

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.