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Supporting Multilingual Learners and Families

Effective Evidence-Based Approaches

Schools in the United States are serving an increasing number of multilingual learners each year.[1] These students come in contact with and/or interact in languages in addition to English on a regular basis.[2] This includes students who are commonly referred to as English language learners, English learners, newcomers, students with interrupted formal education, long-term English learners, and more. The field is moving toward using the more asset-based and inclusive term, multilingual learners.

Effective educators build strong relationships with their students and families and see a positive effect on student outcomes and well-being.[3] Many schools and districts are looking for ways to deepen their understanding of strategies to engage their multilingual learners and families. This guide presents instructional evidence-based practices; considerations when supporting students who are undocumented; resources to engage newcomer families; and networking suggestions to like/follow to continue learning more about multilingual learner programming, policies, and instruction.

As educators, it is important to leverage multilingual learners' languages and cultures for school/classroom life and to engage families in the student learning process. Classroom instruction that intentionally integrates reading, writing, listening, and speaking modalities provides multilingual learners with opportunities to add English proficiency to their linguistic repertoires.

Guiding Principles for Planning for Instruction

The eight instructional evidence-based practices for multilingual learners in Figure 1 describe what instruction can look and sound like and provide a classroom example for each. Multilingual learners can and should engage in grade-level content, but they require a few adaptations and scaffolding to be able to produce and master the content.[4] Those adaptations depend on their English proficiency levels, confidence, and readiness. Strong teacher-student relationships and classroom-level data help guide instructional scaffolds and design.

Students should have the opportunity to experience all four domains of language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) each day.[5] Making instructional adaptations for multilingual learners in classrooms values the linguistic diversity present in the classroom, enhances comprehension, ensures equitable access to the curriculum, and creates an inclusive learning environment that respects and celebrates the various languages and cultures represented. This fosters a sense of belonging and self-esteem among multilingual learners, promoting linguistic safety,[6] positive engagement, and motivation to learn.

Figure 1. Instructional Best Practices

Instructional Best Practices for Multilingual Learners

Activate Prior Knowledge
- Explicit and culturally relevant connections are made between past experiences, past learning, and new concepts.
- Teacher incorporates activities to build background knowledge with the students when necessary.
- *Example: Use thinking routines to see what students know, want to learn, and learned about civilization formations in world history (KWL chart).*

Culturally Relevant Instruction
- Maintain a classroom climate in which all students' cultures are equally respected and hold high expectations for all students
- Engage students in rigorous, meaningful, and relevant instruction.
- Consider linguistic/cultural diversity when grouping students and employ equitable pedagogy such as using culturally relevant texts.
- *Example: Build on student interests and design fantasy unit around fairy tales/storytelling from students' home countries.*

Explicit Language Instruction
- Lesson includes a language objective that addresses academic language features of the content and/or genre being taught, such as key vocabulary, language functions, transitional expressions, grammatical constructions, etc.
- Teacher models oral and written discourse.
- *Example: Sharing the importance of signal words in math word problems, "and," "from," "by."*

Quality Interaction
- Students sit in groups of four with some, not all, common language peers.
- Teacher provides opportunities for structured and purposeful student discourse and interaction through the use of cooperative learning.
- Teacher models clear roles, expectations, and outcomes for student discourse.
- *Example: Using think-write-roundrobin, along with accountable talk sentence starters, provide time for students to brainstorm, and then share their thinking about mitosis in biology class.*

Differentiate
- All students are engaged in learning grade-level content concepts with scaffolding according to students' proficiency levels (ex. leveled texts).
- Teacher prepares leveled assignments, word banks, adapted materials, peer-assisted learning, etc. based on language assets.
- Students can choose their leveled assignment and bump up when ready.
- *Example: To build a 5-paragraph essay, providing three leveled graphic organizers (each one having more sentence frames, transition support, and content cues).*

Comprehensible Input
- Visuals, gestures, realia, demonstrations, modeling, leveled texts, and other resources/strategies are used to ensure that concepts and content are accessible to students.
- Primary language use is supported through the use of bilingual dictionaries, living dictionaries, linguistic buddies, primary language think/discussion time, etc.
- *Example: Using gestures and acting out parasite/host relationships in biology class with visuals/images on every slide.*

Foster Belonging
- Pair students with a peer mentor/buddy, especially new students, and provide school ID cards.
- Embed opportunities for student recognition, value, praise (ex. formal celebrations or informal classroom validation). Learning a language is hard!
- Create an environment where it is physically safe, emotionally safe to share feelings, and linguistically safe to practice English.
- Lower affective filters by brainstorming before speaking in a whole group.
- *Example: Adolescent students brainstorm examples and non-examples for how to react when someone makes a mistake in class.*

Partner with Families
- Create local and internaitonal family outreach structures (ex. weekly text messages, wellness calls, home visits, FaceTime check-ins).
- Ensure two-way communication is available in home languages (ex. seek interpretation service such as Language Line).
- Involve families near and far in school events (ex. zoom invites for families abroad).
- Form a support group for students who are experiencing family reunification or separation.
- *Example: Use WhatsApp to message families in home countries, hold quick calls or video chats to showcase student work and progress.*
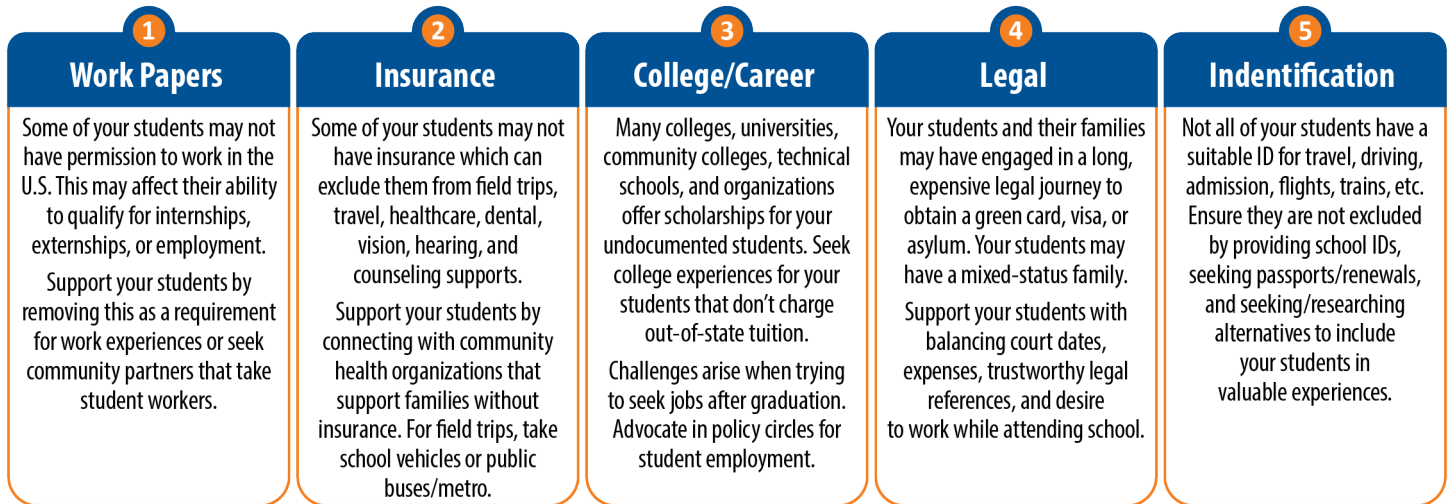
Supporting the Whole Child

Subsets of multilingual learners in schools are recently arrived to the United States, or newcomers; may be undocumented or in a mixed-status household; or may be separated or reunified with their families.[7] As educators, building awareness of how to support the whole child requires a review of traditional school practices or systems to support all multilingual learners. For example, by recognizing and understanding the characteristics of undocumented students, schools can create a supportive environment that ensures inclusivity, promotes belonging, and dispels myths.

Building awareness of undocumented students can help to advocate for equitable educational opportunities and provide appropriate support. Topics such as work papers, insurance, college and career planning, legal, and identification are sometimes overlooked in daily educational planning efforts (**Figure 2**). Additionally, family engagement is one of the most important indicators of student success.[8] It is important for educators to take the first step to build strong partnerships with students' families, even those in other countries.

Figure 2. Considerations When Supporting Students Who Are Undocumented

1 Work Papers	2 Insurance	3 College/Career	4 Legal	5 Indentification
Some of your students may not have permission to work in the U.S. This may affect their ability to qualify for internships, externships, or employment. Support your students by removing this as a requirement for work experiences or seek community partners that take student workers.	Some of your students may not have insurance which can exclude them from field trips, travel, healthcare, dental, vision, hearing, and counseling supports. Support your students by connecting with community health organizations that support families without insurance. For field trips, take school vehicles or public buses/metro.	Many colleges, universities, community colleges, technical schools, and organizations offer scholarships for your undocumented students. Seek college experiences for your students that don't charge out-of-state tuition. Challenges arise when trying to seek jobs after graduation. Advocate in policy circles for student employment.	Your students and their families may have engaged in a long, expensive legal journey to obtain a green card, visa, or asylum. Your students may have a mixed-status family. Support your students with balancing court dates, expenses, trustworthy legal references, and desire to work while attending school.	Not all of your students have a suitable ID for travel, driving, admission, flights, trains, etc. Ensure they are not excluded by providing school IDs, seeking passports/renewals, and seeking/researching alternatives to include your students in valuable experiences.

Unsure of where to start? The resources in **Figure 3** help educators reflect on school data, connect in an accessible way, collaborate in authentic ways, and encourage family leadership in schools. These resources are aligned with National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement's (NAFSCE) Core Competencies for family engagement, which aim to center families and communities more authentically.[9]

Figure 3. Engaging Newcomer Families

Click on the links to find resources to help you reflect, connect, collaborate, and lead with newcomer families.

Reflect Reflect on your school's data. Who are your MLLs? What home languages are represented? How are you currently supporting students and their families?	Connect Connect with families in an accessible way. Multilingual learners and families have rights to access schooling and information in home languages.	Collaborate Create asset-based, authentic relationships and partnerships with your students and families.	Lead Encourage family leadership and challenege school structures to lead your school in supporting families.
Immigrant Connections: Top 5 Strategies	Colorin Colorado: Communicating Important Information with ELL Families	Multilingual Learning Toolkit	Colorin Colorado: 10 Strategies for Supporting Immigrant Students and Families
Colorin Colorado: Guide for Schools	Colorin Colorado: How to Build Partnerships with Immigrant Families	Immigrant Learning Center: Educator Resource Hub	Welcoming America: Building Welcoming Schools
Video: Stages of Language Acquisition	Colorin Colorado: How to host a successful bilingual night	Podcast: Building Relationships Immigrant Communities Through Local Cultural Immersion	Internationals Network: Immigrants and Post-Secondary Pathways
ChoiceLiteracy: Understanding the Silent Period	Carnegie Report: Liberatory Approach in Action	Video: Effective Family Engagment Could Look Like This	Young-chan Han: 4 Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement
Self-Assessment: What type of school are you?	Immigrant Learning Center: Engage Families to Support Immigrant Student	Joyce Epstein's 6 Types of Involvement	Flamboyan: Why Family Engagement Matters

*Categories aligned to NAFSCE's Core Competencies

Make Connections to Discover More about Multilingual Learners

Many professional organizations are dedicated to sharing information and advocating for multilingual learners. Follow on social media or visit the webpages of the organizations in **Figure 4** to learn more about their efforts and current events. For example, Larry Ferlazzo is a veteran multilingual teacher who posts about his lessons and experiences. Follow him to participate in micro-learning that can be implemented in other classrooms.

Educators may also be interested in forming partnerships as a part of continuous improvement efforts at their schools. Many organizations can provide professional learning, coaching, or audit support to support educators in providing a warm, welcoming, and instructionally rigorous and accessible environment for multilingual learners and their families.

Figure 4. Connections & Networks

Multilingual Learner Connections & Networks

Follow and partner with these organizations for tips and updates on immigration, programming, and instruction.

Follow	Partner
@ColorinColorado	Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)
@IntIsNetwork	ImmSchools
@LarryFerlazzo	Internationals Network for Public Schools
MigrationPolicy Institute	LatinxEd
National Immigration Law Center	National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement
United We Dream	
RAICESTEXAS	
Southern Poverty Law Center	TESOL International Association
@Superholly	UnLocal, Inc.
@TESOL_Assn	WIDA Consortium
The Immigrant Learning Center	

References

[1] National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). English learners in public schools. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf.

[2] WIDA (2020). WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition: Kindergarten-grade 12. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

[3] Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Annual Synthesis.

[4] Walqui, A. (2006). Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 9*(2), 159-180.

[5] WIDA (2020). *WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition: Kindergarten-grade 12*. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

[6] McInerney, K. (2022, December). Perceptions from newcomer multilingual adolescents: Predictors and experiences of sense of belonging in high school. In *Child & Youth Care Forum* (pp. 1-32). New York, NY: Springer US.

[7] Kreuzer, L. H. (2016). *The Newcomer Student: An Educator's Guide to Aid Transitions*. Lanham, MD:A Rowman & Littlefield.

[8] Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. Annual Synthesis, 2002. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

[9] National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE). (2022). *Family Engagement Core Competencies: A Body of Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Family-Facing Professionals.* Alexandria, VA: NAFSCE.

Connect with us to:

- support teachers in providing professional learning opportunities
- build capacity in your district for integrating effective instructional practices for multilingual learners
- develop leadership or teacher coaching support around instruction, policies, and practices and
- create a district or school audit to ensure equitable access to effective instruction.

Learn More

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