Newcomer Students at a Glance

Statewide English Learner Administrators Conference

September 2026

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Agenda

- Purpose
- Definition
- Newcomer Stages
- Supports for Newcomer Students
- Role of District and School Staff
- Building an Inclusive and Supportive Environment
- Newcomer Myths and Facts
- Submit Input

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Purpose

- The Newcomer Students at a Glance 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.



ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Newcomer Students at a Glance document



ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

What is a Newcomer student?

- “Newcomer” is a student born outside of the United States and their families who, with their family, has 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.
- These students bring diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences and require intentional support to thrive academically and socially.

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

Stages of a Newcomer Student's Adjustment

Pre-Production (Silent Stage)

- Not speaking much or at all
- Are absorbing the new language and culture
- Focus on listening and reading
- Non-verbal comprehension check, native language support

Early Production

- Begins to use simple phrases or single words
- May be able to understand more than they can speak
- Can answer yes/no questions with 1-2 familiar words

Speech Emergence

- Begins to form basic sentences
- Starts to engage more in conversations
- Can communicate their needs but may still struggle with academic vocabulary
- Good comprehension

Intermediate Fluency

- Student can participate more fully in classroom activities
- Language skills are still developing
- Can use more complex sentences and engage in discussions using technical and content specific language.

Advanced Fluency

- Strong language proficiency
- Can express complex ideas
- May still require occasional support but mostly independent
- May make grammar errors that other grade-level peers make
- On track academically with grade-level peers.

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

BICS vs. CALP



Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)

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

BICS typically develops within six months to two years after arrival.

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.



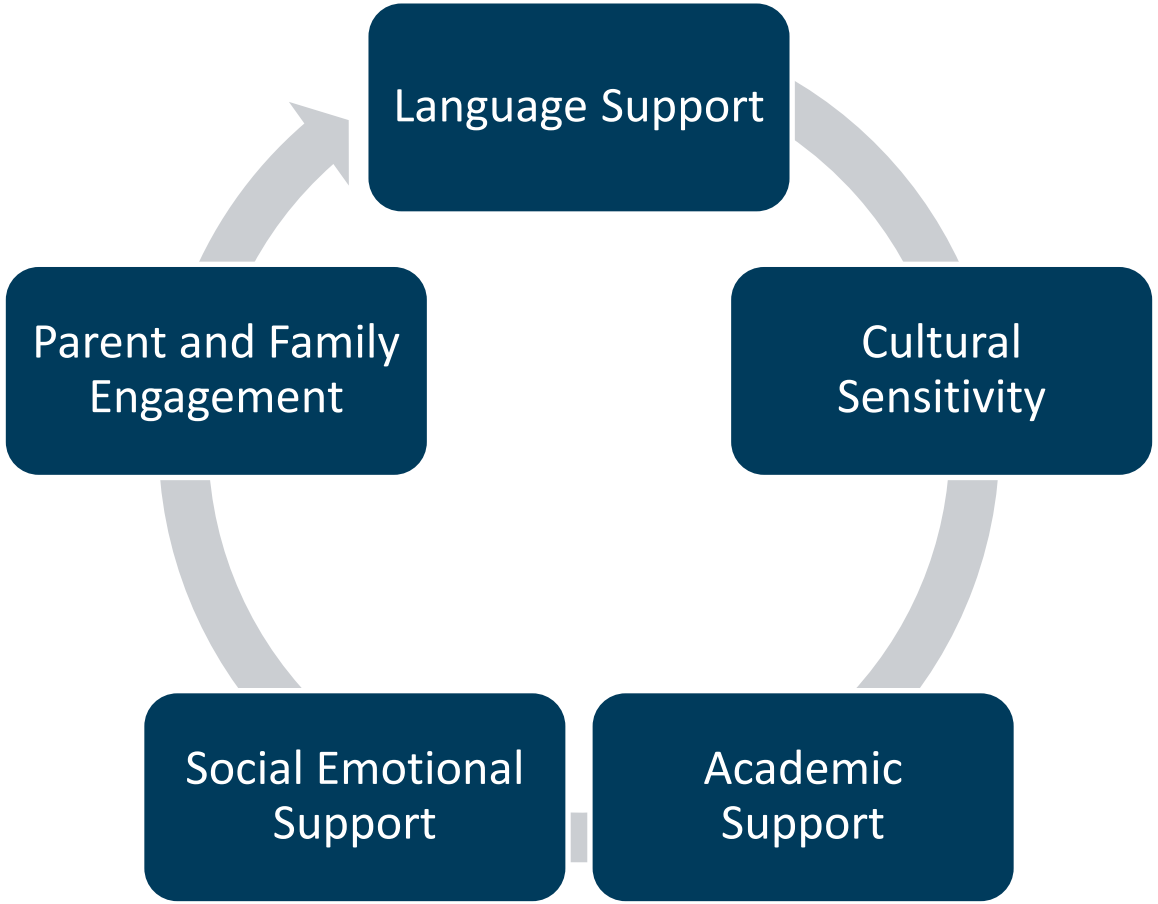
Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

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

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

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

Newcomer Success



ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Supports for Newcomers (part 1)

Language Support:

- Provide access to language development programs (e.g., ESL, bilingual education).
- Use visual aids, gestures, and technology to support comprehension. Include primary language scaffolds and visuals.
- Encourage peer mentoring, where students who are more proficient in the language can assist.

Cultural Sensitivity:

- Be aware of the student's cultural background and possible 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.
- Students may come with a wide variance in vocabulary.

Academic Support:

- Use scaffolding techniques to help students understand content.
- Allow extra time on assignments and assessments when necessary.
- Provide clear instructions and expectations.
- Some students may need literacy and math interventions.

Supports for Newcomers (part 2)

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.

Parent and Family Engagement:

- Develop relationships with families through intentional use of interpretation and translation.
- Offer resources and guidance for parents about the education system and school expectations.
- Give school tours and classroom walkthroughs and 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

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Role of District and School Staff (part 1)

Registrar/Enrollment Staff

- Collect accurate information including the Home Language Survey.
- Communicate with EL program director and assigned school staff.

EL Program Directors

- Ensure access to language services, appropriate assessments, and progress monitoring for English learners.

EL/Bilingual Teacher

- Provide targeted English language instruction while supporting students' access to grade level content.
- Design lessons that develop social and academic language skills.
- Collaborate with classroom teachers and families to advocate for the academic and emotional needs of newcomer students.

Role of District and School Staff (part 2)

School Leaders

- Promote inclusive school culture.
- Monitor newcomer progress.
- Ensure compliance with legal requirements.
- Provide ongoing professional development on cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed care and EL support.

Counselors and Social Workers

- Monitor adjustment.
- Provide social-emotional support and referrals to community resources.

Teachers

- Deliver scaffolded, inclusive, and accessible instruction.
- Maintain high expectations.
- Foster inclusive environments .

Role of District and School Staff (part 3)

Interventionists, Instructional Coaches and Other Support Staff

- 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.

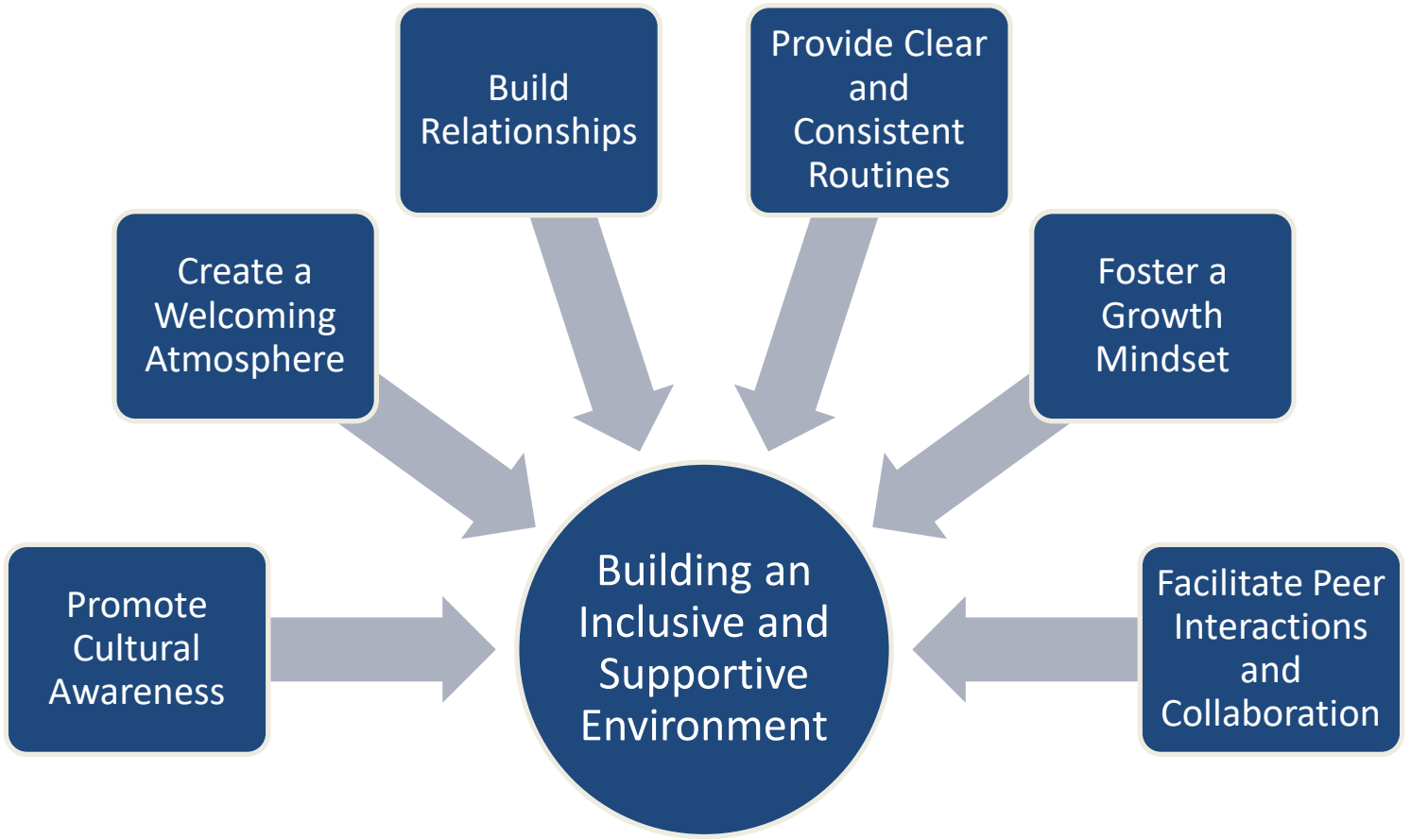
Family Liaisons

- Bridge home-school communication in families' preferred language.

Paraprofessionals

- 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.

Building an Inclusive and Supportive Environment



ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Building an Inclusive and Supportive Environment (part 1)

- **Promote Cultural Awareness**
  - Celebrate diverse culture 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 where all cultures are respected and valued.
- **Create a Welcoming Atmosphere**
  - Greet students warmly and make them feel seen and heard.
  - Use welcoming language and body language.
  - Assign a "buddy" system where 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 and having the same buddy all the time can negatively impact the buddy's learning and can foster bad feelings. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide native language and instructional support.
- **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 the student's home life, interests, and experiences.
  - Foster positive relationships between newcomer students and their peers to reduce isolation and increase social integration.

Building an Inclusive and Supportive Environment (part 2)

- **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.
- **Foster a Growth Mindset**
  - Encourage an environment where 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.
- **Facilitate Peer Interactions and Collaboration**
  - Create group work opportunities where 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 that promote teamwork and social skills development, such as cooperative games or group projects.
  - Foster peer connections through clubs, sports, and mentoring.

Newcomer Myths and Facts (part 1)

Myth: Their families do not prioritize education because they don't come to school events.

Fact: Many families face language barriers, 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: 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 Newcomers' content skills in their native language wherever possible to ensure they are placed in courses appropriate to their academic abilities.

Myth: Newcomers should assimilate quickly and behave like other students.

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

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Newcomer Myths and Facts (part 2)

Myth: All newcomer students have experienced trauma.

Fact: While many have faced challenges, not all have experienced trauma and assuming so can pathologize them unnecessarily. It is important to learn about and know your students.

Myth: Only ESL teachers are responsible for teaching newcomers English.

Fact: Language development should be the focus across all content-areas and from every educator. Each content area has its own Academic English vocabulary that teachers are responsible for teaching to all students in their classes.

Myth: They'll catch up on their own time.

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

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Questions?

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Newcomer Students Inquiry



ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Connect With the Department

Multilingual Webpage

Assigned Consultant Listing

Subscribe to ISBE Emails

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION