

# How do we help Newcomers succeed?

## Topic: Quality Programs & Instruction for Newcomers

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### Executive Summary

The NYS/NYC RBE-RN partnership with public schools in New York City focuses on improving the performance of English Language Learners (ELLs) / Multilingual Learners (MLLs). Our direct involvement in city schools is framed by the New York State Education Commissioner's Regulations Part 154, which governs Bilingual Education programs and English as a New Language (ENL) programs. The main purpose of these mandates is to ensure that all ELL/MLLs, including all Newcomers, have equitable opportunities to succeed in school while meeting the same accountability standards as their non-ELL or native English-speaking counterparts.



This brief describes some research-based strategies that address the academic and social-emotional challenges that may prevent newly arrived students from attaining a high school diploma or performing at levels 3 or 4 on NYS assessments. Thus, the intent of the authors is to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by this vulnerable subgroup, and to help frame conversations that can guide schools in effective planning and creative programming/scheduling that is often required to address the academic and socio/emotional needs of these students.

**These are the Key Questions:** 1) *Who are our Newcomers? How do we welcome them into school?;* 2) *What instructional strategies can accelerate their integration and participation in class and school life?;* and 3) *What are some recommendations for designing quality instruction?*

### Implementing Effective Identification and Instructional Practices for Newcomers

#### Why is it important?

The fastest growing segment of the K-12 student population in the United States are students from non-English speaking backgrounds. These newly arrived students, some immigrants, other refugees and more recently migrants from U.S. territories, namely Puerto Rican students displaced by Hurricane Maria, bring a multitude of experiences, which differ by language and country of origin. Although Newcomers are those who have been in U.S. schools for three years or less, they can also be SIFE students. SIFE students have attended schools in the U.S. for less than twelve months and upon initial enrollment in schools are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and/or two or more years below grade level in math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the U.S.

Once enrolled, all Newcomers must begin the process of simultaneously learning a new language, acquiring an academic skill set in this new language, and eventually take grade level assessments along with all their peers. New to the country and the

language, these students face acculturation issues too, making engagement with their schools, peers, and teachers rather challenging. Moreover, the expectation is that Newcomers will graduate high school in four years in spite of the fact that many bring academic experiences that differ from that of the U.S. mainland culture. *How can educators support Newcomers so they feel accepted and understood in their new land?*

Building an understanding about these students -their language, schooling experiences, and social emotional perspectives, is critical to identifying the supports and strategies that can best address all their needs. One of the supports that should not be overlooked is the student's home language. The home language and culture are learning anchors that enable students to connect their new experiences to their own toolbox of strategies and knowledge. In addition, educators are often required to think outside the box and make changes to the instructional materials, and their teaching practices to engage newly arrived students in classroom routines and to make content and language more accessible in order to facilitate learning.



## I. The Context

The new ESSA plan, *Every Student Succeeds Act* emphasizes fostering equity in education that purposefully includes strategies for supporting the professional growth of educators and ensures that all students, including ELL/MLL learners, immigrant students, and migratory youth have access to a well-rounded, culturally responsive education that supports students' academic and social-emotional development.

The table on this page clearly indicates that the largest subgroup is that of Newcomers. This information requires that schools/districts pay attention to the number of students coming in each year to determine appropriate programs/curriculum to target Newcomer ELLs needs. In addition, this may require specific cycles and close monitoring using benchmark assessments to track and build on academic growth.

Early identification is crucial.

At the forefront of this challenging objective, New York State, under CR Part 154 has established a cohesive statewide protocol to support schools in identifying Newcomer students so that they can receive mandated English as a New Language (ENL) instruction as a component of their Bilingual Education or free-standing ENL as a component of an ENL program.

One resource that all administrators and teachers should be familiar with is the *Multilingual Literacy Screener (MLS)*. This tool is a multilingual set of diagnostics designed to inform teachers and administrators of the home-language literacy skills their students bring with them when they begin schooling in New York State. The **MLS** is also a semi-adaptive online diagnostic that reflects current literature-based curricula and didactic principles from students' home countries for grades three through nine. The tool is currently available in Arabic, Bangla, Chinese, English, Haitian Creole, Karen, Maay Maay, and Spanish, and may be available in more languages in the future as needed. In conjunction with the *New York State SIFE Oral Interview Questionnaire* as well as the Writing Screener, *the MLS is an additional tool used in determining if a newly arrived English Language Learner is qualified for SIFE services.*

All schools should follow the six steps of SIFE identification chart and refer to the NYSED OBE guidance document for screening, identification, and placement of students with interrupted/inconsistent formal education (SIFE).

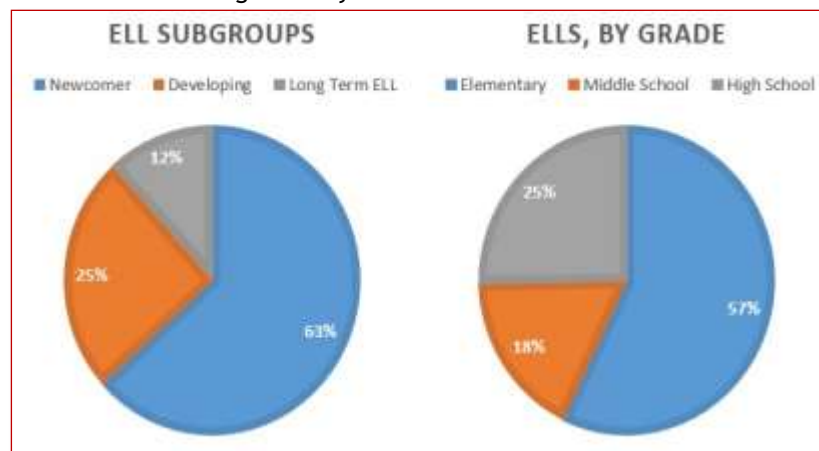
## II. How do we build a foundation in English literacy for Newcomers?

The U.S. Department of Education Newcomer Tool Kit (revised 2017) provides a platform for rethinking instruction for both Newcomers and ELLs, with the goal of providing a high-quality education that is future-oriented and asset-oriented, with high expectations for success. This shift requires teaching/learning with a focus on assessing

what Newcomers bring as assets to classroom instruction, rather than on students' deficits. It also requires that educators recognize and use the rich cognitive, cultural, and linguistic resources that Newcomers bring to their classrooms. Recognizing that Newcomer students arrive with valuable knowledge, skills, and language that frame their social, physical, and symbolic worlds (Walqui & van Lier, 2010),

teachers use these assets to leverage student learning. High-quality instruction also pays close attention to the language, academic experiences, and proficiencies of students and recognizes that learning is a social process that requires teachers to intentionally design, within the practices of each discipline, learning opportunities that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Districts and administrators must ensure that the curriculum provided is rich in content and connects content area practices with uses of language in that discipline and that instruction focuses on providing ELLs with opportunities to engage in discipline-specific practices, which help build conceptual understanding and language competence in tandem. Instruction intentionally scaffolds Newcomer students' participation to enable them to access complex ideas and engage in rigorous analytic and problem-solving skills on level with their grade in school. Ongoing assessment can provide feedback about how individual students are progressing in conceptual, analytical, and language development. Students with developing levels of English proficiency will require instruction that carefully supports and builds their understanding and use of emerging language as they participate in these activities.



### III. Recommendations: Pedagogical Strategies

Lessons for Newcomer ELLs/MLLs should include specific scaffolds and strategies aligned to various proficiency levels, as well as practices that enable students to access grade level content and gradually build their academic skills and competencies. Key to supporting Newcomer ELLs in grades K-12 with new vocabulary and concepts is building background or connecting to prior knowledge, also known as bridging.

According to Aida Walqui (2006) “Prior knowledge should be tapped to activate and connect it to new learning.” She suggests that students build schemas (clusters of interrelated understandings) that increase content learning and language development simultaneously.” Building background increases opportunities for all students to participate in classroom instruction and helps all learners, especially Newcomers, to grasp concepts and make deeper connections between the various content areas and the experiences that they bring.

#### Strategies for Elementary Grades

Newly arrived students in elementary grades can benefit from the use of structured classroom protocols, and the use of the home language.



**Home Language:** The use of the first language boost students’ confidence and creates opportunities for them to share their own ideas, and knowledge while providing a bridge to more difficult concepts.

**Partner Talk & Small Groups:** Newly arrived students and many English Learners, feel a little nervous when called on to speak in front of the whole class. Partner and small group conversations offer a supportive forum where they experiment with the language and build their confidence to participate in whole class activities.

**Think-Pair-Share:** Using either the home language or English students respond back and forth with a partner to build up and negotiate ideas in response to a relevant prompt. The listening partner will then prompt for clarification of ideas and gives feedback to the speaker. Then, partners **share** ideas with classmates and/or with the whole class.

**Sentence Frames:** Perhaps most essential for ELLs is to create sentence frames that allow students to respond. Post these frames up in your classroom so that students can access them easily and use them first in their oral responses, and ultimately in their writing. In addition, creating opportunities for Newcomers to speak in their home language will provide a bridge to difficult concepts by removing the language barrier.

If learning is well-scaffolded, students can accomplish tasks and achieve learning that they would not be able to do on their own (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976).

#### Strategies for Middle Grades

In addition to the strategies highlighted for elementary students, newly arrived middle school students can benefit from strategies that they can work on independently:

**Primary Sources:** Primary sources such as photographs, illustrations, maps, diary entries, and letters engage students in hands-on activities that build vocabulary and background knowledge.

**Visual Resources:** Newcomers tend to rely on the visual stimuli to decipher and engage in the world around them. Thus, visuals including realia and real-life documents such as a subway map, or bus schedule are worthwhile in building background knowledge, as well as to support the understanding of a text. If the students have low literacy levels in their L1, historical picture books will tell stories to help students grasp content knowledge without words.

**Video clips and short movies:** Thoughtful use of short video clips can also help students gain an understanding of the past. Five minutes of visual content can be extremely valuable to accelerate teaching and learning in content area classrooms.

#### Strategies for Secondary Schools

In addition to the strategies highlighted above, newly arrived high school students can benefit from:

**Focus on Analysis and Problem Solving:** In High school, instruction must provide students authentic opportunities to simultaneously develop language and discourse; analytic and problem-solving skills; and competency in academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies. Simultaneous development of these three areas will help students begin to develop their own agency and autonomy as learners and thinkers (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).

**Social Interactions:** Optimal learning takes place when students have increased opportunities to engage in social interactions with their peers. Wong Fillmore’s (1991) model of second-language learning identified three motivational components that contribute to student progress: interest from the learners, proficient speakers who support and interact with the learners, and an environment that supports relationships between learners and proficient speakers.

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**Juicy Sentences:** Teachers take a sentence or two, or a short passage to plan conversational starters that focus on complex language and compelling topics. Under the guidance of the teachers, students use these *juicy* sentences to talk about powerful topics and learn how the English language works.

Graphic organizers, when used skillfully, are also powerful tools. They can support discourse by organizing thoughtful responses to provide information verbally and/or in writing.

#### IV. Conclusion

All teachers need to understand that Newcomers are diverse within their multiple groupings. It behooves us to know them and their families, and to view them individually with robust sensitivity.

In schools, the presence of immigrant students provides a rich opportunity for all students to expand their cultural knowledge and their capacity to participate fully in a multicultural society. Adolescent immigrant English language learners need intensive, specialized literacy and content-area instruction as well as basic introduction to



the norms of American classroom culture in order to perform at the same levels as their U.S. born peers. Schools need to “amplify” opportunities for these students to succeed by reexamining their departmental structures to facilitate collaboration among all teachers serving recent immigrants.

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Classrooms (Pre-k-12) need to be powerful learning environments that provide rich and authentic tasks that bridge content area learning with language and literacy development. In these environments, teachers of ELLs teach less, facilitate more peer-to-peer learning, and slow down the pace of instruction to examine core ideas and their application in depth. These teachers should collect hard and soft data to develop learning profiles for their students in order to plan flexible groupings based on students’ primary language and English literacy. They can connect instruction to students’ prior experiences and offer choices to motivate their engagement.

Knowing students goes beyond the analysis of test scores that accompanies a determination of proficiency levels. Indeed, this is the initial and essential component to begin planning appropriate instruction for our ELLs. However, one must incorporate additional qualitative data to include information about students’ backgrounds and cultures, including identifying their home or heritage language. The notion of using quantitative data as a singular variable in knowing our students cannot validate their linguistic experiences, passions and interests, strengths as a learner, and specific academic needs. Moreover, the implementation of educational programs for Newcomers will need to incorporate structures to provide ongoing socio-emotional support.

When we know our students, we meet each student where he or she is and nurture purposeful learning. By focusing on research-based instructional practices for English Language Learners, we build language and content in tandem, provide high-quality learning opportunities and ensure high levels of academic and communicative skills. When we know our students, we are respectful and responsive to them, their families, and their communities.

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#### Information and Resources

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