

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)

Students with limited or interrupted formal education pose a unique challenge to Missouri schools. Currently, Missouri does not formally define or collect data on SLIFE, but other states have varied definitions beginning with age. Other characteristics include missing more than six consecutive months of school and are two or more grade levels behind in content.

SLIFE also face challenges that other ELs do not and are a consequence of their prior educational experience or lack thereof. These challenges may include:

- Lack of access to school
- Limited or no exposure to technology
- Different school behavior/cultural expectations
- Limited or no experience in certain content areas

Curricular Considerations for SLIFE

Although SLIFE is generally used to describe students at the secondary level, there are instances when elementary students have difficulty adjusting and have significant gaps in their education. Some elementary age students may have never attended school, had irregular attendance or spent years in refugee camps. Some may have never held a pencil or used a computer. Others may have never learned to read or write in their native language which has a documented negative effect on the student's acquisition of literacy in English (August & Hakuta, 1997). Newcomers will not only be tasked with catching up academically, but they must also learn what it means to be a student in the United States. Waiting in line, taking turns, staying at their desk, raising their hand and using school instruments and technology may be new. Teachers must be patient as the students learn the rules of the classroom, hallways, playground, cafeteria and other areas. *It is for this reason that we suggest an orientation to the school before any academic interventions are applied.*

As mentioned, students must be placed at the age-appropriate grade level. Teachers should introduce routines and procedures slowly with much repetition. Academically, it is tempting to focus on literacy and phonics immediately. However, it is important that students begin interacting with English words and phrases to make phonics instruction meaningful. Teachers can employ a number of strategies to make content accessible to newcomers so they can begin building a vocabulary base. First, accessing prior knowledge or building background before introducing new concepts is important. Educators must realize that a student may indeed have background knowledge of a specific topic, but does not have the English proficiency to express it. For this reason, among others, all new concepts should be paired with a picture, real-life item, or video. Additionally, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities are widely available and highly effective at making the content accessible.

SLIFE in middle and high school may be far below grade level in some or all subjects when they enter school. These courses, whether delivered in English or the native language, follow grade-level expectations which are typically far beyond the zone of proximal development for students with limited or interrupted formal education. The frustrating effects can be felt by both students and teachers as they attempt to achieve what feels like an unbridgeable gap (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). *Districts should consider an individualized graduation plan that may take longer than the four years needed by other students.* Sample schedules for SLIFE are noted in Appendix G. The content of the individualized program must relate to the core curriculum, be credit-bearing and designed for the student to catch up to age-appropriate content standards.

Another issue with SLIFE is age. Some students, who come at age 16 years or older without transcripts, must acquire English and complete advanced coursework in order to graduate. Although districts may award core credits for remedial

coursework, many do not. The amount of time some students spend enrolled in ELD and remedial courses can consume a considerable amount of time to where the students “age out” without meeting the minimum graduation requirements. It is for this reason that district personnel in charge of graduation planning be aware of options to provide a motivating pathway to graduation as well as the possibility of graduating without the student earning the 24 units of credit as defined in Missouri. Specifically, page 9 of the Graduation Handbook (2018) states:

“Transfer students from another state, country or home school may graduate upon successful completion of an individualized program of studies which school officials, parents and students agree will allow the student to graduate college or career ready, even though the program of studies may not include 24 units of credit as defined in Missouri.”

Obviously, there are a number of curricular considerations for SLIFE situations that address a variety of challenges. The following are suggestions for schools that support a variety of student numbers and characteristics.

Many SLIFE are not literate in their native language. Research shows that native language literacy impacts the level of English a student can be expected to acquire as well as the amount of time it will take (Cummins, 1979). It is for this reason that we suggest students take a course dedicated to native language literacy development. This can be accomplished through popular heritage language classes, an extended school day, Saturday school or through partnering with a local organization.

SLIFE, and ELs as a whole, must have access to programs that develop English language proficiency. Nationwide, the popular trend is to place students in newcomer programs. Newcomer programs look different depending on the size of the district, staff available and resources. They can be a single class which is in addition to an ELD course, a strand of courses or an entire school. The goal of the program is to not only develop English language skills, but to also bridge the academic gap in core content classes.

SLIFE will have a full schedule of courses, many of which will be challenging for the students. It is recommended that districts provide sheltered instruction for all core content classes at a minimum. This requires additional training and resources for all core content educators.

10 Ideas for Teaching SLIFE

(Adapted from Colorin Colorado)

- **Activate Prior Knowledge**
Whether in English or in the native language, find out what they already know and explicitly link to the new information
- **Provide a Print Rich Environment**
Provide many visuals and appropriate on-level texts, including picture and bilingual books.
- **Engage in Hands-On Learning**
Let students write and illustrate their own bilingual books (fiction or nonfiction), use manipulatives, drama and interactive activities.
- **Focus on Manageable Vocabulary Load**
Concentrate vocabulary learning on concepts and be ready to recast, rephrase and simplify explanations.
- **Give Frequent Checks for Communication**
Avoid yes/no answers. Increase wait time as students summarize learning.

- **Be open-Minded when Assessing**
Provide alternative avenues to demonstrate understanding. Small, formative assessments are more appropriate than large summative tests.
- **Work in Cooperative Groups**
Students learn social skills in cooperative groups and are able to negotiate meaning in a less stressful atmosphere with their peers.
- **Build Native Language Content & Literacy**
If students are comfortable with the content in their native language, learning how to express it in English is easier.
- **Teach Language Through Content**
Various sheltered instruction techniques make content comprehensible and fosters language growth.
- **Keep Expectations Realistic**
Be mindful of what is within reach, and what isn't.

New Americans Class

Recently arrived immigrants, whether they are SLIFE or not, should have an orientation to US schools. In Missouri, a growing number of districts are offering an elective course dedicated to:

- Acculturation to life in Missouri
- Graduation Requirements
- Community Resources
- Socio-Instructional Language

Smaller districts that do not have the resources to operate a course, should consider creative alternatives such as a class within a class, extended school day or Saturday Enrichment. Creativity and problem-solving are crucial aspects of successful programs for SLIFE.

Trauma

The same kinds of trauma that affects students in the United States affect English learners; however, their potential sources of trauma include other areas as well. Students coming to the United States as a refugee, asylee, or immigrant have likely experienced some form of trauma whether it was violence, persecution, natural disasters, etc. These traumatic events affect students young and old. Combined with culture shock, students are faced with numerous challenges beyond academics. This section is intended to offer guidance and suggestions for school personnel as they help the students navigate these rough waters.

Trauma can be categorized into three phases: pre-flight, flight and resettlement (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). During pre-flight, when the child is still in their country of origin, there could have been serious experiences that disrupted the routine or left a lasting impression on the student, such as:

- Inability to attend school due to violence.
- Basic needs were not met.
- Lack of medical care.
- Separation from family and friends.
- Threats of violence.
- Witnessing violence/death.

Flight, or when the child fled to safety, was a significant event in the child's life that was filled with many emotions. Whether they went to a refugee camp, or made their way along the incredibly difficult and dangerous path from Central America to the United States, they likely experienced intense trauma. They also left behind everything that was familiar to them such as their home, school, friends, family members and possessions. Refugee camps, in particular, can be traumatic experiences as safety and basic needs are a constant struggle. The long wait in the camps impacts the child's sense of self, place and belonging.

Resettlement refers to the moment the child arrives in the United States. The first assumption is that being in the United States means that their struggles are over. This feeling is not accurate as a variety of factors can add stressors to the children, such as:

- Continued separation from loved ones
- Uncertainty about safety and whereabouts of friends and family.
- Racial/ethnic discrimination
- Poverty
- PTSD

In addition, to the events leading to and including their resettlement in the United States, recently arrived English learners also experience culture shock. Culture shock affects every person who moves to a new community whether it is within their own country or abroad. It does have predictable stages. The first phase is commonly referred to as the honeymoon phase. Although brief, it is characterized by a sense of excitement, and at times relief, about living in the new community.

The next stage is the frustration stage. During this stage, the differences between the old and new culture begin to show bringing in feelings of angst or hostility toward the new culture. Some symptoms include:

- Frequent illnesses
- Sleepiness, insomnia and fatigue
- Nervous habits – nail/lip biting, scratching or hair pulling

- Anxiety
- Regressive behaviors
- Selective mutism
- Extreme sadness, helplessness or hopelessness

The third stage is the adjustment stage which generally occurs within the first year. As the name describes, this is where the students begin to adjust the new culture. Students will begin to accept the norms of the community, participate more in school and interact socially. The final stage, the adaptation stage is described as the student participating fully in the culture, comfortable using the language and can interact with their peers in a culturally appropriate way.

Schools can do a few things to address issues with culture shock. Traditional schoolwide programs that focus on social skills for all students is one way to build a community of acceptance. Additionally, acculturation courses and/or newcomer programs can address some of these areas. The following signs are red flags:

- Withdrawn and non-communicative in any language
- Obsessive communication over an event or denial that the event occurred
- Rebellious toward school rules and routines
- Aggressive and destructive behavior
- Extreme sadness without an apparent cause (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017)

When faced with these situations, it is important to involve social workers, counselors, family members and other community members with which the student has a positive relationship. It is important to remain sensitive and empathetic while explaining that this phase will eventually pass. Trauma is one of the many reasons to have a welcoming, accepting and pleasant start to school in the United States and a motivating pathway to graduation.

Trauma Resources:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has a number of resources for various trauma types, including refugee trauma, disasters, violence and more. <https://www.nctsn.org/>

[Working with Refugee Students in Secondary Schools: A Counselor's Companion](#) from the Minnesota Department of Education

Sample SLIFE Course Sequence

4-Year Plan

9 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 1	Core
Foundations in ELA	Core
Foundations in Science	Core
Foundations in Math	Core
P.E.	Elective
New Americans Orientation	Elective
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

10 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 2	Core
English I	Core
Sheltered Physical Science	Core
World History	Core
Algebra I	Core
Fine/Practical Art	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective

11 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 3	Core
English II	Core
Foundations in Biology	Core
Geometry/Algebra II	Core
American History	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Non-credit bearing
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

12 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 3	Core
English III	Core
Biology	Core
Geometry/Algebra II	Core
Government	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

3 Year Plan

This plan is intended for older students attempting to graduate prior to turning 21 years of age.

School Year 1	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 1	Core
Foundations in ELA	Core
Foundations in Science	Elective
Pre-Algebra	Core
P.E.	Elective
New Americans Orientation	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

Summer Year 1	
Course	Type of Credit
World History	Core

School Year 2	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 2	Core
English I	Core
Foundations in Biology	Core
Algebra I	Core
American History	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

Summer Year 2	
Course	Type of Credit
English II	Core

School Year 3	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 3	Core
English III	Core
Biology	Core
Algebra II	Core
American History	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

5 Year Plan

This plan exceeds the required graduation requirements outlined by DESE. Districts can use this plan to allow for completion of fifth year to meet CCR standards to attain an industry recognized credential or to ensure college readiness benchmarks outlined by area admissions and proficiency requirements.

9 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 1	Core
Foundations in ELA	Core
Foundations in Science	Core
Foundations in Math	Core
P.E.	Elective
New Americans Orientation	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

11 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 3	Core
English II	Core
Foundations in Biology	Core
Geometry/Algebra II	Core
American History	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

10 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 2	Core
English I	Core
Sheltered Physical Science	Core
Sheltered World History	Core
Pre-Algebra	Core
Fine/Practical Art	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing
Elective	Elective

12 th Grade	
Course	Type of Credit
ESL 4	Core
English III	Core
Biology	Core
Geometry/Algebra II	Core
Government	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective/Pre-requisite for CTE/Post-Secondary	Elective
ESL Resource	Non-credit bearing

Year 5	
Course	Type of Credit
English IV	Core
Elective	Elective
Elective	Elective