WIDA Webinar_March_2026_Partners in Language Transcript

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Hello everyone, and welcome to WIDA Webinars. Thank you for joining. We have more WIDA webinars coming this year — you can check the schedule and register on the WIDA Webinars webpage. In today's session, we'll hear from WIDA professional learning curriculum specialist Lauren Bartholomay and her co-presenter, educator Amanda Goddard. Amanda is an ELD teacher from Massachusetts working with multilingual newcomers in grades K through five. They have a wonderful presentation for you today, so let's get started.

Thank you, Hannah. We have been thrilled about this webinar for quite some time now, and it has finally come to the moment where we get to share it with you all. We know time is so precious, especially in education, and to spend it here is really meaningful — so thank you for doing that and for taking time out of your day. We are so glad you are

here. We'd love to take a minute to introduce ourselves quickly, and feel free to introduce yourselves in the chat and share a little about your teaching and learning settings. We'd love to see all the different perspectives in the room.

My name is Lauren Brith. As Hannah mentioned, I am one of the professional learning curriculum specialists here at WIDA, writing, designing, and facilitating our professional learning materials. And I'm Amanda Goddard. I've been a public school educator since 2012 and have been teaching ESL since 2013. I currently work in an elementary school setting, but I've also taught in middle school, high school, and adult ESL. I'm so thrilled to be here with all of you today, and I'm excited for what we're going to explore together. Our webinar will be rooted in a case study featuring Amanda, her colleagues, and a truly remarkable student. Along our journey, we are going to examine how Amanda worked to set up systems of success, focus on planning, delivery, and instruction for language and content integration, and reflect on what she, her colleagues, and her student learned throughout this process. You'll also have access to a new fillable unit planning template we designed, rooted in the WIDA Standards Framework, and have time to envision how this learning might transfer to your own practice and setting.

Heading into this year, I found myself in a unique situation. The school district I had joined a year prior was redistricting, going from five elementary schools down to two. Just a day before school started, I learned that I would be splitting my time between both of those schools – something that may be familiar to many of you. Being an itinerant teacher was a brand new adventure for me. Instead of focusing on one or two grade levels with many MLs per grade, I was now dividing my time and attention across multiple schools, grades, and teachers. As I headed into the first day of teacher orientation, I didn't yet know my exact caseload, but I didn't want to wait to start building relationships with teachers who were also new to the schools.

While this webinar primarily focuses on partnering with classroom teachers, it's important to remember that partners in language also include the students themselves, their grownups, other staff in the building, and administrators. Before I even mention WIDA to teachers, I start by identifying the ELs and FELLs in my building and create an at-a-glance document for staff. I share this at the beginning of the year with grade-level teams, nursing staff, cafeteria workers, front office staff, building administration – really anyone who interacts with students throughout the day. It includes each student's name and photo, their WIDA access level, native language and translation needs, and whether they're on an educational plan. I also note any students who may need to be screened with the WIDA screener upon the start of school.
This at-a-glance document is helpful for many reasons. Front office and nursing staff use it to know who may need translated documents. Teachers and cafeteria staff use it

during out-of-class moments — if a student isn't in their class when it's time to line up at recess or clean up at lunch, it helps them recognize that a student may need additional visuals, language support, or physical demonstration rather than assuming the student is simply ignoring directions. After sending this document out, I make a point to visit each teacher who has an EL or FELL to introduce myself.

This year, I accidentally walked into the wrong classroom, but it turned out to be a wonderful serendipity. That teacher, Erin, had just received an email from a parent saying their child had just arrived in our country and that supporting their English was going to be a top priority. The student wasn't yet even on my to-be-screened list, but after a few calls I was able to gather more information. As it turned out, Erin ended up being the teacher whose classroom I spend the most time in each day — and you're actually going to hear from her today as well.

Because of the barrier of time, which we're all too familiar with, I sometimes have to rely on low-lift ways to build relationships. One example is a meet-the-teacher document that I create in Canva and share with staff. It gives teachers a quick snapshot of who I am, how I support their students, and how we can collaborate even if I don't have the chance to meet one-on-one with them right away. I like to include my photo as well, especially in years with new staff who might not know who I am — that way they can see me in the hall and stop to ask questions if necessary. For certain teachers, though, I do prioritize setting up one-to-one meetings. In your participant packet, on pages four to five, you'll find a list of sample questions I've used throughout my teaching journey to get to know the teachers I work with.

In most contexts, it's not feasible to set up meetings with everyone. I work with 18 students across two schools, six grade levels, and 16 different teachers. Some of you may work in high school or middle school settings where students have multiple teachers each. But I do think it's important to prioritize meetings with those who have higher-needs students or who will receive push-in instruction. Naturally, Erin was one of the teachers I reached out to with a calendar invite. It's also important to understand how comfortable the classroom teacher is with your level of involvement, and to get a sense of how they feel about collaboration and sharing their plans ahead of lessons. Before I even left my get-to-know-you meeting with Erin, she had already shared her plan book with me and added me to her Google Classroom. We may not have scheduled regular planning time during that meeting, but that initial connection gave me confidence that we would work well together.

Another approach I've used to stay connected and build strong partnerships with teachers is sharing newsletters with individual teaching teams. In the past, I regularly

shared newsletters to keep teachers updated on our work, celebrate student wins, and share resources. This helped make the language I was teaching their students visible and allowed teachers to reinforce it in their classrooms. I still have one teacher from my first year in this new district who remembers those newsletters and how helpful she found them in boosting her students' English proficiency. They were actually pretty easy to make – I used the same template and popped in new pictures and screenshots. As my teaching context shifted, however, and I began working with smaller numbers of students at varying proficiency levels, this individualized approach was no longer practical. Instead, our ELE department now sends out monthly newsletters to the entire district as a team. They continue to share stories, highlight successes, and provide resources, but now they reach a much broader audience. Communicating this way helps maintain connections and build shared understanding of students' learning and support across the district.

As I reflected on the first leg of Amanda's journey, I noticed some salient themes that best set Amanda, her new colleagues, and her multilingual students up for achievement. The first was her focus on relationship building. I know I'm preaching to the choir – you are here because you care, and we all deeply believe in developing authentic relationships and the benefits that arise from them. Amanda impressed me with her deeply intentional and multi-pronged approach. In her new setting, she understood the interconnectedness of student-teacher, teacher-teacher, and teacher-administrator dynamics, and she used these nuances to start building shared responsibility, shared goals, and advocacy rooted in individual students and their needs.

Secondly, Amanda knew she had to lay the groundwork before hitting the ground running, especially when it came to the sometimes daunting 392-page WIDA Standards book. She thought about what was truly essential for ensuring her multilingual learners had meaningful access to rigorous language and content in every classroom. For her, and for most of us, that meant first setting up a system of communication, service routines, and collaboration ideas that felt right to both the ELD and the content teacher. She helped establish shared expectations for what support and reinforcement of learning looks like from each area of expertise – coaching staff, special education staff, language staff, cafeteria staff, general education teachers – and made sure there was space for celebrating both little and big successes along the way.

Once we have those relationships and shared expectations, we have a strong foundation to move forward and collaborate in the best interest of our students at the classroom level. Almost all WIDA workshops and resources focus on this planning stage at a unit level, and that's intentional. We want to set our students up to learn, grow, and successfully express their mastery of content and language standards by the end of a

unit. That's why we plan for those patterns and intentional scaffolds throughout the unit – so students are equipped to demonstrate mastery at the end. We need to consider what we're using to measure their learning, and what key language and content concepts need to be introduced, reinforced, and practiced again and again throughout the unit to get there.

Consider the differences in purpose, style, vocabulary, and academic knowledge necessary for students to report their findings like a scientist, communicate their solution like a mathematician, explain a sequence of events like a historian, or recite a haiku like a poet. These require very specific language and very specific content knowledge, and they're so intrinsically intertwined that they can't be separated. So how can we be intentional about planning for them simultaneously? With this understanding, we can collaboratively set explicit content and language goals no matter the grade level or content area.

Our unit planning template grew out of a desire to bridge the gap between the WIDA ELD standards manual – which, as Lauren mentioned, can sometimes feel overwhelming – and practical classroom instruction. A key part of that process was translating the formal language of the standards into approachable "teacher talk," making the template easier to understand and use in the classroom. The process involves taking the ELD standards and aligning them directly to content in order to integrate language development goals with what students are already learning in class. This helps maintain the same academic expectations for all students regardless of their language proficiency level.

Who is responsible for filling out the template is flexible. An ELE teacher might complete the first unit independently to get a sense of how it works and then collaborate on the next one, or teams can build it together. Ideally it would be wonderful if all teacher teams could work on these templates together for every unit, but there's only so much time in a day. In my context, I work with classroom teachers to understand the content standard, then ask questions to determine what the key language use should be. This flexible approach allows teachers to gradually build independence while ensuring instruction remains intentionally standards-aligned and responsive to multilingual learners.

The first step of the template is really the anchor for everything that follows. You locate the relevant WIDA ELD standards by first examining the unit's content standards. This step is important because language development is built through grade-level content, not in place of it. It makes visible how language planning is directly tied to core instruction. In our example, the content is focused on understanding fractions – how

they're added, subtracted, and multiplied. This helps us clearly identify what students are expected to know and do academically. Once we're clear on the content, we identify the applicable WIDA ELD standards. Standard One, language for social and instructional purposes, supports all of the others and is always present even when our primary focus is a content-specific standard like math. Students need language not only to access content but also to learn the language of routines, discussions, and directions. In this example, we've identified Standard One and the language for mathematics standard. The big takeaway from Step One is simply to start with the content and then use the WIDA ELD standards to identify where and how language development fits within it.

After identifying the WIDA ELD standards in Step One, we move to Step Two, which is where we select the key language use, also known as the KLU. WIDA identifies four of these: narrate, inform, argue, and explain. These are not activities – they are overarching purposes for communication. For those new to WIDA, it's helpful to think of the KLU as a bridge between content and language. It helps narrow our focus so we're not trying to teach every type of language at once. The KLU helps us answer one important question: what is the primary purpose for language in this unit? In other words, what are students mostly doing with language as they engage with the content? To select a KLU, we go back to the content standard and the unit tasks and ask: are students primarily explaining their reasoning, describing and informing about facts, telling or retelling events, or making and supporting a claim? In a math unit like this one, we often land on "explain" because students are expected to explain their thinking and describe their problem-solving process.

Step Three is where we use the language expectations to set our unit-level language goals. If you're brand new to WIDA, you don't need to memorize all of this instantly. Think of this step as helping you answer one key question: what do I want multilingual learners to be able to do with language during this unit? What we're doing here is navigating the WIDA ELD Standards Framework to find an appropriate language expectation that matches our grade-level cluster, content area, and purpose for communication. In this example, the language expectation becomes: multilingual learners will be able to construct mathematical explanations. These words come directly from the 2020 Standards Framework. We haven't changed the expectation just because we're working with students learning English – the bar remains exactly the same for all students.

Step Four is where we unpack what we're really expecting of the student and beef up that language expectation. If Step Three helps us answer what we want students to do, Step Four helps us answer how they'll actually do it. Using the language expectation we identified, we look within our grade band in the manual and locate the language

functions — specific actions students will take with language, such as describe, explain, compare, or justify. Once we've identified the language function, in this case "describe," we then ask what language features students will need in order to do this successfully. Language features are the words, phrases, sentence structures, and supports that make the language function possible. To describe the steps to solve a problem, students will need supportive visuals like charts or manipulatives, and connector words like first, then, and next. This is where the WIDA framework supports us — not by lowering expectations, but by designing pathways that make grade-level content and language attainable. It helps clarify why scaffolds like sentence frames, word banks, and visuals aren't extras, but essential supports tied directly to the language demands of the lesson.

Now we're going to shift from the framework to practice and look at how I applied these steps with a specific student — a newcomer LIFE student in grade four named Kevin. Kevin moved to the United States about six weeks before the school year began. Prior to that, he had lived in the Dominican Republic for a year where he did not attend any school, and before that he had lived in Haiti where his schooling was also interrupted and incomplete. Kevin is considered a LIFE student — someone with limited or interrupted formal education.

What's important to know about Kevin is that he brings a lot of strengths with him. He loves playing soccer and Roblox. He's creative. He adores his mom. He is obsessed with learning English. He's a friendly kid who's respectful to all the adults in the building. At the same time, because of his interrupted school history, Kevin entered fourth grade still needing to develop foundational numeracy skills. So he's doing two very big things at once — learning a new language and learning foundational numeracy concepts — while also learning fourth-grade content, adjusting to life in school in America, building social connections, and just being a fourth-grade student. That makes him quite remarkable. This all makes Kevin a powerful example of why intentional language and content planning matters. The question isn't whether he can engage with fourth-grade math — it's how we design the instruction so he can access it while continuing to build both language and foundational skills.

The guiding question became: how do we set Kevin up to access, engage with, and ultimately master the goals of this unit? To answer that, we considered Kevin's individual context through a set of planning questions and a clear trajectory for his language development. These questions are in your participant packet and can also be found throughout the new language charts document. They help us be very intentional about designing instruction that is responsive to students' individual strengths, needs, abilities, and interests while still staying grounded in content standards.

On this part of the unit planning template, you see how we think intentionally about vocabulary and skills across different language proficiency levels. On the left are examples for students at the entering and emerging levels, and on the right, developing and expanding. What's important to notice is that the content doesn't change — students are still working with the same math concepts. What changes is the language load and the level of independence expected. This step helps us anticipate what language students will need to access the unit during planning, not after the fact, and gives us a shared reference point when collaborating with classroom teachers. Instead of saying "our MLs won't be able to do this," we can say, "here's the vocabulary and language skills they'll need, and here's how we can support that."

The final piece of the unit planning template focuses on in-class and assessment supports. We think ahead about what scaffolds students will need both while they're learning and while they're being assessed — not just during instruction. Supports like visuals, sentence frames, reduced language demands, and clear written steps ensure access and equity. This section also opens the door for important conversations with classroom teachers about things like monitoring assignments for cultural language, adjusting task volume, and deciding when sentence frames will be appropriate — all in a way that feels planned and intentional rather than reactive or personal to their instruction. By the time we've reached this part of the template, we've already aligned standards, content, and language. These supports simply ensure that students can actually demonstrate what they know — and that's really the goal.

Here are a few photos of Kevin engaging with his math work. The most important thing to name here is that the work Kevin's doing is the same work as the rest of the class — we are holding him to the same fourth-grade content standards. What looks different is how he's demonstrating his understanding. Because Kevin is still developing language alongside foundational numeracy skills, he was provided with fraction cubes and fraction tiles. These tools are not simplifying the math — they are making the math visible and helping him model his thinking. They allow Kevin to show what he understands even while his abstract and symbolic understanding is still developing. This is a good example of how we maintain rigor while adjusting access.

In the first video clip, you'll notice I'm using candy — a very spur-of-the-moment decision. I was originally trying to work through the same problem using little base-10 cubes, but for whatever reason it just wasn't clicking for Kevin. So I took him into the office next door, put some M&Ms in front of him, and he was able to demonstrate the concept. Sharing candy just made more sense to him than sharing blocks. You also heard me start by having him count by twos, which might have seemed unrelated to the task — and in a way it was. I did this to try to lower Kevin's affective filter. Because he

was struggling with the base-10 blocks and becoming visibly frustrated, I wanted him to complete a task I knew he could do in order to bring that frustration level down and his confidence back up. This video is a good reminder that sometimes access isn't about adding more explanation — it's about changing the representation.

In the second video, you see us building on the concept of multiplying fractions in a very concrete way. I always start with Kevin doing the work and record the math symbolically so he can see what his actions represent — this helps connect his hands-on understanding to the academic language and notation he'll eventually be expected to use independently. And in the third video, you see how language and math development also happen outside of formal instruction. One thing we did regularly was use the long walk from his classroom to mine as a learning opportunity. We would stop and have him practice introducing himself to adults we passed, saying his name and asking how they were doing. And we used the walk down the stairs as a chance to practice math and language at the same time. When we first met, we practiced counting from one to five over and over. Over time, we started counting by twos, counting backward, and eventually playing number pattern games. All small intentional decisions, but together they created access, engagement, and growth.

Tracking progress isn't just beneficial for me as a teacher — it's something that can be shared with our partners in language, including the classroom teacher, the student's grownups, and most importantly the student themselves. For Kevin, progress tracking became a powerful motivator. He loved tracking his times tables on a bar graph because it made his growth visible, and you could see how proud of himself he was. For us, this wasn't just about collecting data — it was also an instructional tool. It gave him repeated practice with foundational math skills while building confidence and ownership. It also introduced him to bar graphs, a skill his grade had covered in a prior year, so it helped him catch up on that concept as well. Questions like "how many did you get today? How many more is that than yesterday? How many more do you need to reach 60?" reinforced math concepts, comparison language, goal setting, and calendar skills all at once.

In the final video clip, you see a very informal assessment of Kevin's skills tied to the language goal we had set — being able to describe the steps he used to solve a problem, using visuals and manipulatives and sequencing language like first, next, then, and last. The formal activity I had planned wasn't available that day because access testing was taking place in my room, but what you see is Kevin working with colored floor tiles, following the sequence we'd practiced: first he counts how many tiles there are in all, next he counts how many are blue, and then he writes his fraction to show that relationship. Even in this informal setting, his language and process tell us a great deal.

And when I asked him to write down his explanation, he did a great job with that as well – and impressively, this was a month or two after we finished the fraction unit and he still remembered what to do.

I also want to note that Kevin's spelling and grammar are not perfect – but that was not the focus of this assessment. The question we were asking was: was he able to use language to communicate his content learning? And in that way, he absolutely was. That's what we prioritize when we're evaluating language in context.

To summarize the prominent themes from the second leg of our journey: it's essential to set instructional goals at the unit level with the end-of-unit assessment in mind. Research shows that this helps us explicitly identify, for ourselves, our students, and our colleagues, the most critical language and content information for the unit. When we name those things at the beginning, we can watch for those patterns throughout and make them visible for students, rather than introducing a different focus or different models every day that don't connect. Doing this helped Amanda, Kevin's teacher Erin, and Kevin himself develop a shared understanding of what they were collectively working toward. Throughout the unit, they consistently used the same language, the same types of scaffolds, and the same modes of presenting material, so everyone was always building on a common foundation.

Amanda and Erin also did a good job of maintaining the same grade-level content and rigor for everyone in the class while recognizing variation and flexibility in how students – especially Kevin – were able to express their learning. They encouraged Kevin to communicate his learning in different ways, leaning into different language domains. They also understood that the number, type, and extent of scaffolds vary by student, and they were mindful of Kevin's cognitive load – asking whether he could demonstrate learning in a shorter version of an assignment, or answer fewer questions while still engaging with the same level of rigor. This differentiation in access points was essential for Kevin's success, but it never reduced the overall expectation.

Missy Teman, the 2024 National Teacher of the Year, spoke at WIDA's annual conference and shared the quote: "You cannot love students into proficiency." I think that beautifully encapsulates the real messaging and ultimate goals of this work. Ultimately, we can likely all agree that time is a common enemy in our work with students – there's never enough. I was consistently impressed by the innovative ways Amanda maximized every moment, even the walks to her classroom, as connected, interactive, and discourse-based learning opportunities. The value of those moments should never be overlooked.

So, reflecting on this whole process and how it went – my first response is that collaboration really starts with a mix of necessity and relationship building. Sometimes it begins because there's an immediate student need, as in Kevin's case. Sometimes it grows from teacher buy-in and curiosity over time. Those initial problem-solving conversations at the beginning of the year evolved into more natural and ongoing collaboration that Erin and I developed. I found that when teachers see how language support directly impacts their students' success, collaboration stops feeling like an extra task and becomes part of how we regularly plan and think together.

In Kevin's case, my role developed out of a sense of urgency – it was more like a 911 call. We have to get everybody at the table. I'm fortunate to have an administrator who responded by saying, "okay, let's do that." We brought all the data we had already collected, some of which was blank assessments – but no data is still data. In general, I see my role as helping teams think about access, especially access through language. I'm not there to teach the math content; I'm there to support the language of math so that students can fully engage with the learning. That distinction matters. It also means making sure I'm included in the system – in previous settings, and I hear this from others too, ML educators can end up on the back burner or forgotten in student meetings. I make sure my role is part of the system of success.

Kevin's case was a big learning experience for me. He was my first LIFE student ever. I've worked with newcomers before, particularly in kindergarten and first grade, but this was a newcomer in fourth grade who had never attended third grade. At the beginning, I honestly felt overwhelmed, and I responded by calling that 911 meeting, reaching out to a LIFE specialist in another state, and ordering books. In the end, the collaboration between all of us ended up being a real strength. Something I would have done differently is balance my focus more intentionally between content and language supports. Because I wasn't used to working with newcomers in older grades, I initially leaned more heavily on content access – I felt like it was my job to get all that math into his brain. But remembering that I'm the language specialist, and that I'm here to teach him the language, is something I would have prioritized more from the beginning – and it's what I'm doing now moving forward with new units.

As for Kevin now – he is doing fantastic. He can count almost to a hundred. He's multiplying. He's engaging with peers, exchanging screen names for online games, always engaged at recess, asking questions. He has strong relationships not just with his teacher and me, but with front office staff, the assistant principal, and the principal. He greets them by name and asks how they're doing. He's going to come back from vacation this week and be able to write about it and tell me what he did. It has been such

an amazing journey seeing his progress, and I am really excited and honored to have been a part of it.

Amanda was not alone in this work. Through shared advocacy and commitment to Kevin's growth, a whole team worked together to ensure he experienced belonging, support, and language and academic growth in his new school community. Kevin's classroom teacher Erin shared that this was her first time having a newcomer student, and that she initially felt really overwhelmed and often questioned whether she was providing the best possible support. She noted that Kevin's output wasn't going to look the same as his English-speaking peers, but that didn't mean he wasn't learning alongside them — and it didn't mean there weren't other ways to assess his learning. In the very beginning, when writing was limited, she or another teacher would scribe his ideas and focus more on verbal output. Over time, her collaboration with Amanda became more structured and proactive, shifting from informal conversations as questions arose to regular co-planning on a weekly basis. That dedicated time allowed them to reflect on Kevin's progress, analyze what supports were in place, and come up with an intentional plan for upcoming learning. One particularly memorable moment for Erin was watching Kevin stand up in November and give a speech to the class about what he was thankful for.

Kevin's assistant principal, Kristen, reflected that the most important role she can play is to support teachers so that they can support students — making sure students feel comfortable, feel a sense of belonging, and feel like they're part of the community. She spoke about helping teachers find access points for entry into learning, noting that sometimes this looks like a social entry point rather than an academic one during academic time. She also emphasized the importance of teachers being visible, getting to know students, and helping them feel safe during less structured times like recess, lunch, and getting on the bus. She noted that anytime schools can give teachers time to collaborate, build in professional development as a whole learning community, and include ML educators in PLCs and planning time, that's what makes the real difference.

Before we leave, we want to thank you so much for engaging with and learning alongside us today. While our journey together is almost complete, we know that no workshop can have impact without considering what all of this information might mean for you, your students, and your practice. Please take a moment to access our Padlet and share your reflections and aspirations. The blank planning template is already uploaded there, as a Word doc and a PDF version. Amanda has also offered to upload examples of the meet-the-teacher and meet-the-students Canva templates. This webinar will be recorded and when the recording is ready, it will be accompanied by the handout and the blank unit planning template.

Thank you for listening, for engaging with just one way of approaching this work, and for thinking about how it might be meaningfully modified for your own context. We also want to affirm all the amazing things you are already doing with the colleagues you collaborate with and the multilingual students you serve each day. Believe in yourselves and believe in the energy and expertise you bring – because what you do is important, no matter what role you represent in that conversation for your students. Thank you all for everything you do each and every day.

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