

# Supporting Multilingual Learners' Language Growth through Language Development Portfolios



## Introduction

**Language development portfolios** are a classroom-based tool that can help teachers and multilingual learners see and understand students' language growth. Teachers of multilingual learners can collaborate to develop these portfolios with their students. This Focus Bulletin tells the story of how a fourth-grade team introduced portfolios to their teaching practice. It then poses several questions that the team might ask as they refine their usage. It closes by offering two sample tools that teachers can use and adapt to capture multilingual learners' language growth using modified Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) from the [WIDA English Language Development Framework, 2020 Edition](#).

Throughout the process, the teachers are guided by the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition (henceforth known as the Framework) as they (co)plan ways to document how their students' language is growing throughout the academic year.

## Cervantes Elementary

Cervantes Elementary School is located in a midsized city that has received multiple waves of immigrants. The school's Latine population has remained stable, and the K–5 school has maintained a two-way dual language program. In the past several years, Cervantes has seen an influx of refugees from several war-torn homelands; these new arrivals join the other multilingual learners who represent over 20 countries. In response to its growing multilingual student demographic, the administration and teachers built and supported a year-long professional learning experience devoted to the implementation of the Framework.

This year, in an effort to provide a greater range of data to inform local decision-making, the school is initiating a portfolio assessment system for all students. An additional focus on multilingual learners will also chronicle language growth. Later in the year, the portfolios will be used as one data point (among many) to inform decision-making about placement and services for the following academic year. Note that the purpose of these portfolios is not to assign a grade to multilingual learners, but to generate common understandings of current language performance and growth. Another important objective of the portfolios is for students to be able to notice and discuss how their work has changed over time, thereby developing a meta-awareness of their own growth.

The grade-level team has compiled and analyzed a survey on the interests, concerns, and learning goals of students and their families. Teachers plan to use this survey information as a starting point for deciding on themes and planning one project-based learning experience per quarter to be uploaded into each student's portfolio.

As a culminating event at the close of the year, each class will collaboratively present portfolio highlights with performance tasks of their choosing (e.g., poems, songs, audio recordings, photo journals with autobiographical notes, visual displays, or other artistic renditions). Cervantes' teachers plan on converting several hallways of the school into an "art museum." Each grade will take one hallway as their "museum wing," with students serving as "tour guides" of their work. Each class will focus on a theme, and students will select and share original work from their portfolios in their exhibits.

Whereas all students will have a similar structure to their portfolios, multilingual learner portfolios will include some additional tools focused on language development. Although teachers will have common criteria for monitoring language growth based on the Framework's grade-level cluster PLDs, multilingual learners will have the option of selecting various pathways to explore and produce evidence of learning.

### The Fourth Grade Team at Cervantes

Ms. Lima is a first-year, fourth-grade teacher at Cervantes. She has chosen to deepen her knowledge of multilingual education as one of her professional goals. She did not have much exposure to language development pedagogies while studying for her teaching degree; however, she is aware that scores on ACCESS for ELLs indicate a student's English language overall proficiency level. Unfortunately, when the school year begins, Ms. Lima has not yet received much information about her students in general, nor has she received their ACCESS scores. Ms. Lima knows she cannot wait, and she works hard from the very first day to develop connections with students and their families, and to begin learning about student interests and strengths to inform her teaching.

Ms. Lima reaches out to Mr. Fontaine, the language specialist. Luckily, Mr. Fontaine tells Ms. Lima that the fourth-grade team will meet weekly, and one of their goals is to analyze, observe, and support multilingual learners' language development. Mr. Fontaine and Ms. Lima are encouraged by the school administration's commitment to professional learning related to the Framework, and how this effort to better serve multilingual learners and their families supports the school's portfolio initiative.

Mr. Fontaine shares with Ms. Lima that the grade-level team has been planning around using language development portfolios to help teachers, multilingual learners, and their families more closely monitor language development over the academic year—the team will discuss this when they meet next week. For now, Mr. Fontaine offers Ms. Lima a resource to continue getting to know her students from an asset-based lens, a WIDA Focus Bulletin titled *Embedding the Can Do Cycle Throughout the School Year*. Ms. Lima is grateful for the upcoming opportunities to talk and collaborate with Mr. Fontaine and the fourth-grade team. As the team collectively works through their questions, they clarify ways in which they will use the Framework in their students' language development portfolios.

### Questions from the Fourth-Grade Team

1. If ACCESS for ELLs is a federally required, summative tool that offers a *yearly* snapshot to help educators, students, and families understand students' *year-to-year* English language proficiency development, what are some ways to continue to notice and monitor language development *over time throughout the school year*?

In addition to the once-a-year snapshot offered by ACCESS, all teachers of multilingual learners need tools to monitor content-driven language development to gain a comprehensive picture of each student's language development.

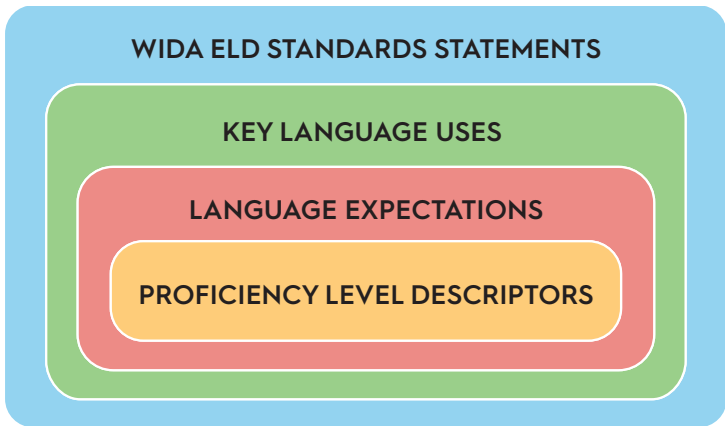
**Language development portfolios** are a classroom-based tool that can help teachers and multilingual learners understand (and document) how students' use of language is growing during the academic year. A portfolio that is co-constructed by students and teachers can provide authentic and robust evidence of learning—evidence that is based on, responsive to, and reflective of students' interests and preferences, their current work, and the local curriculum and program.

Language development portfolios offer a common language for teachers to interact with each other in describing what multilingual learners *can do*. As portfolios are shaped over time by students and teachers, they become common reference points for collaborative<sup>1</sup> analysis of student work, as well as for common adjustment of instructional design and delivery. As each portfolio gradually expands, becomes more comprehensive, and more representative of various aspects of student work, it serves as a cohesive body of work that can be shared with families. In the culminating museum event at the end of the year, student tour guides will have a structured way to share the fruits of their labor, using flashlights to steer peers, teachers, and families through the exhibits.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on how teachers might work together to serve multilingual learners, check out this [Focus Bulletin on collaboration](#).

2. How can the WIDA ELD Standards Framework anchor a language development portfolio?



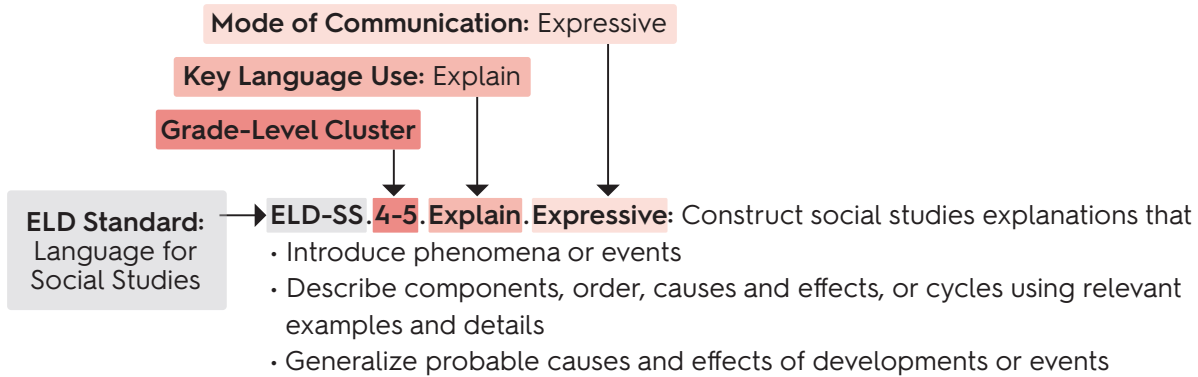
Together, the [WIDA ELD Standards Framework components](#) offer a uniform set of criteria to support and examine the language development of multilingual learners in K-12 contexts. The components can be used to anchor a number of approaches to language development portfolios. While this bulletin later introduces two portfolio elements based

on the Proficiency Level Descriptors, let's first review all four Framework components.

- As indicated by the **ELD Standards Statements** (Language for Social and Instructional Purposes, for Language Arts, for Mathematics, for Science, and for Social Studies), the Framework is designed to closely connect with language demands and opportunities found in state academic content standards.
- The four **Key Language Uses** (KLUs)—Narrate, Inform, Explain, and Argue—are helpful for designing instruction and assessment because they highlight the most commonly recurring language patterns (genre families) across core academic content standards—be they language arts, math, science, or social studies.

Genre Family	Definition
<b>Narrate</b>	Language to convey real or imaginary experiences through stories and histories. Narratives can serve many purposes, including to instruct, entertain, teach, or support persuasion.
<b>Inform</b>	Language to provide factual information. As students convey information, they define, describe, compare, contrast, organize, or classify concepts, ideas, or phenomena.
<b>Explain</b>	Language to account for how things work or why things happen. As students explain, they substantiate the inner workings of natural, human made, and social phenomena.
<b>Argue</b>	Language to justify claims using evidence and reasoning. Argue can be used to advance or defend an idea or solution, change the audience's point of view, bring about action, or accept a position or evaluation of an issue.

- The next Framework component, **Language Expectations**, adds concreteness and detail to the KLUs, and describes language goals for all multilingual learners, based on academic content standards.



- The fourth component, **PLDs** offer agreed-upon criteria to interpret how individual multilingual learners might develop language across six levels of English language proficiency over time. It is important to note that the criteria that PLDs offer can be applied to a variety of student artifacts in the language development portfolios—no matter the ELD Standard Statement, Key Language Use, or Language Expectation. In this way, PLDs offer a stable tool for interpreting varying sets of standards-based evidence of student learning.

For this reason, the fourth-grade team knows PLDs are a useful tool to keep in each student’s language development portfolio. The team adapts the expressive PLD chart for grade-level cluster 4-5 ([see pages 136-137 in the 2020 Edition](#)) into a teacher-friendly version, coupling it with a note catcher for easy reference and documentation of language performance on a quarterly basis. These portfolio tools are included in the last section of this Focus Bulletin.

3. Who monitors and assesses multilingual learners through the language development portfolios?

Schools with different sets of resources may set up portfolio roles and responsibilities in a variety of ways. In general, one or more team members are responsible for assembling and organizing the portfolio process, with the whole team sharing responsibility for collaboratively collecting and analyzing student work.

At Cervantes, school administrators provide the initial structures for the portfolio initiative. For example, they build their own and the faculty’s capacity by connecting the portfolio initiative to the year-long professional learning plan. They make it a priority to schedule time for teachers to have collaborative conversations about multilingual learners. They endeavor to support teachers to feel confident and successful in doing this work.

At Cervantes Elementary, the interdisciplinary fourth-grade team includes classroom teachers (Ms. Lima being one of them), a language specialist and coach (Mr. Fontaine), and a special educator. Sometimes the assistant principal and district ELD director also join the team meetings and help connect the team's work back to the schoolwide professional learning plan and portfolio initiatives. In this team, whereas Mr. Fontaine organizes and orients the other teachers to the language development portfolio, all team members share responsibility for collecting samples of student work, co-analyzing, co-reflecting, and co-planning next steps.

At Cervantes High School, the ninth-grade team uses a similar team structure as the fourth-grade team. However, teacher teams for grades 10–12 meet regularly, not by grade but by content area. In that case, the high school language specialists organize and coordinate the portfolio process. Cervantes High School's language specialists are embedded in content area team meetings, where they introduce the larger team to language development portfolios. Over several meetings across the school year, content area teachers share responsibility for collecting, analyzing, reflecting, and planning next steps around the samples of student work.

Regardless of team structure, it is critical to include multilingual learners and their families in the portfolio process. At Cervantes, teachers introduce families of multilingual learners to the language development portfolios at the beginning of the school year's open house. Throughout the year, they continue to refer to the portfolios during parent-teacher nights, Individualize Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and on an individual basis. In classrooms, teachers confer with students regularly about the projects, opportunities, success criteria, and the work samples to be included.

At the end-of-the-year "art museum," guests are invited, including families and community members. Students can use a flashlight to guide museum visitors and shine a light on their learning. Guests can review the contents of each "exhibit" closely and ask questions of individual students, pairs, or small groups.

#### 4. What types of evidence of student work should be included in the language development portfolios, and how often should it be collected?

The language development portfolios can be visual repositories of multilingual learners' growth, as a place to curate, analyze, and display writings, transcripts of conversations, art projects, photographs, recordings, drawings, notes, and so on. In addition to making language visible, the portfolios can make student learning *and thinking* visible to teachers, families, and students themselves.

A team composed of content and language educators (and other specialists as needed) can decide how often to collect and analyze evidence of student work. As the Cervantes fourth-grade team is committed to project-based learning,<sup>2</sup> they decide to collect one project per quarter to jointly interpret as a team.

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2 As an example, see [Voices from the Field article: Project-Based Learning and Wristbands for Refugees](#). You can [sign up](#) for *The Big Idea: WIDA Standards Quarterly Newsletter* to receive similar articles directly to your inbox.

If a school administers common assessments three or four times throughout the year, another option would be to focus the language development portfolios on these assessments from different content areas. Ideally, common assessments are rich performance assessments where multilingual learners demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and practices established as part of a unit's content and language goals in meaningful, multimodal, and authentic ways.

If a school does not have a unifying focus on projects or common assessments, a grade-level team (or collaborating teachers) can jointly determine a few specific points in the year to collect student artifacts. This team could design specific common prompts for the portfolios or collect naturally occurring pieces of evidence of student work from embedded points in the curriculum of different content areas.

## 5. How is monitoring or measuring happening in the language development portfolios?

At the beginning of the school year, as portfolio facilitator for the fourth-grade team, Mr. Fontaine introduces the portfolio process to new team members such as Ms. Lima, with other teachers also contributing their knowledge and experience. Mr. Fontaine also introduces the portfolio components that focus on language growth for multilingual learners—including a [student portrait](#), the teacher-friendly version of the PLD chart, and the note catcher for shared documentation of language performance (shown at the end of this bulletin).

As Mr. Fontaine facilitates, the team chooses which student projects will be collected for the portfolios toward the end of each quarter of the school year. The team coordinates classroom calendars and incorporates the portfolio schedule into learning plans. This allows them to plan ahead to support, collect, interpret, and discuss student portfolios at specific times of the year. To organize and maximize productive team discussions, Mr. Fontaine brings specific protocols<sup>3</sup> for collaboratively analyzing student work. Mr. Fontaine is poised to facilitate portfolio conversations at the end of each quarter, while the team shares equal responsibility for collecting and analyzing student work.

As authors and collaborators, multilingual learners should have agency in this portfolio process, helping to select prompts and artifacts, dialoguing about the work with peers and teachers, and developing awareness of their own development and growth. As students participate in the portfolio process, they also hone their skills for observation, analysis, organization, and reflection. Over time, students can develop the metacognition to be able to express understandings such as:

- What did I learn in this project?
- How did I learn it?
- How does this specific artifact capture what I learned in the project? What does it say about what I learned?
- Why did I learn this? What is the relation of this learning to life's enduring questions?
- How does this learning build on what I did in previous terms/units/projects?
- And what does this mean for next steps in my/our classroom's learning?

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of protocols, visit the [National School Reform Faculty](#).

Teachers can give feedback on students' choice of artifacts and on how students are analyzing their own artifacts. Teachers can also encourage students to highlight rough drafts and to note their own progress in relation to the final product, thereby showcasing evolution in thinking and learning.

## Sample Portfolio Tools

The next two pages offer two tools the fourth-grade team uses to document and interpret student language growth: the portfolio note catcher and the teacher-friendly PLD chart. These are kept inside each multilingual learner's language development portfolio where notes are taken and revisited several times over the academic year.

The fourth-grade team enjoys meeting quarterly as part of their professional learning to exchange student samples and reach consensus on the language development portfolios that are anchored in the teacher-friendly PLD chart. As they collaborate, the team gains confidence in assessing their multilingual learners in authentic ways. Towards the end of the school year, the teachers hope to meet with the fifth-grade team to share the contents of their students' portfolios.

### Sample Portfolio Note Catcher

The fourth-grade team at Cervantes has decided to use four major student projects for the language development portfolio. For this, in addition to the shared classroom work, the team plans to conduct a series of student-led conferences where students are supported to gradually develop meta-awareness about their own language growth. After the teachers analyze the samples of student work, they will use this note catcher to collaboratively document what they notice about each multilingual learner's language use according to the dimensions of language: discourse, sentence, and word/phrase ([see pages 31–34 of the 2020 Edition of the WIDA ELD Standards](#)).

### Consolidated Teacher-Friendly Proficiency Level Descriptor (PLD) Chart for Grade-Level Cluster 4–5<sup>4</sup>

Along with the note catcher, the team will use this teacher-friendly PLD chart as a summary for a student's language growth over the academic year. The chart maps student language performance across the PLD continuum for each quarter. Based on the note catcher comments, teachers will read across each row from left to right to identify which descriptors best capture the level of language development shown by the student in each quarter's artifact(s). Bolded terms in the example PLD chart on page 10 indicate what changes as the descriptor level increases.

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<sup>4</sup> This chart is drawn from the original WIDA ELD Standards Framework, Proficiency Level Descriptors, Grade-Level Cluster 4–5, Expressive (pp. 137–138)



## Language Development Portfolio Note Catcher

Keep this note catcher in each language development portfolio. Use it to make notes about how the team is catching language development for each multilingual learner based on the WIDA ELD Standards Framework.

Connecting content to language	Connecting language development to Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) and the dimensions of language
<b>QUARTER 1</b> Unit Focus: Academic Content Standards:  Project Title:  Key Language Uses: Language Expectations:	Discourse
	Sentence
	Word/phrase
<b>QUARTER 2</b> Unit Focus: Academic Content Standards:  Project Title:  Key Language Uses: Language Expectations:	Discourse
	Sentence
	Word/phrase
<b>QUARTER 3</b> Unit Focus: Academic Content Standards:  Project Title:  Key Language Uses: Language Expectations:	Discourse
	Sentence
	Word/phrase
<b>QUARTER 4</b> Unit Focus: Academic Content Standards:  Project Title:  Key Language Uses: Language Expectations:	Discourse
	Sentence
	Word/phrase

## Example of a Teacher-Friendly Proficiency Level Descriptor Chart, Grade-Level Cluster 4–5, Expressive

DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE		Variable Range ELP 1-2	Variable Range ELP 2-3	Variable Range ELP 3-5 +
<b>Discourse</b> To what extent does the student craft texts that respond to purpose and audience?	<b>Organization:</b> How does this student arrange texts that are increasingly coherent, logical, and clear?	Through <b>words and sentences</b> that convey an <b>emerging sense of the purpose and organizational patterns of a KLU</b> – Narrate, inform, Explain, Argue (e.g., topic sentence followed by supporting details) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through <b>short texts</b> that convey the <b>intended purpose of a KLU</b> using <b>predictable or generic organizational patterns</b> (e.g., paragraph openers, introduction, body, conclusion) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through <b>texts</b> that convey intended purpose of a KLU using <b>KLU-specific patterns</b> (e.g., set the context, state a position, support the claim with reasons, offer a conclusion, call to action) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Cohesion:</b> How does this student connect ideas throughout a text?	Through <b>frequently used</b> cohesive devices or formulaic expressions (e.g., conjunctions, repetition) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>growing variety</b> of cohesive devices (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, class/subclass) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>flexible variety</b> of cohesive devices (e.g., substitution, ellipsis) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Language and texts are multimodal (spoken, visual, written)</b>	<b>Density:</b> How does this student use language to elaborate or condense ideas?	Through a <b>few</b> types of elaboration (e.g., <b>familiar or newly learned</b> adjectives to describe nouns to expand ideas, pronouns to condense ideas: <i>maple syrup</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>growing variety</b> of types of elaboration (e.g., adding in embedded clauses after the noun: <i>the sap, which boiled for six hours</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>flexible variety</b> of types of elaboration (e.g., adding in embedded clauses after the noun: <i>the sap, which boiled for six hours</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Sentence Complexity:</b> How does this student extend or enhance meaning through sentence construction?	Through <b>sentence fragments</b> and <b>simple</b> sentences (e.g., one independent clause: a subject and a verb: <i>This is a blue nail</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through simple or <b>compound</b> sentences and <b>familiar ways of combining clauses</b> (e.g., independent clauses with conjunctions such as <b>and</b> or <b>but</b> : <i>The blue nail picked up the paperclip, but the red nail did not</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through <b>compound and/or complex sentences</b> and a <b>variety of ways of combining clauses</b> (e.g., mix of dependent and independent clauses: <i>The blue nail caused the paperclip to lift off the table because it had a stronger magnetic field</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Word, Phrase</b> To what extent does the student use precise language?	<b>Precision of Language:</b> How does this student use every day, cross-disciplinary, and technical language to convey precise meanings?	Through <b>frequently used</b> words and phrases (e.g., social studies, government) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>range</b> of words and phrases, including idiomatic expressions (e.g., “blast from the past”) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>	Through a <b>flexible choice</b> of words, phrases, and idioms (e.g., adverbials of time, manner, and place; abstract nouns; idioms; collocations: as a <i>result of the war...</i> ) Q1 <input type="checkbox"/> Q2 <input type="checkbox"/> Q3 <input type="checkbox"/> Q4 <input type="checkbox"/>

## The Takeaway

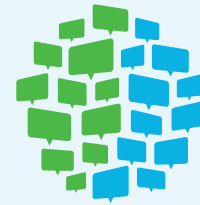
We hope the examples in this Focus Bulletin offer you ideas for understanding, monitoring, and discussing student language growth throughout the year. Language development portfolios can be co-constructed by students and teachers, provide authentic and robust evidence of learning, and help students develop awareness and ownership of their own growth.

Whereas the PLDs offer a standards-based, common criteria for monitoring language development, portfolios offer great flexibility—they can (and should) be tailored to students' interests and preferences; include an array of multimodal student artifacts; and offer multiple pathways to select, collect, and display student work from a variety of academic content areas, Key Language Uses, and Language Expectations.

Not least, language development portfolios offer common reference points for collaborative analysis of student work, support for adjustment of instructional design and delivery, as well as a common language for discussion and reflection among teachers, students, and families. As such, toward the end of the school year, language development portfolios can be a powerful data point (among many) to inform decision-making about placement and services for the following academic year.

## Other WIDA Resources

- Focus Bulletin: [Collaboration: Working Together to Serve Multilingual Learners](#)
- Focus Bulletin: [Embedding the Can Do Cycle Throughout the School Year](#) (see student portraits on page 4: see quantitative and qualitative student data)
- Flyer: [Using ACCESS for ELLs to Promote Beneficial Outcomes for English Learners](#)
- Flyer: [Finding Your Students' Superpowers: Using ACCESS Score Reports](#)
- Article: Aguirre, S. (2022). Using active and former English learner data when creating a balanced picture of bi/multilingual students. (in [English](#) and [Español](#))
- Article: Calaff, K., Shafer Willner, L., Gottlieb, M., Kray, F. (2022, Summer). [Using Proficiency Level Descriptors to Plan Instruction and Assess Multilingual Learners](#). *WAESOL Educator*, 47(2), 30-34.

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