



What School Districts Can Do To Increase Graduation Rates for Late-Entering Immigrant Students With Interrupted Formal Education

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In the United States, federal laws and Supreme Court rulings (e.g., *Lau v. Nichols*, *Plyler v. Doe*) mandate that immigrant children are provided with equal access to public education regardless of their immigration status or home language(s). These newcomers represent a large and rapidly growing student population, with the highest concentrations in urban areas. Along with this growth is an increase of children who have experienced interruptions in their formal schooling. The New York State Education Department defines students with interrupted formal education (referred to as SIFE or SLIFE) as multilingual learners/English language learners who have attended schools in the United States for less than 12 months and who are two or more years below grade level in home language literacy and/or mathematics due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to their arrival. However, data are limited as only a few states identify these students (e.g., [Massachusetts](#), [Minnesota](#), [New York](#)). This dearth of identification leads to schools and teachers serving these students without proper supports and resources. To ensure that students with interruptions in their formal schooling are well positioned to succeed, school districts must identify them and adopt programs and practices to support them.

A RUPTURED GRADUATION PIPELINE

Although immigrant students are a diverse group with a range of educational backgrounds, the subset who meets the above definition face a myriad of obstacles. This is particularly true for those who enter the United States at high school age. After all, these newcomers have a short amount of time to build advanced literacy skills and content knowledge in a language that they are in the process of learning while trying to pass the standardized assessments required for graduation. To further complicate this matter, their teachers and schools are typically held accountable for their test scores within one or two years of their date of entry into the U.S. school system. This results in a high rate of late-entering newcomers dropping out, being counseled out, or being pushed into adult education programs.

HOW PIPELINE RUPTURES CAN BE REPAIRED AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

There is a lack of research about students with interrupted formal education, particularly in examining what works within the challenging contexts of the urban public schools that they typically attend. To address this need, a study was carried out in two urban high schools that serve large numbers of immigrant students. Students with interrupted formal education were not identified in this district, but the teachers who were interviewed had taught them for at least one year. To learn about their students' educational histories, native language proficiency, and content knowledge, the teachers had to have conversations with them and create diagnostic assessments. The only information that the teachers were provided was the newcomers' English levels and date of entry into the school system.

A body of research on refugee-background students (who often have gaps in their formal school-based learning) clearly demonstrates that stringent graduation requirements and high-stakes testing are detrimental. The present study found that additional challenges are presented when the curriculum is inflexible and inaccessible. In addition, the study's findings affirmed the importance of using asset pedagogies to leverage the focal students' experiential knowledge and [community cultural wealth](#).

The following recommendations stem from the study's findings as well as a synthesis of recent and relevant research. States and school districts can follow and/or adapt them to support students with interruptions in their formal schooling and the teachers and schools that serve them.

- Offer newcomer and bridge programs for all recently arrived adolescent students. Many urban school districts offer newcomer programs that could serve as models (e.g., Dallas/Ft. Worth, Boston). There are also district-collaboration models, such as the [Internationals Network](#) of schools. Ideally, these programs would provide bilingual instruction. Research suggests that bridge programs that help students transition from newcomer programs into traditional high schools and from high schools into post-secondary opportunities are also effective.
- Identify students with interrupted formal education and create plans to support them. The states that define SIFE have identification flowcharts and support models that districts could adapt.
- Use data on students with interrupted formal education to assess school-level support needs. The schools that are serving high numbers of students with gaps in their formal education require additional personnel, support, resources, and targeted and ongoing professional learning.
- Provide teachers with the autonomy and support to develop curriculum and assessments. Research suggests that it is beneficial for teachers to use [backward design](#) along with asset-based pedagogies (e.g., [culturally sustaining pedagogy](#), [translanguaging](#)) that leverage the students' strengths, languages, experiences, and cultures in the classroom. Teachers should be supported in curriculum and assessment design, particularly as they implement culturally sustaining practices and integrate language instruction into course content.
- Provide extended learning opportunities and flexible pathways to obtain a standard diploma. It is beneficial to provide learning opportunities outside of school hours (e.g., after school programs, summer programs) and to offer non-traditional pathways to earn a standard high school diploma. This may require advocating for standardized testing exemptions and collaborating with local universities and/or non-profit organizations.
- Extend support into the surrounding community. Teachers, counselors, and social workers should be provided with the time and support that they need for engaging with the newcomers' parents or guardians. Districts can also form agreements between schools and programs/organizations to help students and families meet basic, medical, psychological, and legal needs.

Ultimately, states that do not identify students with interrupted formal education should revise and re-submit their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans to do so. They should also remove high-stakes testing mandates and the accountability measures that are linked to them and offer fair and valid assessments. In the meantime, school districts can push for those changes and can follow the above recommendations to improve outcomes for the focal students, their teachers, and their schools.

Read more in Kristin W. Kibler, "The Teachers Responses to Policies Affecting Late-Entering Students with Interrupted Formal Schooling" In J.F. Simpson and W. Cavendish (Eds), *Advancing Equity in Education Through Intersectionality- Based Analyses* (Teachers College Press, 2021).