



# Promising Practices in Rural Multilingual Learner Education

September 2, 2026

## Webinar Guest Speaker(s):

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## Webinar Overview:

Join Dr. Maria Coady, Goodnight Distinguished Professor in Educational Equity at NC State, and Dr. Kia Johnson of the Center for Applied Linguistics for a conversation on supporting English/Multilingual Learners in rural and new destination states. Drawing on research, policy and practical expertise, we will explore the unique challenges and promising practices shaping these communities across the nation.

### CAL Disclaimer

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## Key Insights

- **Rural multilingual learner communities are diverse and dynamic.**

There is no single rural ML experience. Rural communities vary in geography, histories, demographics, linguistic diversity, enrollment patterns, and local capacity. Effective approaches begin with understanding the unique assets and needs of the local context.

- **Rural communities have assets that can support ML success.**

Strong relationships, close community connections, local knowledge, and opportunities for collaboration can be powerful resources for multilingual learners and their families. Promising practices build upon these existing strengths (unity, resilience, resourcefulness) rather than approaching rural education from a deficit perspective.

- **Context-responsive leadership creates conditions for success.**

Our research and work with rural districts demonstrate the importance of leaders who listen, adapt, build relationships, use evidence to guide decisions, and creatively leverage available resources to ensure multilingual learners have equitable opportunities to thrive.

## Policy Implications

- **Design for context, not just scale.**

Policies and programs should provide flexibility for rural and low-incidence districts to develop approaches that respond to their local populations, geography, staffing structures, and community assets.

- **Invest in people and sustainable local capacity.**

Policies should support high-quality professional learning, leadership development, educator collaboration, and access to specialized ML expertise so knowledge and capacity are distributed throughout rural systems.

- **Strengthen networks that connect rural communities.**

Regional partnerships, cross-district collaboration, universities, state agencies, and professional organizations can expand access to expertise and help rural educators share promising practices rather than working in isolation.

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## Calls to Action

- **Know your community.**

Use local data and the voices of students, families, educators, and community members to understand both the strengths and evolving needs of your multilingual learner population, particularly in times of shifting educational priorities and policies.

- **Build on what is working.**

Identify successful local practices, invest in the people leading them, and create structures for effective approaches to be shared, strengthened, and sustained.

- **Connect and advocate.**

Build partnerships across schools, districts, communities, and states, and elevate rural voices and promising practices in conversations about multilingual learner policy, funding, research, and professional learning.

## Resources

**Understanding the Rural ML Landscape:** *National data on rural EL enrollment, geographic distribution, and English language proficiency outcomes.*

U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2026). *English learners in rural localities* [Infographic].

<https://ncela.ed.gov/resources/infographic-english-learners-in-rural-localities-march-2026>

**Rural ML Leadership and Promising Practices:** *Explores context-responsive leadership practices identified among leaders of rural and low-incidence EL programs.*

Johnson, K. (2026). “Bless Your Heart” leadership: *Advancing equity in rural and low-incidence EL programs* [CAL Research Brief]. Center for Applied Linguistics.

<https://www.cal.org/publications/bless-your-heart-leadership-advancing-equity-in-rural-and-low-incidence-el-programs/>

**Rural ML Policy and Advocacy:** *Examines the implications of changing federal supports and identifies ways rural educators and leaders can respond.*

Coady, M. R. (2025, November 14). *What the death of OELA means for rural schools—and how educators can respond*. National Rural Education Association.

<https://nrea.net/maria-coady-death-of-oela/>

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