

Cultivating and Supporting Quality Educators of Newcomers and Multilingual Learners

Who Are Newcomer Multilingual Learners? What Educators Need to Know

Introduction

Since the start of 2022, school districts in the U.S. have experienced a surge in arrivals of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees across the southern and northern borders. Newly arrived young people who are in the process of learning English are often referred to as newcomer multilingual learners (MLLs). Some school districts are serving these newcomer MLLs for the first time, while others with experience are seeing significantly larger numbers of these new arrivals.

An estimated 500,000 newcomer multilingual learners have entered U.S. public schools since 2022. This group is adding to the approximately five million existing multilingual learners who currently make up 10 percent of the U.S. public school population (NCES, 2023). Their graduation outcomes lag far behind non-MLLs, and their dropout rates are three times that of native-born students (Sugarman, 2023), in particular if they enter U.S. schools for the first time in middle or high school. Newcomer MLLs come from a variety of

cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as educational experiences. They may be refugees, asylees, immigrants, unaccompanied youth or undocumented youth and may or may not be able to work at grade level.

Research has demonstrated the importance of equitable access to quality programs that support and leverage the multilingualism of immigrant youth, especially given the increasing numbers of MLLs in U.S. schools and the urgency of investing in resources and the professional development of staff (Porter et al., 2023; Umansky et al., 2018). Newcomer MLL students have diverse academic and socio-emotional needs that require the linguistic and cultural competence of educators (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008; Umansky et al., 2018). However, because they have not had explicit training in how to work with this population, many U.S. educators remain unfamiliar with the needs of MLLs – though they make up the most rapidly growing student population in districts around the U.S.



Internationals Network Educators engage frequently in active learning and peer exchange.

What Can U.S. Schools Offer Newcomer Multilingual Learners?

While not a monolithic group, newcomer MLLs share many important characteristics that educators can become knowledgeable about to guide programs and instruction – a process that has been shown to enrich both students and the educators who serve them. Newcomer MLLs are developing mentally, emotionally, and physically, just like their U.S.-born peers, while also having recently arrived in the country, which for some involved arduous periods and loss. Many, if not most, hunger for community, connection, and support. Some were born in U.S. territories (largely Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa), while others may be Green Card holders, asylees, undocumented migrants or refugees, and perhaps unaccompanied. Some had no or limited formal schooling in their countries of origin; some had their formal schooling interrupted by their departures.

Multilingual learners in U.S. schools enter with emergent English proficiency and knowledge of at least one other language. They are developing English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The term "multilingual" acknowledges the racialized nature of linguistic identities of children of immigrants who grow up speaking, learning, and interacting with multiple languages. While the terms “English Learner” (EL/ELL) or “Limited English Proficient” (LEP) are found in policy documents, they are deficit-oriented and mask the reality that languages other than standard English have long played a role as markers of lower status and a lightning rod for social stigmatization for language-minoritized populations. Newcomers are a subgroup of the MLL population who have recently arrived into U.S. schools.

Regardless of their backgrounds, MLL newcomers enter U.S. schools with needs beyond the development of English. They require socio-emotional support, community assistance, and help in understanding and navigating an unfamiliar educational system. Understanding and working to meet their needs is central to their development into active members of a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual participatory democracy. Districts and school leaders can help leverage these students’ strengths and help them adapt, develop into their full

elves, and graduate high school with the knowledge and skills to make their own choices for life beyond graduation and contribute to their communities, while also creating a supportive environment for educators, parents, and community members.

It is essential for districts, schools, and educators to develop processes to identify MLL newcomers’ backgrounds and to work with the skills and life experience that these young people bring with them. Schools with robust intake systems report that their newcomers have varied literacy levels in their home languages and a spectrum of experience with formal education and the working world. For example, a student who is proficient in three non-English languages may have emergent literacy, perhaps never having had the opportunity to attend school but having significant experience in the workforce.

The living situations of newcomers range in terms of stability and economic means. They may have arrived accompanied by their families and be living with them, or may have joined family members they never met before. They may live doubled or tripled up with other families, in transitional housing or in a shelter. These circumstances often influence how newcomers spend their time outside of school. Newcomer MLLs may work part or full time, and they may have substantial family responsibilities in addition to attending school, such as dropping off and picking up siblings or helping translate for the official business of family members with less comfort in speaking English. No small number experienced trauma in their home countries or on their journey to the United States. What we can say about newcomers as a whole is that they tend to be resilient and curious, and they – like all students in U.S. schools – deserve the best education that we can provide.

Internationals Network has created a series of free resources for schools serving newcomers.

Access them on our website:
www.internationalsnetwork.org/newcomer-resources

What Are the Legal Requirements for Educating Newcomer Multilingual Learners?

Schools in the United States have a legal obligation to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students residing in the country, including newcomer MLLs. In [Plyler v. Doe \(1982\)](#), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that schools cannot deny access to public education based on a child's immigration status, meaning that undocumented children have the right to free education under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Similarly, the Supreme Court's decision in [Lau v. Nichols \(1974\)](#) determined that schools must take affirmative steps to help non-English-speaking students overcome linguistic barriers to education, making clear that offering the same educational programs to all students without regard to language needs violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As per guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice, school districts and administrators may not make school enrollment contingent upon immigration status.¹ This guidance set a precedent for specialized services to support access for MLLs to the core curriculum. Schools' obligations were further clarified in [Castañeda v. Pickard \(1981\)](#), which established a three-part test to ensure that programs for English learners meet three foundational criteria: (1) They are based on sound educational theory, (2) they are effectively implemented, and (3) they are regularly evaluated for results.

A Civil Rights Issue as Much as an Instructional Issue

Interest in education for newcomers re-emerged as U.S. schools welcomed growing numbers of immigrant students after Lyndon Johnson signed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (The Hart-Celler Act) at the base of the Statue of Liberty. The law lifted the strict national origin quotas ushered in by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act. The 1924 law had all but eliminated immigration from Asia, South America, Africa, and Southern and Eastern Europe for four decades. After 1965, growing diversity in schools led to increased focus on multilingual approaches to education and in second-language acquisition. This was driven by the changing immigration patterns, coupled with the Civil

Rights movement and the recognition of diverse needs of immigrants and children of immigrants in U.S. schools.

The growing emphasis on improving approaches to teaching newcomers represented a pedagogical shift in which the importance of language acquisition in the learning process was finally acknowledged. At that time, newcomers and MLLs were still typically the responsibility of English as a Second Language teachers. ESL teachers were often isolated from their peers and saddled with multiple responsibilities on top of teaching, including assisting in student intake, translation services, and counseling. ESL classes were often relegated to basements and temporary trailers, separating students from the general school population. Eminent scholars have written powerfully about their own experiences with these subtractive programs (De la Ruz Reyes, 2015; Gándara & Orfield, 2010; Valenzuela, 2005). The field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) emerged during this time, along with a renewed interest in the role of multilingual approaches to schooling with the passage of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act. The federal grants to school districts mandated by the act represent the first instance of the U.S. government providing funds for programs to promote educational equity among MLLs.



Newcomer youth thrive on community and peer support.

¹ US Department of Education, *Dear Colleague Letter*, Jan 8, 2025

How Have Approaches to Newcomer Education Changed?

The tenets of newcomer education have changed dramatically since the largest wave of immigrants entered the U.S. at the turn of the 20th *Century*. There has been a marked shift away from subtractive, assimilationist approaches that focused exclusively on English learning to the current research-based emphasis on embedding language learning in content areas. Today, it is widely recognized that, regardless of teachers' disciplinary expertise, they must be skilled in integrating language learning into their content areas (August & Shanahan, 2006; Gibbons, 2002; Gottlieb, 2016; Short & Echevarria, 2004), or, in short, that “all teachers are language teachers.” The past subtractive approaches², which were widely popular, have been shown through research to be largely detrimental to newcomer students' chances of succeeding. Scholars have for years examined the damage done (MacSwan, 2020; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999) by the imposition of perhaps well-meaning but often inadvertently paternalistic standards (MacSwan, 2020; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). The educational consensus has shifted to the stance that students' languages are essential assets for facilitating communication within the family, as well as markers of identity.

The historical myth that immigrant children can succeed in school “by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” in an English-only classroom has long been debunked by research on language acquisition (Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1987). The submersion approach, where students are placed in mainstream classes without language support, scaffolds, or accommodations, has instead been proven to be ineffective and damaging. Studies, such as [Urban Institute's Overlooked and Underserved: Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools](#), reveal that, without intentionally designed systems and support, many newcomers and MLLs struggle academically, leading to high dropout rates and low educational outcomes. It is now clear is that effectively designed programs provide the scaffolding that is necessary for these students to succeed.³

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 recognized the value of multilingualism and its cognitive benefits, but still had a significantly detrimental impact on the U.S. pipeline for bilingual teachers.

While the act's goals were to improve accountability and student outcomes for marginalized groups, its focus on standardized testing and English-only accountability measures resulted in barriers for bilingual education and the recruitment, preparation, and retention of bilingual teachers. NCLB effectively created incentives for schools to shift away from bilingual education in favor of English-only instruction (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Menken, 2008).

The shifting role of high school

More than a century ago when the United States experienced large waves of immigration from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, schools emphasized teacher-centered rote learning and memorization. Conventional wisdom was rooted in largely deficit views of MLLs, fostering the belief that English-only, assimilationist approaches were best. Xenophobia bolstered such ideas and culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924⁴, which curtailed most immigration.

In the 1920's in the U.S., however, high school completion was not as necessary as it is today. Then, only about a quarter of all eligible youth in the U.S. were enrolled in secondary education (NCES, nd). The consequences of not completing high school did not include marginalization or exclusion from the workforce. Most young people, regardless of nativity, entered the workforce soon after completing primary school. It was not until after World War II that secondary education in the U.S. became much more widespread and available (Goldin, 1998; NCES, nd). Now, with higher standards for workforce participation in the global economy and a clearly demonstrated link between education and social mobility, it is clear that the lack of a secondary education can have disastrous long-term impacts.



Students from the International High School at Langley Park (MD) greet their teachers during the return to school.

² For a powerful reminder of draconian English-only classroom approaches, listen to this short memoir [The Day a Texas School Held a Funeral for the Spanish Language](#). Warning: content is graphic.

³ NYSED, *Dispelling the Myth of “English Only”*

⁴ Office of the Historian, *The Immigration Act of 1924*

What Do Teachers of Newcomers and Multilingual Learners Need to Know?

Research affirms the principle that all teachers are language teachers, regardless of their content area, credentials, background or language skills (August & Shanahan, 2006; Walqui, 2006). We now know that language is best taught in context and that the most effective approaches to support English learners' language development embed the process in scaffolded content instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006; Gibbons, 2002; Snow & Brinton, 1997). We also know that students' home languages are important tools for learning and must be harnessed rather than silenced (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). However, even with this robust research, states still require limited preparation and offer few supports for content teachers who have MLLs and newcomers in their classrooms.

As we outlined in our series of [Learning Briefs on project-based learning](#), newcomers and MLLs benefit most from instructional that is designed to be:

- Purposeful, language-rich, experiential, and interdisciplinary;
- Rich in opportunities to practice and rehearse new language;
- Iterative, cycling content, skills, and language
- Meaningful, with ample opportunities to use, rehearse, and apply language;
- Supportive and aligned with the goal of language development.

Teachers of newcomers are often these students' first introduction to American schooling. Instructors therefore have the unique opportunity and responsibility to set the tone for newcomers' educational experiences in the U.S., which research has shown have social-emotional factors that are central to learning success (Melani, Roberts & Taylor, 2020). In the case of middle and high school students, instruction and support designed for newcomer MLLs must consider the unique and vital phase that is adolescent development. Central to supporting adolescents is the creation of a safe, supportive, culturally responsive environment where students are able to sustain a low affective filter (Krashen, 1985) in order to participate in positive risk taking. Approaching the classroom with a focus on students' strengths is an assets-based mindset. Teachers who recognize the worth of their students' home languages and are curious about their lived experiences can leverage the knowledge of their backgrounds, bringing these components into the foundation of their course curriculum.



Internationals Network Educators have many opportunities to exchange ideas and grow their professional practice.

Teachers of newcomers also need a range of techniques to create and adapt materials so there are multiple access points, allowing students to engage at the level of challenge best suited for them to progress in their English and content learning. Strategic scaffolding; an understanding of differentiation-teaching tailored to students' diverse needs, learning styles, and linguistic backgrounds; and the ability to make in-the-moment shifts during instruction are key.

In addition, language acquisition while learning new content, quite simply, requires time. Teachers can enhance students' progress by giving them ample periods to complete tasks and creating opportunities to revise and resubmit their work multiple times to demonstrate skill knowledge. Language acquisition may develop differently across the modalities of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and can be encouraged by delivering instructional materials and assessments in multiple modalities, including oral and written. These are responsive approaches to the very real challenge of acquiring a new language in a new educational environment.

Finally, it is important for teachers to recognize that newcomer students deal with all of the typical challenges of adolescence, plus the stress of attempting to communicate their experiences and emotions in a new place and in a new language. Whether their relocation was by choice or necessity may also impact their mental health in many ways. Internationals Network has learned that teachers who have the time, space, and access to call upon a variety of social-emotional supports, including counselors and social workers, have the most success in supporting their students.

What Specific Knowledge and Skills Do Educators of Newcomers Need?

Social-Emotional Learning and Support

Immigrant students are not simply coming to the United States; they are leaving their countries and often family members behind, a wrenching experience. They must make sense of the changes that are thrust upon them in a new system with different expectations as they are going through adolescence, already a time of immense change and upheaval and an important phase of identity development. Schools can provide instruction and exposure to healthy emotional skills for self-regulation, building empathy, and problem solving. Many newcomer students have traumatic memories and experiences that require increased social and emotional support. They also now face a political context marked by increasing xenophobia. We know that attention to their social and emotional health directly affects the rate and quality of their learning.

Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity

Cultural awareness and linguistic responsiveness are essential for teachers of newcomers to create inclusive, equitable learning environments that validate students' identities and experiences. In addition, families and students are navigating complex political environments and educators need to be aware of ways to support them and be culturally responsive. Understanding and valuing students' diverse cultural backgrounds through conversations, and classroom and school activities, helps build trust, foster engagement, and support their academic and social-emotional growth. These priorities are also key to integrating students' languages, cultures, and knowledge in their education. As Bettina Love emphasizes, "Education can only be transformational when it embraces the richness of students' cultures as assets, not deficits" (Love, 2019).

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is effective for all learners, ensuring that they can access and engage with the curriculum through multiple entry points, regardless of their literacy levels or academic backgrounds. Teachers of newcomers need to understand how to leverage images, gestures, background and schema building, scaffolding, and collaboration to provide rich, relevant, engaging, age-appropriate instruction. Newcomers need consistent exposure to meaningful opportunities to read, write, l

listen, and speak so that they can build vocabulary, improve pronunciation, learn grammar, and leverage communication skills while learning content. Tailoring material, processes, and formative assessments provides scaffolds that meet diverse needs while empowering students to build on their strengths and advance at their own pace.

Integrating Language Development Into Content Instruction

Newcomers' rich cultural and linguistic assets are a valuable foundation for their learning journey. While learning a new language, they are also expanding their background knowledge and critical thinking skills, and simultaneously navigating content that often reflects an U.S.-oriented perspective. Skilled educators of newcomers know how to build on students' strengths by embedding language instruction into content and celebrating their diverse experiences. Well-designed and meaningful project-based learning further leverages these assets, providing opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and engage deeply with content beyond language acquisition.

Knowledge of U.S. Education Laws and Rights

Educators of newcomers play a crucial role in demystifying the U.S. education system, helping students and families understand its structure, expectations, and opportunities. They must effectively explain the significance of grades, the accumulation of credits, and how these elements contribute to high school graduation and pathways to college and careers. By providing clear guidance and culturally responsive support, educators empower newcomers to navigate the system confidently and achieve their academic and career goals.



Skilled educators of newcomers develop the expertise to be culturally and linguistically responsive.

Cultivating Quality Educators of Multilingual Learners: Internationals Network

Since its inception in 2004, Internationals Network for Public Schools has designed, developed, and sustained public, district-run middle and high schools and school-based programs for adolescent newcomers. The first Internationals school was founded in New York City by district educators who saw that newcomer adolescents were often poorly supported in traditional large comprehensive high schools. They seized the opportunity to design an innovative stand-alone public high school to address the particular and complex needs of newcomers. Today, Internationals Network schools enroll about 9,500 students in nine public school districts across the U.S. and over the course of 20 years have served nearly 50,000 newcomers. Most of these students have been new to the U.S. school system, entering our schools less than four years from their arrivals in the country. All our schools qualify for federal support under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, with more than 75 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged.

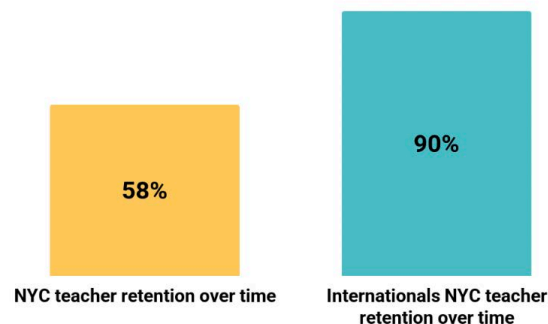
Internationals Network cultivates and supports its educators by connecting nearly 1,400 educators in peer exchange and mutual learning experiences⁵ at the school, district, regional, and national level and hosts opportunities for ongoing communities of practice. One example is the yearly Fall Professional Development Conference, where Internationals educators from across the U.S. lead dozens of professional learning experiences for their peers. Our network understands that in order to serve newcomers well, we need to invest in their educators, offering them the kind of high-quality learning opportunities that we provide to our students. Internationals also hosts a Learning Network for public middle, high, and transfer schools that seek to improve structures and supports for growing populations of newcomer MLLs.

Student outcomes across Internationals Network, which we explore more fully in the next section, are extraordinary, demonstrating that newcomers, when served intentionally and effectively, can graduate at rates far beyond their newcomer peers in traditional high schools. Across the network, nearly 100 Internationals graduates have returned to work as teachers, leaders, and in other professional roles in Network schools.

Who are the educators in Internationals Network schools? Most do not enter with ESL or bilingual credentials, nor with any special training or expertise in

serving newcomers. Some are multilingual, but most are not. Nonetheless, staff in Network schools experience a uniquely supportive environment, where their efforts to address the diverse needs of their students are recognized and backed by dedicated resources. The Network’s emphasis on collaboration manifests in teacher teams that work within and across disciplines. Teachers learn from one another, sharing strategies, adapting curriculum, and troubleshooting challenges together. This approach strengthens educators’ professional skills while fostering a sense of shared mission: Internationals educators often express a sense of purpose and belonging. In addition, professional development is embedded in structures throughout the school day to ensure that teachers have many opportunities to develop expertise, regardless of their prior professional experience or credentials. Educators who enter Network schools tend to stay, often becoming teacher leaders or school leaders. Below is a comparison of teacher retention rates in the 16 New York City-based Internationals Network schools.

Comparison of Teacher Retention Rates



Public schools within the Internationals Network have developed a reputation as “destination workplaces.” Vacancies are highly sought after, especially by educators passionate about working with a diverse student population in a student-centered and collaborative environment. The Network serves newly arrived immigrant and refugee MLLs, focusing on English-language development through content-specific instruction, with equal emphasis on students’ academic and social-emotional growth.

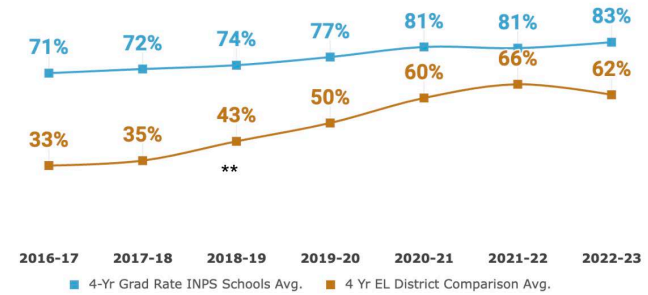
As detailed in the 2023-24 Learning Brief Series on project-based approaches, many schools within the Internationals Network employ hands-on, project-based approaches, collaborative learning, and project-based learning. In addition to administering state-mandated tests, Internationals educators design and employ performance assessments and capstone projects to enable students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are more aligned with research (Miranda, 2024).

⁵ One example is the yearly [Fall Professional Development Conference](#) where school-based Internationals educators lead dozens of workshops for their peers

Outcomes

Schools and programs across Internationals Network manage to hire, support, and cultivate teachers who create challenging, safe and supportive environments for newcomers. Those students end up outperforming peers who attend more traditional programs. Our outcomes are notable, especially coming amid teacher shortages and starting with public middle and high school teachers, many of whom did not have specialized training in language acquisition, culturally responsive methods, immigration, or project-based approaches. Internationals educators report high levels of satisfaction with their work and appreciation of the culture of their school community and of their students. These successes come within the constraints of federal, state, and district education policy and use public funds and a regular school budget. Drawing on conventional public per pupil funding allocations and working within district, state, and federal guidelines, Internationals Network schools consistently outperform their peers in supporting, retaining, and graduating English language learners.

Internationals' network-wide 4-year graduation rates are consistently higher than average MLL grad rates in corresponding districts



**In 2018, the NYCDOE changed how the EL graduation rate is calculated, causing a marked increase in the district average



Graduation 2024 at International High School at Largo in Prince George's County, MD.



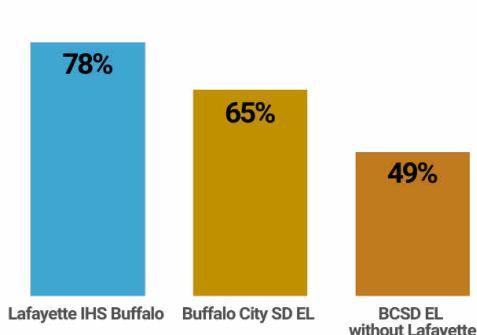
Graduation day at Bronx International High School.

Graduation Rates: 3 Case Studies

Here's how Internationals Network schools stacked up in the 2022-23 school year.

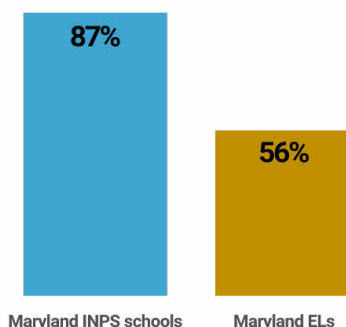
Students at Lafayette International High school accounted for a 29 percent increase in the district graduation rate for MLLs.

Buffalo City Schools EL Graduation Rates 2022-23



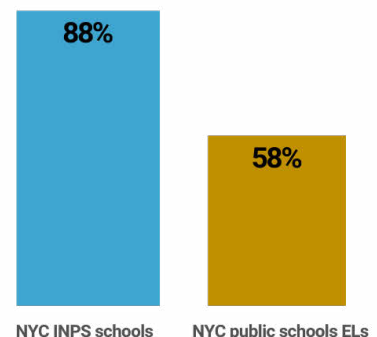
The MLL graduation rate at two Internationals high schools run by Prince George's County public schools far outpaced the district's.

MD English Learner Graduation Rates 2022-23



MLLs in New York City's Internationals Network schools outperformed their peers in comprehensive high schools by a wide margin.

NYC English Learner Graduation Rates 2023



Implications for All Schools and Districts

How is this success possible? What happens inside a school or program that manages to develop educators without MLL expertise or training into a powerhouse community that retains students and guides them to success while also nurturing and supporting educators? What can schools and districts serving newcomer MLLs learn from how Internationals leaders, teachers, and staff structure their schools to support and cultivate quality teachers and staff, who in turn stay to ensure that newcomers succeed to their full potential? In our next brief, in Spring 2025, we will share how, with a normal public school budget, per pupil funding, and traditionally trained teachers hired to work with MLLs, it can be done.



Students and staff at International High School at Lafayette in Brooklyn engage in a district-wide "Designathon" to create apps to address community issues they have researched.

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This brief was researched and written by a group of educators from across Internationals Network as part of a professional learning opportunity. The writing group was convened to engage teachers in a year-long process in which they collaborated to dig into the topic of cultivating quality educators of newcomer multilingual learners, gathering insights and examples from colleagues across the network and across the field. The writing group is one of many opportunities offered to Internationals Network educators to build leadership and contribute to the field.

The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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