

# Establishing an Effective Newcomer Program

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Newcomer students are recent immigrants who have little or no English proficiency and who may have had limited formal education in their native countries. These students have needs that traditional English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual programs are usually not designed to address. Newcomer programs have been established to bridge the gap between newcomers' needs and regular language support programs. The objective of these programs is to develop students' English language skills, help them acculturate to U.S. schools, and make them aware of educational expectations and opportunities. Newcomer programs are a fairly recent phenomenon and are growing across the United States.

This digest offers guidance on developing a newcomer program. It lists common features of newcomer programs and describes the steps a district might take when considering a newcomer program option.

## Common Features of Newcomer Programs

Although there is great variation in the design of newcomer programs, all share the following features:

- A cohort of newcomer students
- A program or set of courses distinct from the regular language support program
- A plan for English as a second language development
- Instructional strategies for literacy development
- Instructional strategies for the integration of language and content
- Courses to orient students to U.S. schools and the community
- Experienced teachers
- Appropriate materials
- Paraprofessional support
- Family connections

## Establishing a Newcomer Program

Districts must make many decisions before implementing an effective model that serves the needs of their newcomer population. The following steps, which are organized into three phases—exploration, planning, and implementation—are recommended for developing a newcomer program.

### Exploration

**Leadership.** The first step is to form a leadership team that will form and convey the vision of the program. This team conducts initial research on existing programs and enlists support in designing and implementing a new program.

**Newcomer definition.** To identify potential students, criteria must be established for defining a newcomer (e.g., length of time in the United States, age, educational background). This definition will help determine how many newcomer students are in the school district and how many to serve in the newcomer program.

**Goal setting.** Goals should be set that include student learning objectives for language and content and that are realistic given the daily schedule and expected time that students will remain in the program. Programmatic goals may be set as well, such as increasing the number of students served over several years.

**Program design.** Developers must design a program to meet student needs and match district resources. For example, they must decide how many students to serve, which grade levels to include, whether to operate a full- or half-day program, how long students should remain in the program, whether to create a program within a school or at a separate site, and which courses to offer.

**Language(s) of instruction.** The languages to be used for instruction must be determined for the particular group of students to be served. This choice has implications for staffing, curriculum

development, and instructional resources. Some programs may develop options to meet the needs of their particular population, such as offering Spanish language arts courses in programs that serve native Spanish speakers.

**Administrative approval.** Administrative approval must be secured. Leadership teams may begin by presenting their case to an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, sharing their definition of a newcomer student, data on the lack of success experienced by these students in regular school programs, their goals for the newcomer program, and ideas about program design.

**Location.** A site near the majority of the students' homes is usually sought. Most newcomer programs are housed within a school with larger ESL or bilingual programs and share resources such as space, staff, and materials. Some districts find that a central location in a school or at a separate site is the most effective way to utilize their resources.

**Funding.** Potential sources of funds should be identified early in the process. Newcomer programs often draw on a combination of local, state, and federal funds. As programs become better established, they may turn to private sources, such as business and community sources or charitable foundations, to supplement public funds.

**Program site visits.** If possible, the leadership team and other administration staff should visit established programs, especially those similar to the anticipated program design.

### Planning

**School board approval.** School board approval is critical and will likely require a series of meetings to orient board members to the needs of the newcomer students and to examine programmatic alternatives.

**District-level coordination.** Ongoing coordination at the district level helps ensure that newcomer students have access to appropriate services and helps facilitate the transition between the newcomer program and the programs students will move into. The articulation process should include a sequenced curriculum for English language acquisition and courses to help students maintain or continue developing their content knowledge or to address gaps in their educational backgrounds.

**Stakeholder input.** The leadership team should establish communication with various stakeholder groups, including other teachers and administrators, parents, and community leaders. Information gleaned from these stakeholders can yield important insights for program design.

**Program director.** A program director must be appointed fairly early in the planning phase. The director is responsible for coordinating instruction, providing staff development, and maintaining connections between the newcomer programs and the home schools. The director also assists in securing funding and other support from policy makers.

**Program design.** The program is shaped to the interests, needs, and resources of the school and the community. It is an iterative process during which new information and opportunities emerge that may result in design modifications.

**Grade levels.** Program designers must determine which grade levels to serve and how students will be organized. For example, some programs combine middle school and high school students in one location but do not co-mingle the two levels, except for an initial literacy class.

**Course offerings.** Depending on the size of the program and the availability of resources, students should have course options appropriate to their age and educational backgrounds. For example, if possible, high school programs should develop courses that earn students credits toward graduation.

**Scheduling.** Newcomer programs should operate on a schedule that is parallel to the regular school schedule. For example, if high schools in the district operate on a block schedule, the newcomer program for high school students should also utilize a block schedule. This helps prepare students for the regular school program.

**Curriculum/Materials.** New curricula may need to be written, such as an accelerated U.S. history course that combines the information taught in elementary school into a 1-year program for newcomer students of middle school age. Newcomer teaching staff often need to develop curricula, assessment measures, and classroom materials tailored to fit their own program and student population.

**Transportation.** Transportation can be a costly aspect of the program, and arranging bus service can be complicated. Discussions with the transportation department should begin as soon as the program site is determined.

**Extended time for learning.** Many programs look for opportunities to involve students in clubs, classes, and study sessions beyond the regular school day. When the site is a program within a school, afterschool opportunities are often easier to secure. When the program is at a separate site, staff often lead learning activities after school or on weekends.

**Placement policies.** Policies for identifying and placing newly arrived students should be formalized. Entry criteria must be determined and may include scores below a certain level on assessments such as an English language proficiency test, a native literacy assessment, a content area test, a writing assessment, and an oral interview. Many newcomer programs rely on a district intake center, when available, to assess and place students.

**Assessment.** Assessments must be selected to measure student growth in language and content knowledge. The goals of the program will influence this process. Moreover, regulations for programs relying on federal funding require annual assessments in language and key content areas for English language learners.

**Transition strategies.** Planning for transition must be done well before students exit the program. Ongoing discussions should take place with staff who will receive the newcomer students when they exit, and school visits or meetings with counselors should be provided to help acclimate students to their new schools or programs.

**Student monitoring.** Procedures should be established to monitor students' success after they leave the program. Data from this process will show whether the program is meeting its goals.

**Baseline data collection.** Collecting baseline data on student achievement prior to implementation of the new program will provide critical information to support subsequent formative and summative evaluations. Relevant data from the years prior to the beginning of the program make it possible to document program effects in areas such as student achievement, dropout rates, course offerings, and teacher preparation.

**Program evaluation.** It is recommended that newcomer programs plan a formative evaluation process that examines students' progress while they are in the program and after they have exited. Programmatic goals, such as development of specialized curricula and completion of a staff development program, should be evaluated as well.

## Implementation

**Students.** During the first year of operation, new programs may need to recruit students through school and community networks. Until the newcomer program becomes known in the district and identification and placement procedures have been established, most students are recruited through teacher referrals and community outreach efforts.

**Teachers.** Programs should recruit experienced teachers who are trained to address the special needs of new immigrants. The teachers should have a foundation in second language acquisition principles, cross-cultural awareness, sheltered content instruction, and literacy development. If the students represent a diversity of cultures and languages, it is helpful to have staff members who represent this diversity.

**Paraprofessionals.** Paraprofessionals can play an important role in helping students who are recent immigrants become acclimated to their new environment. Bilingual paraprofessionals often provide native language support in classrooms where courses are taught in English.

**Guidance counselors.** Programs with larger numbers of students may hire their own guidance counselors to work specifically with newcomer students. In smaller programs, regular school counselors serve all students, including newcomers. It is preferable to recruit counselors who are bilingual and familiar with the students' cultures and the issues they face.

**Translators and interpreters.** Translators and interpreters should be recruited to work on staff or on call, in paid or volunteer positions. They are important resources for communicating with parents and community members and among counselors, students, and other school personnel.

**Staff development.** Teachers in the newcomer program as well as teachers who receive the students once they exit the program should participate in staff development activities. Paraprofessionals should be included in ongoing staff development as well.

**Student orientation.** Programs need to help orient newcomers to the school and the community. Some programs include curriculum units developed as part of a social studies course specifically for orientation purposes. Other programs plan ongoing field trips and curriculum activities that familiarize students with school routines and expectations, American culture, and the United States.

**Integration with native English speakers.** It is essential to provide opportunities for newcomer students to interact with English-speaking students. Extracurricular clubs and sports provide one means of promoting interaction. Joint activities, such as service learning or community projects, offer another approach.

**Parent/family connections.** Making connections with students' families is important to understanding students' educational, social, and health needs. Information gained through family orientation meetings will also help facilitate the family's access to community services, such as district-supported adult ESL classes or local affordable housing agencies.

**Community outreach.** While family connections are being made, outreach to the local community should continue, and information about the program as it evolves should be made available. Opportunities for school and community groups to meet and discuss concerns, suggestions, or emerging issues can become routinized over time.

**Formative evaluation.** A formative evaluation should be conducted annually. This is an essential tool for program improvement and for verifying that the program is meeting its goals.

**Collection and examination of student data.** Data should be collected on students' language and content knowledge development during the program and after they have exited. This will provide an accurate picture of the program's effectiveness and offer evidence to school policy makers that the newcomer program is beneficial for the students it serves.

## Conclusion

Establishing a newcomer program is a complicated but rewarding process. Planners need to be aware that design features can shift as the planning and implementation phases unfold. With a clear vision for the program, the involvement of key stakeholders, committed staff, and an eye on the ultimate educational goal for the newcomer students, a newcomer program will take root and thrive.

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