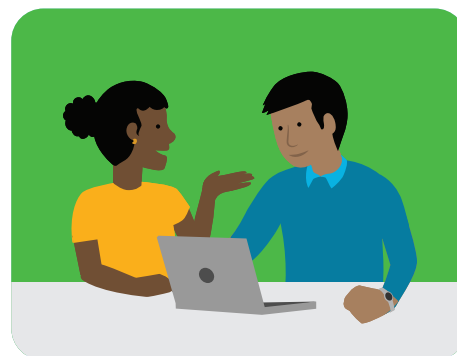
Using visual supports, students identified as SLIFE can learn the important nuances of the vocabulary used by English-speakers to describe states of feeling. Source: Addison Barrack & Katrina Fernandez



When designing classroom instruction around the needs of multilingual learners identified as SLIFE, emerging multilingualism should be reinforced through frequent, explicit lessons that highlight the benefits of acquiring additional languages. Source: Addison Barrack

Coming Together To Establish Official Policies

We understand that best serving multilingual learners identified as SLIFE requires a whole-child, whole-building, whole-community approach. Every community's population is unique, so it is important to consider local cultural and environmental structures and align them with what you've learned from your students' and families' personal goal setting. Considering this macro-level coordination, certain policies and procedures have been found to be effective in supporting the engagement of students identified as SLIFE, especially at the secondary level.



These characteristics include the following:

- Knowledge of and familiarity with interpretation and translation services available in your setting. These can range from technology applications to conference phone calls to in-person bilingual or multilingual support. Translation and interpretation services should not only occur for essential contact but also extend to regular school and district-wide communication, extracurricular opportunities, and positive check-ins with families.
- Required professional development for all staff around best practices for welcoming multilingual learners and their families, understanding language proficiency data, best practices in the classroom, and basic training in trauma-informed strategies.
- Program-specific administrators and counselors that are familiar with this population of students and the resources available for welcoming them and their families into school buildings.
- Placement processes that assess international transcripts to award potential credits and determine the best course pathway for students. Here, potential gaps may also be identified that can be addressed by available intervention and remediation resources.
- Devoted English language development courses taught by ESL-certified teachers. These courses are not isolated phonics lessons, but rather explicit, targeted language instruction rooted in relevant grade-level, content-based materials. This best sets students up for success when ESL and general education teachers collaborate based on their areas of expertise to set language and content goals for a unit and plan for scaffolds and models that reinforce one another.
- Utilizing local funds or grants to prioritize after-school and Saturday “homework help” or learning interventions. These settings can offer effective environments with less distractions, small group settings, and devoted time to reinforce essential skills and content.

One District's Whole-Community Approach

Over the past few years, Norfolk, Virginia, experienced a mushrooming population of newcomer families arriving in the city and enrolling in the local school system. In response, Norfolk Public Schools prioritized the establishment of a specialized welcome center to strive to build a sense of community and belonging for newcomer students and families in their new community. Julianne Flores, senior coordinator of ESL services for the district, described the purposeful approach in action and highlighted the following considerations:

- The location of the center was significant. The team considered where families were located, which schools had the highest concentration of enrollees, and what was convenient and accessible to public transportation and close to local resources.
- How could existing resources and funding be utilized? The team transformed prior science classrooms in a middle school building to form the basis of the center. They combined the use of local funds with Title 1 funds when able and applicable.
- Collaboration was, and is, key to their success. Colleagues all across the city have been essential in getting the welcome center up and running, from district leadership to administrative staff in different school buildings, and from security and construction personnel to local community organizations. Information continues to be passed through these networks, along with multilingual informational brochures available at school sites throughout the city.
- The intention is not to be a one-stop shop. Family engagement specialists work on ensuring families have a positive and informative experience enrolling in the school system. From there, they are welcomed into the growing community with invitations to return for regular workshops. Workshop topics are based on identified high areas of need and aligned with district initiatives. Examples of workshops include technology assistance and navigating the online learning management system, expectations of U.S. schooling, guidance on secondary grading and course credits, support to recognize and combat bullying, introduction to a variety of community resources, and informal opportunities to share coffee, cookies, and connections.
- The whole family is welcome! The English Learner Family Academy (ELFA) takes place quarterly on a Saturday. This event is hosted in a neutral space in the community like the zoo. Topics covered are similar to the welcome center workshops and are tied to an academic activity. The intention here is to engage every member of the family, demonstrate that learning can be fun, and help build a sense of community across the city.

Our work in supporting multilingual learners identified as SLIFE is just getting started. For further professional learning, check out the WIDA Focus Bulletin [Trauma-Informed Considerations and Strategies for Multilingual Learners](#) or see how the [WIDA Language Charts](#) meet students where they are at and move them toward higher English proficiency levels through targeted classroom learning.

Suggested Citation

Bartholomae, L., Mossgrove, T., Barrack, A., Mickunas, A., & Flores, J. (2025, October). *Supporting multilingual learners identified as Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)* [Focus bulletin]. WIDA and The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

Bibliography

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. (2018, September 5). *Welcoming and orienting newcomer students to U.S. schools*. <https://brycs.org/schools/welcoming-and-orienting-newcomer-students-to-u-s-schools/>

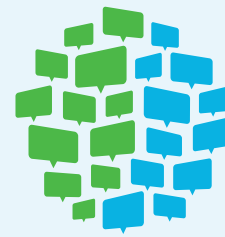
Custodio, B., & O'Loughlin, J. (2020). Students with interrupted formal education: bridging where they are and what they need. *American Educator*, 44(1), 9–11. <https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2020/custodio-oloughlin>

DeCapua, A., Marshall, H. W., & Tang, F. (2020). *Meeting the needs of SLIFE: A guide for educators* (2nd ed.). University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10024087>

Rumberger, R. W., Addis, H., Allensworth, E., Balfanz, R., Bruch, J., Dillon, E., Duardo, D., Dynarski, M., Furgeson, J., Jayanthi, M., Newman-Gonchar, R., Place, K., & Tuttle, C. (2017). *Preventing dropout in secondary schools* (NCEE 2017-4028). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/24>

Salva, C., & Matis, A. (2017). *Boosting achievement: Reaching students with limited or interrupted formal education*. Seidlitz Education.

Umansky, I., Hopkins, M., Dabach, D. B., Porter, L., Thompson, K., Pompa, D. (2018). *Understanding and supporting the educational needs of recently arrived immigrant English learner students: Lessons for state and local education agencies*. Council of Chief State School Officers. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED586975>



WIDA™

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

WIDA Authors

Lauren Bartholomae
Terri Mossgrove

Educator Authors

Addison Barrack
Allison Mickunas

Special Thanks

Julianne Flores

Editing and Design

Marilia Gutiérrez
Janet Trembley

School of Education

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Education Building
1000 Bascom Mall
Madison, WI 53706

Client Services Center

Toll free: 866.276.7735
help@wida.wisc.edu

wida.wisc.edu

© 2025 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of WIDA