



Gathering Multilingual Learner Student Input for Safe and Inclusive Schools

FEBRUARY 2026

One of the surest methods for learning about multilingual learners is to listen to what they have to say – to ask them about, and truly listen to, their experiences, perspectives, and ideas. To understand what students are saying and how your practices can shift, all staff should consider the impact of their practices on other individuals - especially those directly impacted by current systems and culture. Multilingual Learner student input is a necessary part of community school development and sustainability. Their perspectives can be used to inform, develop, and improve school practices and climate to be more inclusive of multilingual learners. This can look like a school culture that demonstrates a sense of value for what multilingual learners have to say, and like concrete language and access to meaningful and supportive student support.

These tools were adapted from pages 58-65 of **A High School Counselor's Toolkit for English Learner Success** in partnership with Californians Together and Community Schools Learning Exchange.

Listening to Multilingual Learner Students

Globally, demographic patterns are changing and these trends are reflected on classroom rosters. Teachers are facing increasingly diverse cultural, linguistic, national and ethnic backgrounds in their classrooms. Responsive schools recognize the need to learn about the cultures, experiences, and needs of multilingual learners. These schools create environments that are conducive to listening to and applying learnings from MLs.

Obtaining student feedback can be challenging, particularly for students who have trouble expressing themselves in English or who come from traditions in which students do not speak out to school authorities. Schools committed to learning from these students need to deliberately invite student participation—and create a climate in which student voices can be heard and respected. Listening to and acting on student feedback can transform school culture in many ways: a shift in discussions from adult to student issues; better informed decisions; closer relationships between students, their families and the school; and more highly motivated educators.

Adults play a central role in creating school practices, habits and forums for eliciting ML student feedback. For example, adults can do the following:

- Ensure there are regular, multiple, formal forums and mechanisms through which teachers and administrators are able to hear MLs discuss their hopes, concerns and experiences in school.
- Be intentional about establishing safeguards and designing venues for feedback where students feel free to speak about their experiences and teachers can learn without fear of retribution or blame.
- Take full advantage of opportunities to hear student voices individually. Sharing what you hear from students individually, and bringing their voices to bear in the planning and dialogues of leadership and staff is particularly important for student groups like multilingual learners and immigrants who have often historically been under-served and excluded

There are multiple approaches you may want to consider as a way to elicit and amplify multilingual learner student feedback. Some parameters for consideration are: What kind of feedback are you looking for? Who do you need to hear more from to get a complete picture of student experiences? How much time and effort can be devoted to the process? What will be done with this information? The following chart presents some approaches and notes on their benefits and drawbacks.

For a more comprehensive sense of student experiences, consider multiple approaches to access different student groups. For example, you might hold a focus group with a specific typology of ML students (e.g. SLIFE), along with a questionnaire for recently reclassified ML students, and quick writes during an ELD session for a specific level. This will give you a sense of how students' intersectional identities are impacted by the school culture and systems of support.

Choosing Your Approach for Listening to Students

Student Voices Approach	Benefits/Drawbacks
<p>Focus Groups <i>(Small group discussion around a specific topic, guided by a few key questions)</i></p>	<p>Benefits: Students build on each other’s comments, and because of their dialogue with each other, there is often a richness to the information. Great way to get overall themes and patterns, to get a sense of priorities, to get reactions to specific ideas, to hear students’ words.</p> <p>Drawbacks: Time and labor-intensive to set up; lose individual stories and detail; sometimes unusual experiences and perspectives don’t get expressed because of peer pressure.</p>
<p>Surveys and Questionnaires</p>	<p>Benefits: Relatively easy to administer; can get responses from many students; anonymous responses can elicit more honesty. Good for finding out the extent of an issue.</p> <p>Drawbacks: Depends on written responses which can be difficult for multilingual learners; yields less depth and descriptive detail; surveys may not be taken seriously by students; information is restricted to forced choice answers or relatively simple responses.</p>
<p>Quick Writes* <i>(Quick and informal written responses to a single question or prompt)</i></p>	<p>Benefits: Easy to administer; takes little time; can get responses from many students; can be done across multiple classrooms with minimal interruption; responses are in students’ words.</p> <p>Drawbacks: Sometimes what students have to say is filtered and limited by their writing ability and comfort with writing. Encourage them to write in whichever language feels most comfortable. Another drawback is that Quick Writes are restricted to a single prompt.</p> <p>*Tip for Quick-Writes: Use a “stem” as part of their prompt to get responses. For example: “If you want to make school better for multilingual learners, you could .”</p>
<p>Panels <i>(A few selected students speak in front of faculty to specific questions)</i></p>	<p>Benefits: Real students talking to each other and teachers in real time—the face -to-face contact can be powerful; responses are in the words of the students.</p> <p>Drawbacks: Students can become shy or intimidated by the “in-front-of-the room” format; teachers need to be prepared to listen respectfully.</p>
<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Benefits: Good for getting individual stories and data. Can be more comfortable for students because they are talking to a real person (compared to surveys or Quick Writes); more revealing than surveys because of depth of response and opportunities for follow up questions.</p> <p>Drawbacks: Very labor intensive; interviews take a lot of time to prepare, conduct and analyze. Usually you can only “hear” from a small number of students.</p>

An equally important piece of garnering student input is making use of it. When adults gather information and input from students and families, then act without explicit consideration of the feedback that was shared, the school relationships are impacted. As discussed previously, there are a variety of reasons that ML students and their families may have for not speaking up for improvement. Schools can recognize and show respect for the vulnerability it takes to share ML and immigrant experiences by accepting these insights as valuable expertise. As such, the feedback students offer needs to be part of a system that is ready to create inclusive and equitable experiences for ML students.

Creating a safe, inclusive, affirming school for multilingual learner students.

The following tool has four sections for reflecting on the school climate, culture, and practices that contribute toward creating schools in which multilingual learners are safe, included and affirmed—the kind of climate that is needed for learning. The sections include, a) eliciting and supporting student voice, experience and identities; b) affirming and reflecting ML experiences; c) supporting bilingualism; and d) creating safe and inclusive schools. You can focus on just one or all of the sections. You are invited to use this assessment to reflect upon your own practice, or your counseling program overall, or the school in general. If you choose to use it to reflect upon the school climate overall, consider the role you and your counseling program might have in shifting the school toward more proactively and effectively demonstrating the value of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Reflecting on School Climate

Indicator/Example	Not present, not happening, not addressed	Aware of this to some degree	This is present, but we can do more	This is a strength, we excel in this area	Not sure, needs inquiry, clarification, dialogue with others
Do we elicit, support and respond to student voice, experience and identities?					
We have regularly structured mechanisms through which we invite students to share their opinions, perspectives and ideas, elicit their voices, and hear from our multilingual learner students about their experiences and needs (e.g., listening sessions, shadowing, surveys, panels).					
We understand the intersectionality of multilingual learner status , racial identity, cultural/ethnic identity, nationality, and economic status in the lives of our multilingual learners.					
Our school has language clubs, ethnic and cultural clubs that support students' cultural identity development and support connecting with their heritage.					

Indicator/Example	Not present, not happening, not addressed	Aware of this to some degree	This is present, but we can do more	This is a strength, we excel in this area	Not sure, needs inquiry, clarification, dialogue with others
ML student leadership and expression are visible and affirmed on the walls, materials, curriculum and in the everyday life of our campus.					
We regularly facilitate ML student input to inform our staff about the experiences and needs of our ML students.					
Do our multilingual learners see themselves reflected and affirmed in the life of our school?					
The languages of our families/community are visible in the messages, information on the walls, and in the halls of our school.					
We have books in our library and curriculum in which our students see themselves reflected —and materials that are authentic and correct about the cultures and national/ethnic communities of our students.					
Educational events and celebrations regularly embrace and feature the cultural and language communities of our students.					
Leadership and staff receive professional development related to cultural and linguistically responsive and sustaining pedagogy and approaches.					
It is an explicit goal for our students to develop a prideful and knowledgeable sense of identity about their own culture and language.					
Is our school climate supportive of bilingualism?					
We have an explicit vision or mission statement affirming the importance of bilingualism, language diversity, multiculturalism.					
Our school does not tolerate comments that are anti-bilingual, anti-immigrant, or racist.					
The development of home language is encouraged and prized , and students have opportunities to utilize their home language in their learning.					
In the classrooms and library, there are books in the home languages of our students.					
We actively recruit and support pathways to biliteracy culminating in the Seal of Biliteracy to graduates to formally acknowledge and certify development of biliteracy skills to an advanced level.					



Indicator/Example	Not present, not happening, not addressed	Aware of this to some degree	This is present, but we can do more	This is a strength, we excel in this area	Not sure, needs inquiry, clarification, dialogue with others
Is our school safe and inclusive for our ML students?					
It is an explicit goal for our students to develop cross-cultural competencies for understanding, communicating and interacting respectfully across cultural differences.					
We have clear and enforced norms related to zero tolerance for bullying and harassment based upon student ethnicity, language, racial, and gender identities.					
Our school is explicitly a “safe space” for immigrants , and our staff (leadership, front office and teachers) are knowledgeable about the implications.					
We have schoolwide practices and mechanisms to support building an inclusive, safe, and equitable community (e.g., Restorative Justice, PBI, etc.).					
In the informal and social life of our campus , ML and non-MLs tend to be socially integrated.					

Reflection

Reviewing your responses to the Reflection Tool above, what stands out to you as a high priority to work toward? What more could be done in your school to strengthen the embrace of multilingual learners and to create a climate that affirms language and cultural diversity? What role can you as a counselor, or the counseling program overall play in strengthening the school climate to become more asset oriented, safe, affirming, and embracing of multilingual learner students?

