

# On the Right Path: Newcomer Student Enrollment and Course Placement Promising Practices

OCTOBER 10, 2023 – MANUEL VAZQUEZ CANO AND ALEJANDRA VÁZQUEZ BAUR



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**“It can be a game changer when you’re facilitating enrollment and collaborating with families on initial placement. It’s a crucial time to get kids set up in the appropriate school, in the right program, and ensure that there are no barriers to get them ... on the right path to succeed.”**

—Nathaniel Dunstan, program manager, Refugees and Newcomers English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement (ELLMA) Office

Each year, thousands of immigrant students enter U.S. middle and high schools. Newcomer students, who share a common albeit unique experience of migration to the United States, bring cultural, linguistic, and academic assets that enrich our education system. Newcomers arrive with a wide range of pre-migration experiences<sup>1</sup> and diverse educational histories: some arrive with interrupted education from low-resourced contexts, while others arrive with continuous education from highly resourced systems; many newcomers have an experience somewhere in between. Schools in the United States are tasked with unlocking the potential of newcomer students by creating a rigorous and engaging educational environment that meets their academic, social-emotional, and basic needs. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that

newcomer students are often underserved, perform lower on content area and language assessments, and graduate at lower rates compared to students who have been classified as English learners for six or more years.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that our educational systems need to improve to better support newcomer students as they enter U.S. schools. Currently, the federal government does not provide guidance on initial enrollment procedures for newcomers. With no federal guidance, state education agencies (SEAs) are left to play a pivotal role in providing districts with clear guidance and support to effectively incorporate newcomer students in our schools.

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This report can be found online at: <https://thenext100.org/advancing-pre-apprenticeship-programming-through-national-service/>

To best serve newcomer students, it is critical to recognize and build from the diversity in their pre-migration educational experiences. Gathering information about their prior educational experience can help local school staff understand the content newcomers already learned and identify the knowledge and skills schools can build on. Not using information about their pre-migration educational experiences may lead to subsequent course placement misalignment in two ways. First, newcomer students may be placed in courses that are below the content they have already mastered. This often happens when school staff members mistakenly assume that, because a student is new to the United States and demonstrates a beginning level of English, they are behind in other subjects as well, when in fact their achievement in some subjects may be superior to that of U.S.-educated peers. This misalignment and subsequent lack of appropriate support can demoralize students and potentially prevent them from accessing the courses they need to graduate and prepare for college.<sup>3</sup>

Second, newcomer students may also be placed in courses that focus on content above their current level of mastery. As described earlier, some newcomer students may arrive with periods of interrupted schooling or with varying levels of literacy skills in their home language. These students may need additional support to master pre-required concepts and targeted scaffolding support to access grade-level content because of these gaps in schooling.<sup>4</sup> Placing students in inaccessible courses may lead to frustration and disengagement from school.

It is crucial that we make these placement decisions right the first time: when schools make critical decisions on how many credits newcomer students receive at initial enrollment and in which classes students are placed, they set newcomer students on an educational trajectory that can be very difficult to adjust. Consistent procedures on how to collect information about prior schooling experiences, which may include evaluating international transcripts or recreating prior schooling experiences, can lead to consistent, more complete evaluations of prior learning and help newcomer students with accurate and optimal initial placement.

SEAs play a key role in multilingual education policy.<sup>5</sup> This wide policy umbrella includes federal Title III policy and immigrant education. One of the key functions of SEAs is to develop guidance for school districts so that policies are implemented consistently across districts. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, SEAs are required to provide districts with standardized guidance for identifying students who may need English language development support. However, there is currently no requirement for states to define enrollment procedures for newcomer students. The non-binding guidance that the federal government does provide through a newcomer toolkit addresses the importance of reviewing prior educational experiences and presents a broad framework of a process to do this,<sup>6</sup> but is thin in specific guidance to implement each step. This leaves districts and schools struggling to define best practices at initial enrollment. Despite the lack of a federal requirement, some SEAs and individual districts have taken the initiative to create guidance to support newcomer enrollment. This has created a patchwork response across and within states without an understanding of the quality of the guidance. Therefore, it is important to assess the quality of guidance SEAs are currently providing to districts to understand gaps and opportunities for improving enrollment procedures for newcomer students.

This report examines the number of SEAs that provide guidance in collecting and using students' prior education experiences in initial enrollment, as well as the specificity of the guidance that SEAs provide. To understand the existence and specificity of the guidance, this report is informed by a comprehensive review of the documents, publicly available, on all fifty SEA websites that provide guidance on enrolling and serving multilingual and immigrant students. This includes the SEAs' Title III guidance documents that articulate procedures for identifying students who need English language supports, serving English learner classified students, and exiting students from English learner services, as well as all other documents focused on newcomer students. Documents that informed the analysis were collected and reviewed from October 2022 through January 2023. Using the elements of a standardized intake procedure for newcomer students,<sup>7</sup> the authors examined

guidance and practice in three sets of responsibilities:

- 1. Collect and document information on prior schooling experiences.** In order for schools to have a baseline understanding of their newcomers' academic history, there needs to be an explicit process for collecting this information. Such a process requires a designated location to collect this information, a defined type of documentation that is collected at initial enrollment, and a formalized method of translating documents. The latter includes documentation such as international transcripts or, in the absence of international transcripts, engaging in a process to recreate a student's academic history through an interview protocol or other intake practices.
- 2. Evaluate and assess prior schooling experiences.** Simply having records on prior schooling experiences is not enough to make informed decisions about how many credits to award newcomer students and where to place students. Instead, schools need to be able to interpret what previously completed courses means in the district context. As such, schools need to define a process to determine what equivalency a course a student took in their home country has in their new district, if any. This requires schools to use their knowledge of a country's educational system to determine things like the level of overlap in standards between similarly named courses and the length of time a course is in session (e.g., year-long, semester, trimester).
- 3. Decide on credit award and course placement.** In order to best serve newcomer students, schools need to make credit award and course placement decisions based on student data. As such, once documentation is interpreted, schools need to have defined rules that specify under which conditions to allow credit to be awarded and how that credit will be recorded. For example, a school may decide that previously completed algebra courses can be awarded as math content credit, whereas previously completed social science courses may only be recorded as elective courses.

***We found that less than half of SEAs are requiring or recommending districts to review prior schooling experiences when enrolling newcomers, and even fewer are providing specific guidance, resources, and support to help local district staff implement standardized enrollment procedures.***

This report provides an analysis of our findings and includes spotlights examples of states who encourage promising practices under each of the three core elements. It is important to note that we were only able to access guidance documents available publicly at SEA websites that explicitly focused on multilingual education: we were not able to identify other guidance that SEAs may communicate to districts but is not available online. If non-public guidance does exist at some SEAs, it is important that it enters the public sphere so more districts have access to it. Furthermore, we reviewed all Title III guidance documentation that SEAs developed. This includes documentation that articulates the standardized procedures that are mandated for SEAs to develop under ESSA and documentation specifically focused on newcomers students such as newcomer toolkits. However, guidance from SEAs might live in other policies, such as those designed for out-of-state transfer students. As such, the sample of states who are identified may be an undercount of the states that have guidance for newcomer student enrollment and represent states that more explicitly communicate enrollment guidance for newcomer students.

It is also important to note that the research on which enrollment practices work best for newcomer students' long-term outcomes is sparse. Furthermore, school district guidance for processes involving newcomers (intake, interviews, placement, connecting wrap-around services they require) varies and is inconsistent. As such, the practices we highlight cannot be considered "best practices;" rather, we refer to these as "promising practices." Future research should examine which policies and practices work best to support the academic success of newcomer students.



## Enrollment Guidance Findings

### ***Less than half of SEAs explicitly guide school districts to collect information from newcomer families about their prior academic experiences.***

Out of the fifty SEAs and the District of Columbia, twenty-two SEAs (43 percent) included language in their guidance documents that explicitly stated that districts should collect information from newcomers about their prior academic experiences during the enrollment process. The guidance from SEAs typically focused on reviewing international transcripts and was included in resource documents focused on serving newcomer students. In the vast majority of states with guidance, there was no language that suggested the guidance was a requirement for districts to implement. Only Texas and Florida had written into law requirements for districts to develop systems to review prior academic experiences for newcomers. This underscores a weakness even in states that have guidance: implementation of these practices is likely to vary within districts.

Geographically, states with guidance are clustered in the Midwest and east coast but were present across all regions in the United States. Many of the twenty-nine SEAs that did not provide guidance had a lower rate of students from immigrant households, such as Montana and North Dakota. Regardless of their immigrant population size, all states will receive newcomer students and need systems to collect and use information about their prior academic experiences. More concerning, some states with a high number and rate of children from immigrant families (e.g. California, Nevada), did not have explicit recommendations in their state guidance to review prior academic experiences for their newcomer students.

As noted, there is an absence of explicit guidance to collect and use newcomer students' prior academic experiences at initial enrollment across the United States. This absence of explicit guidance from SEAs can lead to inconsistent practices across and within states, leading to equity issues. Without explicit guidance from states to review prior

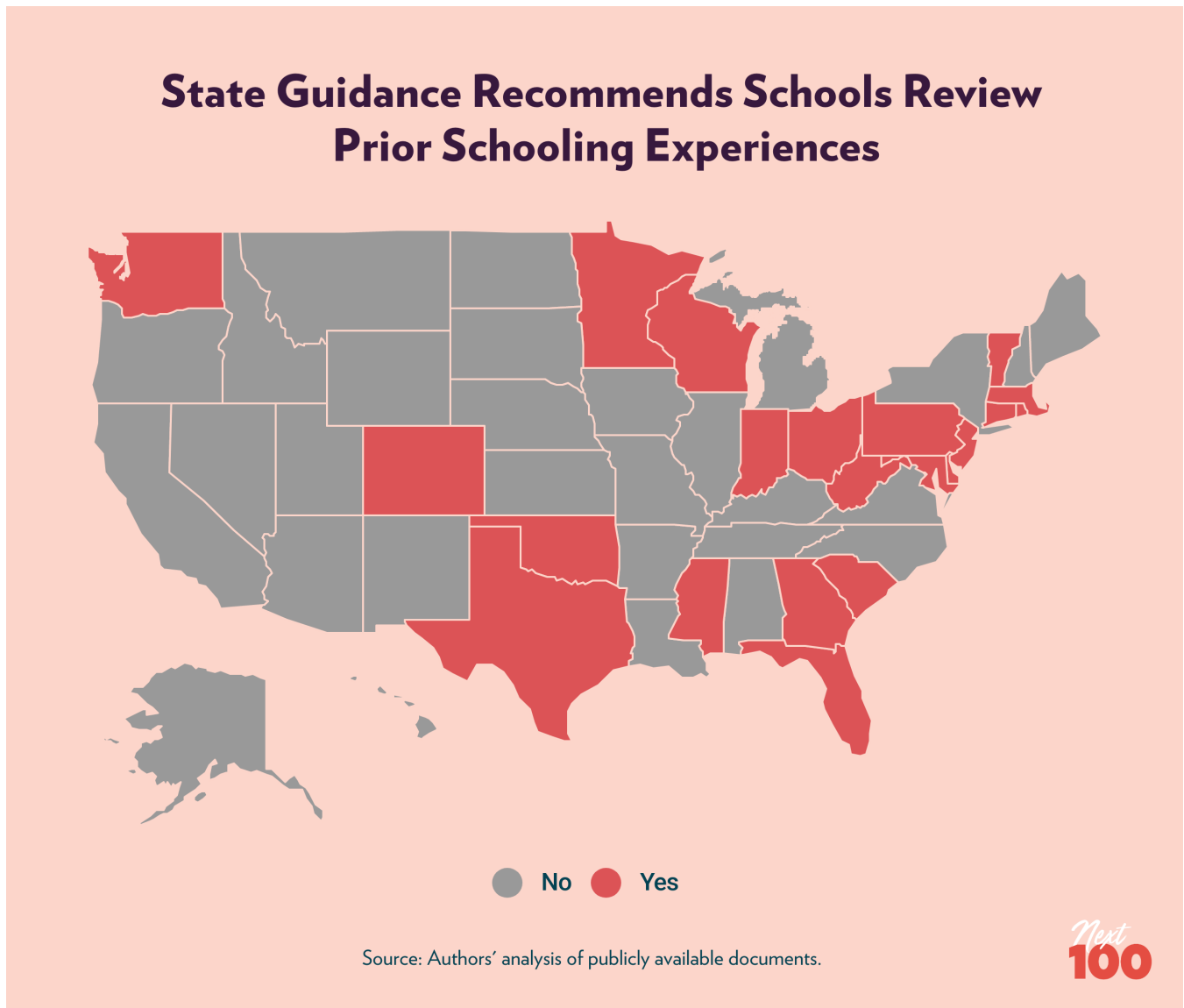
academic experiences, some districts may skip this step and make consequential decisions that misjudge students. For example, the same student may receive core content course credit for previous classes in one district while they may receive no credits in another. Some larger districts, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District and the New York City Department of Education, have developed their own internal guidance that filled the void of absence of guidance from SEAs.<sup>8</sup> However, this does not solve the equity issues that may arise from inconsistent practices across districts within states.

### ***Less than one-third of SEAs communicated specific guidance that districts could use to develop and implement standardized procedures to assess prior academic experiences.***

As previously mentioned, only twenty-two states (43 percent) explicitly require or recommend that districts review prior academic experiences during the intake process of secondary newcomer students. However, out of these twenty-two states, only sixteen had guidance or provided resources to districts in at least one of the elements reviewed (see Table 1). The other six states mentioned the importance of reviewing prior academic experiences but provided no guidance to districts on how to engage in this process.

The core element with the most explicit guidance was related to collecting information on prior academic experiences. States with this guidance recommended that districts, for example, collect international transcripts and translate these documents. The element with the least explicit guidance was related to evaluating and assessing academic experiences. Only a handful of SEAs (ten out of fifty-one) actually described a process or provided resources for districts to interpret what a course completed in a student's home country equals in their new district. Some SEAs stood out in the specificity of their guidance: Washington, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Oklahoma included standalone documents or sections in their guidance that described detailed steps for districts to engage in, key considerations in developing their procedures, and resources to support their practice.

**FIGURE 1: MAP OF STATES THAT EXPLICITLY RECOMMEND USING PRIOR SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES AT INITIAL INTAKE**



To reiterate, it is important for SEAs to provide guidance to districts about collecting information from newcomer students about their prior academic experiences so that districts award credit and place them in courses appropriate for their level. In order for districts to implement consistent practices within states and avoid equity issues that may arise due to poor placement and inconsistent practices, SEAs need to provide guidance that provides local staff with sufficient substance to implement the SEAs recommended or required guidance.

### **Promising Practices in Select SEAs**

In this section, we describe the guidance some states provide in each of the three key areas we examined. These key areas were identified by scholars as promising practices districts should engage in when enrolling newcomer students. We define “promising practice/guidance” as one of the three categories named above and detailed below with examples from different states. We chose not to call them “best practices” because there is insufficient research

to determine the impact of these practices. However, the following promising practices in select SEAs provide a starting point in understanding the types of guidance that exist and practices to evaluate, and further refine.

### ***Initial Intake and Recreating Students' Academic History: Mississippi***

**Resource:** The Mississippi Department of Education offers a number of state-level resources to support schools and districts serving newcomers, including guidance for administrators focused on newcomer English learners, and students with limited or inconsistent/interrupted formal education (SLIFE). The 2022 SLIFE guidance provides important information about SLIFE students, including context on the factors that may affect their educational experience, information on accessing translation supports, and tips for administrators and instructional staff. Most importantly, this guidance provides detailed support for enrollment and course placement for enrollment officers who intake newcomer SLIFE students.

**Guidance:** The guidance recommends that the enrollment officer review the responses for specific questions in the Home Language Survey—required paperwork for all newly enrolled students—that may indicate whether the child might have experienced a gap in their education. If so, the administrator is to proceed with the SLIFE screener(s) on the subsequent pages of the guidance to determine if possible additional academic, linguistic, and/or SEL supports will be needed.

The guidance also provides an “educational history” guide that the enrollment officer is recommended to fill out with the student to retrieve detailed information related to the student’s academic background. It also provides a “background inventory” questionnaire designed to connect with the new student and “determine student motivations, assets, and learning preferences” (page 19), as well as to identify areas of support where educators can build on existing knowledge.

Finally, the guidance offers recommendations for academic

screeners available to districts to assess content-area knowledge. These recommendations are organized by content area (math, native language literacy, science, etc.) with information about language access for each resource. Notably, the guidance explicitly requires adequate language access to best serve newly-enrolled students and provides a clear explanation of the risks of not providing adequate language support: “If the screener is not available in the student’s home language, the assessment may not truly reflect the student’s accurate academic level. If possible, give the assessment one-on-one to determine the validity of the assessment” (page 22).

**Strengths of the guidance:** Mississippi’s guidance is exemplary for two important reasons. First, the guidance includes detailed step-by-step instructions for the enrollment process and provides information on additional resources/support (assessment, translation services) that are critical to following those instructions. These step-by-step instructions and recommended resources at the state level help to ensure that students experience a smooth transition and are placed in the right courses regardless of which school or district in which they are enrolled.

Second, these resources actively use asset-based language. Enrolling in a new school or district can often feel intimidating for students and their families. This may be especially true when there is a language barrier—a common experience of many newcomers. In addition, students who have experienced interrupted formal education may also feel some embarrassment or shame over their educational history (or lack thereof). Affirming and asset-based language is an important countermeasure to these complicated feelings, and can go a long way to make any student feel more welcome in a school or district. Per the guidance, it is important that all staff that engages with and supports SLIFE and newcomer students throughout their educational journey adopt an asset-based approach.

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF STATES WITH GUIDANCE IN THE ELEMENTS REVIEWED**

Core Element	Number of States with Guidance	Percent of All SEAs with Guidance
Collecting information	15	29%
Evaluating and assessing information	10	20%
Making course placement decisions	14	27%
At least one element	16	31%

Source: Authors’ analysis of publicly available documents.

**Initial Intake and Recreating Students’ Academic History: Indiana**

**Resource:** The Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) provides a “Secondary English Learner Toolkit” that was written by the Indiana Secondary English Learner Collaborative Community, a working group of stakeholders across the state who work directly with ELs. The guidance is aimed at administrators and school counselors that directly serve English learners and newcomer students.

**Guidance:** Each chapter in the Indiana toolkit addresses different issues that are relevant to newcomers, SLIFE, and long-term English learners (LTELs). Chapter Three, “Credits and Scheduling,” is most relevant to this report, as it provides guidance for districts to support ELs and newcomers in the enrollment and course placement process. First, IDOE identifies communication with the family of an EL as “essential” to understanding a child’s previous academic experiences. Communicating with the family encourages a holistic approach to recreating a student’s academic history building the connection between school and home. Further, engaging the family in the enrollment process is a good strategy to set the tone for long-term family engagement throughout the child’s education.

The guidance also points to the need to provide translators for parents and students who do not speak English in order to create a warm environment and deliver accurate information while enrolling: “An interpreter will provide a welcoming

environment, a positive first impression of education in the United States, and the ability to get the most out of the enrollment process” (p. 15).

The guidance advises districts to “examine” and “discuss” (page 15) the student’s educational background to provide the most appropriate programming and support throughout their educational journey. It explicitly recommends identifying the sequence of mathematics courses in the student’s home country, as it may be different than the sequence required in the school district and would help to determine what the student knows. Additionally, it recommends cultivating a plan with the student and their family to build trust in the relationship and help them meet their post-secondary education goals.

**Strengths of the guidance:** The IDOE toolkit offers less step-by-step guidance than Mississippi, leaving significant discretion to districts to develop their own specific processes, and potentially leaving room for discrepancies in intake processes across the state. However, two of its components are worthy of note. First, it provides helpful examples throughout each chapter to inform district decision-making when they develop local enrollment procedures. Second, similar to Mississippi’s guidance, it frames the entire enrollment process in affirmative language that centers the comfort and safety of the student and their family, setting the tone for affirming engagement with the district throughout the child’s educational journey.



## ***Evaluating and Interpreting Prior Schooling Experiences: Washington State***

**Resource:** Chapter Eight of the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) guidance focuses exclusively on serving newcomer students, and provides detailed guidance on the initial intake process of newcomers. Embedded in the OSPI guidance are links to other resources that support school-based staff whose responsibility is to assess a newcomer student’s prior schooling experiences.

**Guidance:** OSPI provides specific guidance that can assist school districts in interpreting courses students have taken before arriving in the United States. The OSPI’s guidance begins by explicitly stating what transcript evaluation consists of: “Transcript evaluation is a process that results in a list of courses eligible for transfer credit by determining equivalency between courses taken outside the district and those offered within it” (page 65, EL state guidance). OSPI’s guidance document provides a description of the process and key considerations when engaging in transcript evaluation. For example, the guidance document recommends first determining key information about prior courses completed, such as the school system of origin, length of the course, grading system, and standards covered in the course. With that information, the OSPI recommends comparing it with the standards covered in the school’s courses to understand the alignment between courses taken and courses offered at the school. The guidance provides links to resources that an individual conducting the evaluation would find useful including links to the state course codes, learning standards, and country education profiles.

**Strengths of the guidance:** Two elements stand out from OSPI’s guidance. First, the clear definition of transcript evaluation and the step-by-step process described by OSPI’s guidance provides a common understanding of what transcript evaluation means and a framework that can help schools develop similar procedures. This increases the likelihood of a consistent standard for assessment across the state. Second, the guidance to compare courses completed in another country to the Washington state standards sets

the precedent that prior coursework should be equated to similar content in Washington courses. Consequently, this improves the likelihood that newcomer students earn content area credit—as opposed to elective credit—for courses they already mastered.

## ***Evaluating and Interpreting Prior Schooling Experiences: Pennsylvania***

**Resource:** Modeled after a New York City Department of Education resource, the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s (PDE) Evaluating Foreign Transcripts is a standalone document explicitly focused on international transcript evaluation. It leaves much discretion to individual school districts but includes step-by-step guidance and additional resources to support interpretation of prior schooling experiences.

**Guidance:** The PDE document provides a general picture of the process and steps to the interpretation of prior schooling experiences. PDE makes it explicit that districts are responsible for developing a detailed process to evaluate prior schooling experiences and provides a few important elements to consider in the interpretation process. The guidance emphasizes that school districts review documentation and meet with families to “obtain clarification on curriculum, amount of time spent in each course, grading policies, and other pertinent information helpful to the evaluation process” (page 2). Additionally, the guidance also encourages the use of content-based assessments to help understand the level of mastery of prior coursework. To support reviewers in interpreting prior schooling experiences, the document provides a profile of 76 international schooling systems. The profiles include information about school levels and their equivalent in the US, leveled tracking, and country grading systems.

**Strengths of the guidance:** While the PDE’s guidance does not provide the same level of detail in the evaluation process compared to Washington state, PDE’s guidance adds two important elements to consider when evaluating prior learning experiences. First, similar to Indiana’s guidance, collecting more information about the student’s prior

schooling by interviewing their families can be a valuable source of information for school staff to use in their evaluation procedures. Secondly, similar to Mississippi’s guidance, the guidance to consider content assessment to gauge mastery of certain standards or content can provide another opportunity for newcomer students to showcase what they have learned. Information from content assessments can help school staff make better decisions by supplementing information from an international transcript—or especially when a transcript is not available.

### ***Developing Procedures for Giving Credit for Prior Coursework: Colorado***

**Resource:** The Colorado Department of Education’s (CDE) 2023 guidebook on services for multilingual learners has a chapter titled “Understanding Secondary English Learners” where there is explicit guidance for awarding credit to newcomers enrolling in Colorado (CO) schools.

**Guidance:** CDE points to the importance of proper course placement in this document: “placing ML students in the appropriate classes to meet their individual needs can increase school success” (page 16). This is also articulated earlier in the document: “Making time for placement is crucial because it saves time in the long run. It takes more time to reschedule a student who has been misplaced in courses. Additionally, such misplacement could in turn create challenges with student motivation and behavior. It is important to provide high school students with high quality—as opposed to remedial—instruction” (page 13).

CDE adequately couches its course placement in this knowledge for counselors so that they are aware of the natural—and harmful—consequences of placing a student in a course that isn’t aligned with their skills. Though this guidance does not specifically reference newcomers, these consequences are especially pronounced for students enrolling in U.S. schools for the first time.

Additionally, CDE elevates exemplary district guidance for other districts in the state to follow. The International Clarifications on Foreign Transcripts manual was created by

Denver Public Schools (DPS) to support schools enrolling newcomer students and making credit awarding decisions. This document has specific language and guidance on how to award content credit in Denver schools. For example, any local Civics course from a foreign country should be awarded general social studies credit, but the student would still need to take U.S. Civics to receive adequate credit for that course (page 1). This level of detail leads to standardized practice and consistent, fair evaluations for students enrolled across the state and increases the chances a newcomer student will be placed in proper courses and given appropriate credit for completed coursework.

**Strengths of the guidance:** As noted above, it would be helpful for the CDE guidebook to explicitly name how appropriate course placement is particularly important and impactful for secondary EL students enrolling in U.S. schools for the first time, as well as those with limited or interrupted formal education. Despite this oversight, both the aforementioned CDE guidebook and the DPS resource for awarding credit stand out among all states that provided guidance on course placement because they are centered on the impact of these decisions on student opportunity, reference specific core courses, are specific about how much credit is to be given, and specify whether that credit should be elective or core content credit. CDE’s efforts to elevate Denver’s framework to the rest of the state may help address an equity issue for newcomers who might enroll in other school districts in the state.

### ***Developing Procedures for Giving Credit for Prior Coursework: Oklahoma***

**Resource:** The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) developed its own “Out-of-Country Transcript Guidance” to award course credit for newcomer secondary students. The guidance offers many tools to support enrollment counselors at the school or district level who make those decisions for newcomer students and standardize those practices at the local level. It includes promising practices for awarding secondary core-content class credit when a student provides a foreign transcript. It also recommends taking into account additional documentation that details the student’s

educational background, including findings from enrollment interviews and academic assessment results.

**Guidance:** The guidance is organized by core subject and offers explicit credit awarding recommendations. For example, the English language acquisition (ELA) section names all of the courses that count toward the required units for graduation in the state of Oklahoma. The guidance recognizes the unique challenges counselors often face in seeking to award credit for ELA compared to other core-content classes. It recommends that counselors consider the level of English language proficiency the student is able to demonstrate upon initial enrollment as well as what is written in their transcript. Two distinct and detailed examples help to provide more context for these decisions, naming exactly how much ELA and World Languages credit the students each received when enrolling.

Similar to the ELA section, guidance for each core subject area includes course options that qualify to meet graduation requirements, examples of newcomers who enrolled and what credit they were given, and specific reminders for counselors when making decisions.

A particularly unique portion of the guidance that we have not seen in other documents offers explicit rules for graduation cohort inclusion for Recently Arrived English Learners (RAELs): “[A] student’s Recently Arrived English Learner (RAEL) status has no bearing on their determined graduation cohort year or their inclusion in the Graduation Indicator component of site Accountability. A student’s graduation cohort year will be determined by the grade level assigned to the student upon their first recorded enrollment in Oklahoma schools” (page 12). This section also includes examples. In one, after adequate transcript evaluation and assessment, the district assigns a new student to the ninth grade “to allow sufficient time to attain the credits necessary for high school graduation” (page 13).

**Strengths of the guidance:** Like other states highlighted in this article, OSDE’s guidance is not prescriptive, leaving significant discretion for districts to develop their own systems. It does provide specific support and research to

help enrollment counselors make the best decisions possible for newly enrolled students from other countries. As noted in the guidance, these decisions can “have a significant impact on whether or not the student is able to earn a high school diploma within a reasonable period of time” (page 2).

## Policy Recommendations

Few SEAs are guiding districts to use prior schooling experiences when enrolling newcomer students. The guidance that exists is still insufficient to implement best practices with fidelity within and across states for a variety of reasons: a) implementation is not consistent; b) there is little research on the impact of different methods; and c) guidance is not robust enough to adequately prepare schools for the process.

First, there is very little emphasis on training for school staff who engage in the evaluation of schooling experiences. Transcript evaluation and course placement is a profession with credentials and standards that are governed by organizations such as the Association for International Credential Evaluation and Professionals. To effectively implement the guidance, school staff will need additional training or support from credentialed staff.

Second, there is very limited research that examines the impact of initial enrollment procedures—like the collection of transcripts and assessment of prior schooling—on long-term outcomes for newcomer students. We do not know how decisions on credit awarding policies impact students, and which design features of state-level policies and guidance are the most effective choices for helping newcomer students begin their U.S. schooling at an optimal point and have long-term success. More research is needed to know how policy choices impact outcomes for newcomers.

Lastly, there are newcomer students whose situations are not represented in the current guidance, so adaptations need to be added. For example, unaccompanied minors may not have a transcript document with them or family members with knowledge of their educational background to interview in order to recreate a record of prior schooling

experiences. Moving forward, further research and analysis are required to improve the guidance and infrastructure to ensure newcomer students are successfully placed into courses that meet their academic needs and implement that guidance at the state and local level.

Given these findings and promising practices, we offer the following recommendations.

## **Recommendations for SEAs**

**Develop comprehensive state-level guidance for newcomer intake and course placement.** The guidance should meet the following criteria:

- **Include template questionnaires, screeners, assessments, and other tools to assess prior knowledge** that are adaptable to different contexts and student experiences. This eases the burden on districts that need access to these resources and standardizes the type of information that is collected within the state. Mississippi's guidance is a great example of this recommendation.
- **Create a hub of centralized resources that can support training, assessment, and language access.** Guidance is not enough to carry out these duties successfully. Assessing prior schooling experiences requires training and adequate resources. Providing these at the state level ensures that enrollment officers are prepared to support newcomer students when they start school in the United States. This can be done by making funding available for staff to participate in professional development, hiring trained evaluators to support local staff, or developing your own training modules for local staff to access. Better-trained local evaluators can improve the likelihood that well-defined guidance will be implemented with fidelity. Furthermore, providing assessment support and translation and interpretation support ensures that all districts can provide language access and more adequately collect appropriate information about a child's educational history regardless of what language they speak when they arrive.
- **Identify and elevate promising practices from districts and schools within the SEA.** Concrete examples make it easier for enrollment counselors and school staff to apply the guidance provided and make better decisions with regard to student enrollment decisions. In addition, districts that have developed their own guidance in lieu of SEA guidance may be able to offer unique insight into tested procedures that can be scaled to state-level guidance. CDE's guidance, which incorporated Denver Public School's credit awarding guidelines, is a helpful example.
- **Build internal capacity within the SEA to clarify information** in the guidance and direct district-based enrollment staff to centralized or external resources and supports. Even the most robust and comprehensive guidance documents can leave readers with questions. Naming a point of contact will help to clarify those questions before practices are implemented incorrectly.
- **Include the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders** in the development of SEA guidance. These stakeholders should represent every part of the education system, including current and former newcomer students, their families, enrollment counselors, educators, and other school-based staff that work with this population, and community leaders that support them. They should be brought in early in the process and have the opportunity to review drafts prior to completion. For example, Indiana's Secondary English Learner Collaborative Community convened a work group of a variety of stakeholders to create its statewide guidance.
- **Clearly articulate the importance of this process for students' access to educational opportunities using asset-based language throughout the guidance.** This may include information specific to the newcomer communities in the SEA and how they have contributed to the academic environment. Framing this procedure in asset-based language that centers on human experience will help to add meaning to an otherwise normal administrative procedure.

We also recommend the following for SEAs.

**SEAs with existing guidance can reassess the existing guidance** to ensure it meets the criteria above. Additionally, they should assess local-level guidance that has been developed to supplement previous volumes of the state guidance and make amendments accordingly.

**Examine school practices and newcomer outcomes.** SEAs can engage with districts to collect a repository of practices that districts are using and examine how this relates to initial credit accumulation and eventual likelihood of graduation for newcomers. Engaging in these analytic tasks can help SEAs understand what practices districts are implementing, and get an understanding of what practices are introducing barriers or opportunities for newcomers.

### ***Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education***

**Conduct research on the impact of specific intake and enrollment procedures on newcomer student outcomes.**

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) can commission the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) to conduct this research using Title III research set-aside funding. As mentioned, the “promising practices” outlined in this article are based on limited, existing guidance from SEAs and require further research to determine whether they are “best practices” when implemented in a standardized way.

**Release federal guidance outlining standard concepts and procedures required to certify enrollment staff at the district and school levels.** As previously stated, SEA guidance is not sufficient in itself to lead to the common implementation of intake procedures. Practices like international transcript evaluation are a profession that requires professional training. ED can release guidelines for this training to ensure enrollment staff receives standard and adequate training before making important decisions that impact student trajectories.

**Assist SEAs with building statewide enrollment guidance and update it once every 5-10 years.** If they haven’t already, states will need support to develop their own guidance. ED can utilize federal Title III technical assistance funding to provide subject matter expertise and technical capacity and support from the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) to do this.

**Work with international educational agencies and higher education institutions to better understand international educational systems.** Also using Title III set-aside, ED can lead an effort to work with international education agencies to create a repository of courses offered in different countries and the associated standards that are covered in specific courses. This is a complex task, but ED can first focus on countries that are highly represented in the newcomer population and specific content areas can be prioritized. This level of detail is important because it more easily allows local school administrators to interpret the content covered in specific courses and decide if it meets an equivalent course in their own district.

## **Conclusion**

SEAs play an important role in establishing intake and enrollment standards to ensure students have a similar, comprehensive, and warm welcome in all districts across the state. While some have indeed produced guidance documents for statewide practices, our report demonstrates that many fall short of incorporating each of the elements of a standardized intake procedure for newcomer students as described by Martinez-Wenzl (2017) and Greenberg Motamedi et al. (2021).<sup>9</sup> Further, others failed to provide adequate training and resources to enable the intended standard implementation across the board.

Our recommendations offer the next steps for SEAs to create or update their guidance. We also point to opportunities for ED to support SEAs who take on this task through research and technical assistance. While the policy levers available to ED are limited, it can use designated resources to produce research that examines which policies and practices work best to support the academic success of



newcomer students. This will enable SEAs and districts to choose local research-based practices that best meet their students' needs.

Addressing patchwork intake procedures across the country is ultimately an equity issue. Newcomer students are enrolling in new districts far beyond coastal cities and southern border states—it is time to advocate for better policies that govern the experiences and opportunities afforded to newcomer students from the moment they arrive to enroll.

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## Authors

**Manuel Vazquez Cano** is a principal researcher focusing on multilingual learners at Education Northwest. Manuel's background as an immigrant influenced his experience with the U.S. education system and, ultimately, his work. His research aims to build evidence that can help educators and policymakers make decisions that improve outcomes for multilingual students.

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## Notes

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