

# Newcomer Students



## Purpose

This document is intended to give school and district staff a quick overview of who newcomer students are, what their unique needs may be, and how to support their successful transition in the U.S. school system.



**“Newcomer” is a term for students born outside of the United States and their families, who have recently arrived in the United States. These students and families may fall into a variety of categories. Learning more about student and family backgrounds helps guide districts/schools to provide more specific services. Newcomers may be:**

- Students with adequate, regular formal education.
- Students with limited or interrupted/ inconsistent formal education.
- Students who speak some English.

- Students who come from English-speaking countries or who, upon screening, may be determined as English proficient.
- English learners.
- Refugees.
- Asylum seekers.
- Unaccompanied youth.
- Unhoused youth.

*These students bring diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences and require intentional support to thrive academically and socially.*

## How to Best Support Newcomer Students

### 1. Language Supports

- Provide access to language development programs (e.g., English as a second language [ESL], bilingual education).
- Use visual aids; gestures; and technology, including primary language scaffolds and visuals, to support comprehension.
- Encourage peer mentoring, which allows students who are more proficient in the language to assist.

## 2. Cultural Sensitivity

- Be aware of a student's cultural background and potential trauma they may have experienced.
- Create an inclusive and welcoming classroom environment that values diverse cultures.
  - Consider how languages vary and how that may impact instruction and evaluations. American English is different from British English. Spain Spanish is different from Colombian Spanish. Students may come with a wide variance in vocabulary.

## 3. Academic Support

- Use scaffolding techniques to help students understand content.
- Allow extra time on assignments and assessments, when necessary.
- Provide clear instructions and expectations.
- Provide literacy and math interventions for the students who need them.

## 4. Social-Emotional Support

- Foster an inclusive, safe space for students to express themselves.
- Recognize and address potential social isolation or bullying.
- Connect with school counselors or community support services, if needed.

## 5. Parent and Family Engagement

- Develop relationships with families through intentional use of interpretation and translation services.
- Offer resources and guidance for parents about the education system and school expectations.
- Offer school tours, classroom walkthroughs. Explain basic school routines.
- The idea of family engagement in schools is uniquely American. Parents may need targeted support and invitations to help them understand the American school system and the cultural expectations for being involved and engaged with school.



## Role of District and School Staff

This chart outlines the recommended roles and responsibilities for staff in districts serving newcomer students. These recommendations may vary based on the district’s English learner (EL) program models and staffing structures. The chart is not intended to be prescriptive; it emphasizes that the support of newcomer students is a shared responsibility on both school and district levels.

<b>Registrar/Enrollment Staff</b>	Collect accurate information, including the Home Language Survey, and communicate with EL program director and assigned school staff.
<b>EL Program Directors</b>	Ensure access to language services, appropriate assessments, and progress monitoring for English learners.
<b>EL/Bilingual Teacher</b>	Provide targeted English language instruction while supporting students’ access to grade-level content. Design lessons that develop social and academic language skills and collaborate with classroom teachers and families to advocate for the academic and emotional needs of newcomer students.
<b>School Leaders</b>	Promote inclusive school culture; monitor newcomer progress; ensure compliance with legal requirements; and provide ongoing professional development on cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed care, and EL support.
<b>Counselors and Social Workers</b>	Monitor adjustments and provide socio-emotional support and referrals to community resources.
<b>Teachers</b>	Deliver scaffolded, inclusive, and accessible instruction; maintain high expectations; foster inclusive environments.
<b>Interventionists, Instructional Coaches, and Other Support Staff</b>	Assist in identifying appropriate interventions, analyzing data, and co-planning instruction that aligns with English language development goals; build teacher capacity to create inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms that support newcomers’ academic growth.
<b>Family Liaisons</b>	Bridge home-school communication in families’ preferred language.
<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	Collaborate with teachers to scaffold learning; foster cultural understanding; and ensure newcomers feel safe, welcomed, and supported both academically and socially. Reinforce English language development by modeling vocabulary, sentence structure, and conversational skills.

# How to Build an Inclusive and Supportive Environment for Newcomer Students

## 1. Promote Cultural Awareness

- Celebrate diverse cultures through classroom activities, discussions, and displays.
- Encourage students to share aspects of their culture (e.g., traditions, holidays, food) with the class.
- Avoid stereotypes and create a space in which all cultures are respected and valued.

## 2. Create a Welcoming Atmosphere

- Greet students warmly and make them feel seen and heard.
- Use welcoming language and body language.
- Assign a “buddy” system in which newcomer students are paired with a peer to help them navigate school routines, schedules, and social dynamics.



**CAUTION: A “buddy” should not become a newcomer’s official translator. Having the same buddy all the time can negatively impact the learning of the buddy and can foster bad feelings. It is the teacher’s responsibility to provide native language and instructional support.**

## 3. Build Relationships

- Take time to get to know each student individually. This helps you understand their unique needs and strengths.
- Use surveys or questionnaires to learn about a student’s home life, interests, and experiences.
- Foster positive relationships between newcomer students and their peers to reduce isolation and increase social integration.

## 4. Provide Clear and Consistent Routines

- Use visual schedules and clear expectations to help newcomer students feel secure and understand what is expected of them.
- Make sure transitions between activities are smooth and predictable.
- Label classroom materials, furniture, and areas in multiple languages, if possible.

## 5. Foster a Growth Mindset

- Encourage an environment in which making mistakes is seen as part of learning.
- Reinforce effort, perseverance, and progress rather than focusing solely on outcomes.
- Use positive reinforcement to build self-confidence and motivate students to keep trying, even when the challenges seem overwhelming.

## 6. Facilitate Peer Interactions and Collaboration

- Create group work opportunities in which students can collaborate, share ideas, and help each other.
- Mix students of varying proficiency levels so that newcomer students have opportunities to interact with their peers and learn from them.
- Encourage activities, such as cooperative games or group projects, that promote teamwork and social skills development.
- Foster peer connections through clubs, sports, and mentoring.

## Stages of a Newcomer Student's Adjustment

### 1. Pre-Production (Silent Stage)

- A student may not speak much or at all in the classroom.
- They are absorbing the new language and culture.
- Focus on listening and reading.
- Offer non-verbal comprehension checks, native language support.

### 2. Early Production

- A student begins to use simple phrases or single words.
- They may be able to understand more than they can speak.
- Can answer yes/no questions with one or two familiar words.

### 3. Speech Emergence

- A student begins to form basic sentences and may start engaging more in conversations.
- They can communicate their needs but still struggle with academic vocabulary.
- They have good comprehension.

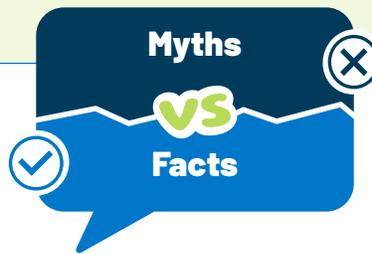
### 4. Intermediate Fluency

- A student can participate more fully in classroom activities.
- Their language skills are still developing, but they can use more complex sentences and engage in discussions using technical and content-specific vocabulary.

### 5. Advanced Fluency

- A student demonstrates strong language proficiency and can express complex ideas.
- They may still require occasional academic support but are mostly independent in communication and learning.
- The student may make grammar errors that other grade-level peers make.
- They are on track academically with grade-level peers.

## NEWCOMER



**Myth No. 1: Families do not prioritize education because they don't come to school events.**

Fact: Many families face language barriers, have transportation issues, or work long hours. Schools should consider how they can reduce the barriers families face to encourage and facilitate parent engagement in school events. In addition, the idea of family engagement in schools is uniquely American. Families may need specific and targeted invitations and instruction to help them understand American school culture.

**Myth No. 2: Newcomers need to be placed in low-level or remedial classes until their English improves.**

Fact: Academic ability and English proficiency are separate. Students may be highly capable in content areas when provided with appropriate linguistic support. Schools are encouraged to assess a newcomer's content skills in their native language wherever possible to ensure they are placed in courses appropriate to their academic abilities.

**Myth No. 3: Newcomers should assimilate quickly and behave like other students.**

Fact: Cultural adjustment takes time, and maintaining cultural identity supports emotional well-being.

**Myth No. 4: All newcomer students have experienced trauma.**

Fact: While many have faced challenges, not all have experienced trauma. Assuming so can pathologize them unnecessarily. It is important to learn about your students before making assumptions.

**Myth No. 5: Only ESL teachers are responsible for teaching newcomers English.**

Fact: Language development is the responsibility of all educators, including content-area teachers, interventionists, specialists, etc. Each content area has its own academic English that teachers are responsible for teaching to all students in their classes.

**Myth No. 6: They'll catch up on their own time.**

Fact: While there is some truth to this statement, many will fall behind without targeted support (language development, trauma-informed care, academic scaffolds, possible interventions).

## Understanding BICS vs. CALP

It's important to understand the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which are two types of language skills that develop at different rates, when supporting newcomer students.

### Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills

This is everyday social language used in informal settings, such as talking with friends, chatting at lunch or recess, or asking to go to the bathroom.

**How long does it take?** BICS typically develops within six months to two years after arrival.

**Example:** A student might seem fluent because they can easily say, "Can I borrow a pencil?" or "I like soccer."

**Important to know:** Just because a student sounds fluent in conversation doesn't mean they're ready for academic work in English on their own. They will still need accommodations, scaffolds, visuals, and other necessary instructional strategies to help make the content as meaningful and accessible as possible.

### Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

This is academic language that is needed to understand textbooks, write essays, solve word problems, or explain scientific concepts.

**How long does it take?** It can take five to seven years (or longer) to develop, especially without strong support in the student's first language.

**Example:** Understanding instructions like "compare and contrast" or "analyze the author's perspective."

**Important to know:** This is the language needed to succeed in school. Students might struggle with CALP even though their BICS is strong.

## Resources

[Considerations for Support of Newcomers Students: Recommended for Local Literacy Plans](#)

[National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition- Newcomer Toolkit](#)

[Colorin Colorado – Supporting Newcomer Students: Resource Gallery](#)

[WIDA –Five strategies to welcome newcomers into your classroom](#)

[WIDA Webinars](#)

WIDA offers webinars on the topic of newcomers and multilingual learners regularly

[Illinois Resource Center Newcomer Guide Secondary: Arrival Day](#)

[IRC- Supporting Newcomer Students by Carly Spina](#)

## Guidance

September 6, 2023 – [Immigrant Dear Colleague Letter](#)

[Non-Regulatory Guidance on Registration of Special Populations, including Newcomers](#)

## Legal Requirements

[Lau v. Nichols \(1974\)](#): Schools must take “affirmative steps” to help ELs overcome language barriers.

[Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#): Prohibits discrimination based on national origin, including language access.

[Plyler v. Doe \(1982\)](#): Public schools cannot deny access based on immigration status.

[ESSA Title III](#): Requires districts to identify, support, and monitor ELs, including recent arrivals.



**REMEMBER:** Every newcomer student’s journey is unique. Building a supportive, understanding, and inclusive environment is key to their success.