

# Checklist for School Staff: Working Effectively with an Interpreter in a Special Education Meeting to Support Parent Participation

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parent participation is a right (34 CFR §300.322). In the special education process, nurturing collaborative relationships with parents who are English language learners requires intention and practice. Special education meetings where interpreters are involved provide a critical opportunity for both. This checklist is designed to support school staff in the full utilization of these opportunities.

## Advance planning for the meeting

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- Make it a practice for school staff to use plain language in all conversations with the parents and in the preparation of all written records for the student, including the Evaluation Report, the Individualized Education Program (IEP), and progress reports. In your speaking and writing, communicate information in a way that is easy to understand and clearly organized. Avoid idioms, acronyms, and technical language. Support your message with concrete examples and strong visuals. Consistently communicating in ways that are more accessible in English will greatly support the success of the interpreter and productive conversations with the parents at every meeting.
- Provide parents with timely and complete translation of any document(s) related to their child's special education and regular education program that are vital to the parents' understanding of their child's placement, progress, and recommendations from the district. For example, the evaluation report, IEP, progress reports, prior written notices, and procedural safeguards
- Inform parents of the different roles fulfilled by interpreters, cultural liaisons, and advocates in the special education process (See "Roles and Responsibilities" on page 3), so parents can make an informed decision as to who they want to bring to the table to most appropriately support their participation in an upcoming meeting. Refer parents seeking the assistance of an advocate to PACER Center.
- Prepare visual aids and collect student work samples that will support a clear understanding of topics to be discussed at the upcoming meeting.

## Immediately before the meeting

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### Schedule time for the interpreter to sit down with the parents to:

- Ensure that the interpreter is fluent in the primary language of the parents.
- Explain that their role as an interpreter is limited to interpreting the words of school staff and documents they may share with the parents and vice versa. The interpreter is not an active participant in the conversation and will not express opinions or give advice. The interpreter is there to make the voices of parents and school staff understandable to each other.
- Review any materials or documents in their native language the parents may have brought for reference and/or to share with school staff so the interpreter can orally interpret relevant written content as needed during the meeting.

### **Schedule time for the interpreter to sit down with the school staff to:**

- Hear from school staff an overview of where the student is at in the special education process (for example, a manifestation determination or a referral for an initial evaluation) and a review of essential special education terminology that will be the focus of the meeting (for example, least restrictive environment or assistive technology).
- Explain that their role as an interpreter is limited to interpreting the words of the parents and documents they may share with the school staff and vice versa. The interpreter is not an active participant in the conversation and will not express opinions or give advice. The interpreter is there to make the voices of school staff and parents understandable to each other.
- Review any materials or documents in English the school staff may have brought for reference and/or to share with parents so the interpreter can orally interpret relevant written content as needed during the meeting.

### **At the meeting**

- Work with the interpreter and the parents on an appropriate seating arrangement. Seating the interpreter behind the parents may make them uncomfortable and make it impossible for the interpreter to read the parents' nonverbal language. Allow the interpreter to position themselves where they can comfortably see and hear all meeting participants. Seating arrangements may also signify different things across different cultures, so it is important to involve parents in determining who sits where.

### **Start the meeting:**

- Ask the interpreter, cultural liaison, and/or advocate, as applicable, to introduce themselves and their role at the meeting.
- Ask each school staff person at the table to introduce themselves and their role at the meeting.
- Ask the parents to introduce themselves and any participants they may have invited.
- Clearly state that everything said by any participant will be interpreted and that everything said during the meeting is confidential.
- Explain that the interpreter may take notes during the meeting to help them communicate exactly what is said by all participants and that these notes will be destroyed at the end of the meeting.
- Review the purpose of the meeting and give parents the opportunity to ask any questions they may have.

### **Support effective communication throughout the meeting:**

- Do not engage in any side conversations.
- Turn your body and maintain eye contact with the person you're addressing, to physically cue the parents and the interpreter as to who you're speaking to.
- Speak in the first person as you would in direct conversation with any parents. Do not say to the interpreter, "Tell the parents that..."
- Avoid idioms, acronyms, and technical jargon.
- Use plain language, concrete examples, and visuals.
- Pause frequently. Chunk what you're saying into 1-2 sentences for the interpreter to deliver at a time.
- Check in with parents frequently and invite them to ask questions, share their ideas or concerns, or request additional information on any topic. Societal norms for how school staff and parents relate to each other vary widely across different cultures, so it is important to create these opportunities for parent engagement.

- Be patient. Special education meetings that involve an interpreter are meetings where three languages are spoken: English, the primary language of the parents, and the language of special education in IDEA and Minnesota law. Expect this meeting to take more time and remember that there is a child at the center of all discussion who needs every minute to access a Free Appropriate Public Education.

#### **Close the meeting:**

- Recap and check for parent understanding and support regarding any decisions made. If parents state concerns or objections, review with them their options for dispute resolution in plain language.
- Review the next steps in the special education process and the timeframe for each step. Allow time to discuss any questions parents may have.
- Provide parents with contact information for school staff who can help them through the next steps and answer questions that may come up later. Ensure parent understanding of how they can access interpreting and translation of vital documents in the future outside of a special education meeting process.

#### **After the meeting**

- Give parents an opportunity to express how they felt about the meeting, share what went well, and anything that did not go well for them.
- Provide the interpreter with access to a shredder to destroy any notes taken during the meeting.
- Schedule time with the interpreter to ask for their feedback regarding what went well and any areas for improvement. The role of the interpreter in special education meetings is essential in supporting parent participation, so it is important to gather their professional insight and use it to enhance communication with parents who are English language learners at future meetings.
- If the interpreter is also a qualified translator, plan with them for a timely and complete translation of the prior written notice and other vital documents resulting from the meeting, such as an IEP proposal. If not, seek out a qualified translator to provide the parents with a timely and complete translation of these vital documents in their native language.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Translator**

A translator works with written language, producing a document in one language which meaningfully conveys the content and tone of what is written in an original document in another language. Under IDEA, a prior written notice provided to the parent in their native language is a right (34 CFR §300.503(c)). Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, school districts have independent responsibilities to provide parents who are English language learners and also parents of children with disabilities with meaningful access through timely and complete translation of vital documents such as evaluation reports, IEPs, progress reports, and procedural safeguards. Translators of special education documents should have excellent writing skills and training in special education terminology. They are not typically involved in special education meetings, unless they are also qualified interpreters.

### **Interpreter**

The interpreter conveys orally in one language what has been said in the other, without adding, editing or polishing what is said by either side. They may also provide sight translation, which is reading and orally interpreting the content of a written document. A skilled interpreter has the ability to convey the intended meaning of the speaker or writer, such as interpreting a term or expression that doesn't have an equivalent in the parent's native language. They do not offer opinions or advice. For special education meetings, the interpreter should have training in special education terminology.

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## **Cultural liaison**

A cultural liaison has a broader role than an interpreter and is generally employed by the school district. The Minnesota Administrative Rules defines a cultural liaison as a person who provides information to the IEP team about a student's race, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic background, assists the IEP team in understanding how these factors impact educational progress, and facilitates the parent's understanding and involvement in the special education process [Minn. R. 3525.0210, subp. 10].

## **Advocate**

An advocate speaks on behalf of the parent and/or assists them in understanding and participating in the special education process. All parents have the right to involve an advocate at any point during the special education process, from evaluation to developing an IEP and placement. If parents have a disagreement with the district, they should request assistance from an advocate who is not employed by the district.

## **Resources**

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### **Minnesota Department of Education (MDE)**

[Language Access is a Civil Right](#)

[English Learner Disability Resources](#)

[What Do Spoken Language Interpreters Wish that Special Educators Knew?](#)

### **The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education**

[Open Doors Webinar: Working Effectively with Interpreters](#)

[Working Effectively with Interpreters Checklists](#)

### **U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights**

[Schools' Civil Rights Obligations to English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents](#)

[Fact Sheet: Information for Limited English Proficient \(LEP\) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them](#)

[Dear Colleague letter from the Office of Special Education Programs regarding IEP translation, June 14, 2016](#)

MDE defines family engagement as the collaboration of families, schools and communities as active partners in the shared responsibilities of ensuring each student's success in lifelong learning and development. If you need guidance to ensure that parents of students with disabilities in your district have effective language assistance services, contact MDE Community Engagement at 651.785.4064 or [Lee.Her@state.mn.us](mailto:Lee.Her@state.mn.us).

PACER Center's vision is that children and young adults with disabilities and their families have access to resources and equitable opportunities to be successful and valued members of their community. If you are working with parents who are English language learners and need assistance from a parent advocate who speaks Spanish, Somali, or Hmong, refer them to PACER at 952.838.9000 or [PACER@PACER.org](mailto:PACER@PACER.org).

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