# **Understanding and Supporting Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) in Massachusetts: Literature Review Summary**

Prepared by the Center for Applied Linguistics

**Introduction**

This document presents a summary of a larger literature review report conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The literature review report focuses on two research questions:

(1) What can the department learn about SLIFE nationally and in MA that would help the department to accurately identify and provide effective, differentiated services for SLIFE students?; and

(2) What are effective policies, practices (definitions, processes, program models, curricula, and tools), and programmatic approaches for supporting the academic success and well-being of SLIFE in Massachusetts and the nation?

The term **Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)** describes English Learners (ELs) who have some degree of interruption or limitation to formal schooling in their native country. For example, refugee or migrant students, or other students who have experienced disrupted education due to economic, social, political, and/or environmental factors are considered SLIFE (Pentón Herrera, 2022). Although the term SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) is also used in some contexts and generally refers to the same students, we use the term SLIFE in this summary.

## **Number of SLIFE in U.S. Schools**

Estimations of the percentage of English Learners in U.S. schools who are identified as SLIFE come from both research studies and state-level data. SLIFE estimations in the U.S. from the early 90s reported that 14.6% of K-12 children had experienced interruptions of more than two years in formal schooling (Fleischman & Hopstock, 1993). Nearly a decade later, New York and Maryland reported that 3.5% and 5% of EL students had been identified as SLIFE, respectively (Alvarez, 2020; Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, 2022). Given differences in these estimations, information from a variety of sources estimates that 5% to 20% of EL students are SLIFE (Fleischman & Hopstock, 1993; Fry, 2005; Potochnick, 2018). Evolving migration trends contribute to an increasingly diverse and heterogenous group of SLIFE in the U.S. that, combined with inconsistencies in SLIFE identification processes, make it challenging to provide more precise information about the demographic characteristics of these students and trends.

## **SLIFE Identification**

There is no federal definition of SLIFE and state definitions and identification practices vary. We conducted an analysis of publicly available information from the State Education Agency (SEA) websites for all 50 states and the District of Columbia and found that, as of August 2022, 20 SEAs provide an explicit definition for SLIFE on their websites. SEAs typically define characteristics of SLIFE as a group of students within the larger group of English Learners according to five areas: (1) immigration status/history, (2) limited or interrupted education/schooling, (3) grade-level skill or knowledge, (4) native language literacy, and (5) age/grade level. Although there are some common trends among SEAs’ SLIFE definitions, there are differences in how criteria are defined (such as age), how requirements are described (such as grade level skills), and how gaps in formal education are measured (such as native language literacy and numeracy assessments).

Knowing who SLIFE are, where they come from, and their cultural backgrounds and educational experiences is also an important part of understanding who SLIFE are. All students, including SLIFE, use their cultural backgrounds and understandings to interpret and evaluate their experiences, including their classroom experiences. Once enrolled in U.S. schools, SLIFE are not only learning language, literacy, and academic content, they are also being socialized into the U.S. Western schooling environment, and all the practices, perspectives, and products that make up their new classroom settings and experiences. Teachers, administrators, and other adults working with SLIFE can support them by recognizing that many, if not all, school practices, expectations, and values may be unfamiliar to this group of students and providing students with culturally responsive supports to help them understand and adjust to these differences throughout their learning.

## **Welcoming SLIFE**

When welcoming SLIFE into a school community, learning more about the nature of their interruption in schooling and other aspects of their experiences can help lay the groundwork for a smooth adjustment for both the student and staff members working with them. Pre-migration factors include home country variables like political stability, civil unrest, education quality/requirements, and schooling availability, and global trends on educational opportunities based on geographic region, gender, and socioeconomic status may offer a snapshot of larger international circumstances that contribute to SLIFE experiences. During migration, considerations include the length and conditions of a student’s journey to the U.S.. Translators and cultural brokers from SLIFE’s own communities are helpful for understanding students experiences during the migration period and later supporting students as they enter the U.S. school system. Post-migration factors that have surfaced in recent explorations of SLIFE include acculturation stress, urban resettlement issues, transient housing, frequent school mobility, enrollment in under-resourced schools, and academic marginalization (Flores, 2022; Drake, 2017; Hos, 2016). Understanding SLIFE’s circumstances during each of these stages of the migration process can support educators to provide students with effective learning options and support systems.

The unique strengths and perspectives SLIFE bring to the classroom serve as the foundation for developing effective, culturally responsive programs. Depending on resources and needs, schools may choose to serve SLIFE through separate site models (like the [New Citizen Center](https://worcesterschools.org/school/ncc-secondary/) in Worcester, MA), within school models (like the [Salina Intermediate Newcomer Center](https://salina-int.dearbornschools.org/) in Dearborn, MI), or whole-school models (like the [International High School at Lafayette](http://www.inths.org/) in New York, NY).

## **Instructional Approaches**

Regardless of the program model, researchers recommend an assets-based instructional approach informed by a culturally-responsive pedagogy in which students’ backgrounds and experiences are understood, acknowledged, and leveraged as bridges for new learning. The following strengths are frequently mentioned or highlighted in guidance for working with SLIFE (Alvarez et al., 2020; Barba et al., 2019; Digby, 2019; Hos et al., 2019; DeCapua, 2016; Kennedy & Lamina, 2016; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011):

* **Oral language and home language skills:** Oral language skills are often cited as a strength of SLIFE students. Students have existing language proficiency that can be built on by encouraging the use of oral expression in students’ native languages. Beyond speaking and listening capabilities, these may include the ability to retain information, conversational and interpersonal skills, and playful and creative language use.
* **Informal learning skills:** These skills, including discourse styles and ways of accessing knowledge, may be unrecognized or undervalued in formal education settings.
* **Student expertise/Funds of knowledge:** Acknowledging students as experts on topics related to their lived experiences and backgrounds.
* **Cultural assets:** The skills and values that emerge from a student’s cultural background. Some SLIFE guidance notes the importance of understanding collectivist cultural approaches to learning as many SLIFE may have this background.
* **Resilience:** SLIFE often have strategies for expressing agency and building connections that reflect resilience and endurance they have developed in their various transitions.

Incorporating a student-centered approach builds on SLIFE’s backgrounds, knowledge, and skills, and differentiating or scaffolding is essential when working with SLIFE with different academic and linguistic abilities. SLIFE benefit from bilingual supports and opportunities to leverage their native language skills in the classroom, and it may be helpful to incorporate collaborative learning and group work that may be similar to SLIFE’s pre-migration schooling experiences. The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) model (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010) is one widely referenced approach to instruction designed to honor SLIFE’s cultural backgrounds by incorporating features of familiar learning paradigms and using these to bridge to learning paradigms commonly found in U.S. schooling.

There are a number of other research-based recommendations for supporting SLIFE’s language acquisition, literacy development, academic content attainment, meaningful school participation, and socio-emotional growth. The following table presents a high-level summary of recommendations for each of these areas. Please refer to the full literature review report for additional details.

**Summary of Instructional Recommendations for Working with SLIFE**

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| **Areas for Growth** | **Summary of Recommendations** |
| English Language Acquisition | * Incorporate sheltered instruction methodologies
* Organize instruction around culturally relevant themes
* Leverage SLIFE’s oral language skills to build literacy skills
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| Literacy Development  | * Use oral interactions to scaffold text-based literacy tasks
* Create individualized literacy plans that allow students to continue to develop literacy in their home language(s) while developing literacy in English
* Incorporate an integrated literacy approach that focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, alongside systematic and explicit opportunities for oral language development and a functional understanding of language
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| Academic Content Attainment | * Incorporate sheltered instruction methodologies
* Modify language and leverage students’ home language(s) skills when teaching new or challenging content
* Provide opportunities for SLIFE to use their existing skills and knowledge within each content area
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| Socio-Emotional Growth | * Incorporate trauma-sensitive classroom practices
* Create a welcoming school environment and develop routines and structures that create a sense of familiarity
* Collaborate with school counselors and connect SLIFE and their families with mental health support services and community partners beyond the school as needed
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| Meaningful School Participation | * Incorporate whole-class activities to model desired participation and boost SLIFE’s confidence and engagement in the classroom
* Support SLIFE in developing basic school competency skills and understanding grade-level expectations associated with the U.S. education system
* Communicate information about academic and career trajectories, educational requirements for graduation and employment, and ways to achieve personal and academic goals to SLIFE and their families
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