

# COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES WITH LANGUAGE ACCESS NEEDS

## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS WHEN USING A QUALIFIED INTERPRETER (TELEPHONIC OR IN-PERSON)



### OVERVIEW

#### WHY SHOULD I, OR MY SCHOOL/DISTRICT, USE A QUALIFIED INTERPRETER?

Communicating effectively with students and families is fundamental to your role as an educator and requires the assistance of a qualified interpreter when families speak a primary language other than English, or are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (HOH) and might communicate using American Sign Language (ASL) or some other system of visual communication. Schools and districts have a civil rights obligation to ensure meaningful communication with families with language access needs. Qualified interpreters help educators strengthen family-school relationships while fulfilling these obligations.

#### *Quick Resources to Learn More About:*

Communication modes for Deaf/HOH families: See these resources from the National Deaf Center:

<https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources>

Legal obligations for language access: See these resources from the Department of Education— Office of Civil Rights: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ellresources.html>; and NAD—Section 504 and ADA

Obligations of Public Schools: <https://www.nad.org/resources/education/k-12-education/section-504-and-ada-obligations-of-public-schools/>

#### GETTING STARTED: UNDERSTAND YOUR SCHOOL/DISTRICT'S PROCESS FOR ACCESSING INTERPRETERS

Your school or district must take steps to ensure qualified interpreters are available to assist you in communicating with families when needed. That may include having individuals on staff who are qualified to interpret, having a contract with outside agencies that provide in-person interpreters, and maintaining an account with a telephonic interpretation provider. Remember, even if your school or district has qualified interpreters on staff or who are on-call for in-person support, you will always be prepared if you have a telecommunications option as a back-up, especially to provide coverage for a range of languages and when time is of the essence. For some Deaf or HOH families, a regular phone call is not an option. You may communicate with them via text, email, or Telephone Relay Service. Please ask families what works best for them.

Many districts have written guidelines for accessing interpretation services for families who use a primary language other than spoken English. Determine who in your school district is responsible for the provision of language interpreting services. In some schools, it is the Multilingual Learners (MLs) / English Language Learners (ELLs) / English Learners (ELs) department and for others it may be the Americans with Disabilities Act/504 coordinator or some other office. Please remember that even if the student speaks English and does

not receive English language learner services, the ML / ELL/ EL department is a resource for families who need interpretation in languages other than English. Similarly, the Special Education Department can be a resource for families of students with disabilities.

For Deaf/HOH families, the district's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Program, DSHS' Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH), or the Washington School for the Deaf can provide resources and referrals to qualified interpreters. See: ODHH: [Community Resources | DSHS \(wa.gov\)](#), Washington School for the Deaf—[About WSD – Washington School for the Deaf](#).

Providing annual training for school staff on working with interpreters of all kinds is a valuable, proactive step to ensuring effective communication when needs arise.

#### Additional Tips:

- Find and review your school or district's guidelines on accessing interpretation for families with a primary language other than English or those who are Deaf/HOH.
- If your school relies on bilingual or Deaf/HOH staff to provide interpretation, check to be sure that the staff person is familiar with the terminology that will come up in the conversation you are planning, and understands the role and responsibilities of serving as an interpreter. (See below for information on the role of the interpreter.)
- For in-person interpretation (generally preferable), plan to schedule in advance.
- Telephonic interpreters are normally on call, within a matter of minutes, for Multilingual families. Finding a qualified interpreter for less frequently spoken languages or dialects, however, might take more time to arrange. Similarly, interpreters for Deaf and HOH families need to be pre-arranged.
  - o When working with Multilingual families, you can call a telephonic interpreter while the family member is with you in person and have the interpreter on speakerphone, if your phone has this feature. You can also call a telephonic interpreter and ask them to initiate the call to the family. If you receive a call from a family and need to connect with an interpreter, you can put the first call on hold, call the interpreter service, and then merge the two calls.
  - o Educators can usually access telephonic interpreters in more than 100 languages. To reach telephonic interpreters, you will generally need the interpreter service toll-free number and your account number. You will be prompted to provide your name and the language you need. Do not hesitate to ask for a few minutes to brief the interpreter on the matter that you will be discussing.
  - o When working with Deaf/HOH families, determine the family's preferred method of communication. The Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 give deference to these preferences, as well as provide for choices of interpreters. If the family prefers meeting by phone, families and schools can connect immediately through the telecommunication relay service accessed by dialing 1-800-833-6384. For in-person meetings where no interpreter is on site, schools can contract, for a fee and with pre-arrangement, for video remote interpreting (VRI), where an off-site interpreter can see and hear all of the participants in the meeting and provide language access.

## INTERPRETATION VENDORS ON CONTRACT WITH THE STATE OF WASHINGTON\*

WA State Contracts can be found at:

<https://apps.des.wa.gov/DESContracts/Home/>

- **In-person, spoken interpreter services for languages other than English are listed in the master contract:**
  - <https://apps.des.wa.gov/DESContracts/Home/ContractSummary/03514>
- **Telephone based interpreter services for languages other than English are listed in the master contract:**
  - <https://apps.des.wa.gov/DESContracts/Home/ContractSummary/02819>
- **Phone interpretation vendor currently on contract with the state of Washington:**
  - **CTS Language Link** <https://www.language.link/> 1 (360) 823-2287
- **Contracts for in-person or video remote interpreters for Deaf/HOH families until 05/2026:**  
<https://apps.des.wa.gov/DESContracts/Home/ContractSummary/02120>
- **Communication Access Real-time Transcription (CART):**  
<https://apps.des.wa.gov/DESContracts/Home/ContractSummary/15422>
- **Communication facilitator services for Deaf/HOH families:**  
<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/altsa/odhh/communication-facilitator>

DSHS has the authority to manage the statewide sign language interpreter contracts through its Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

\*Schools and districts may be eligible to use vendors listed in the state of Washington master contracts. Check with your district to see if they have signed a Master Contracts Usage Agreement. They can also hire/work with qualified interpreters through other local organizations or with staff members who are qualified to work as interpreters.

## MANAGING COMMUNICATION THROUGH INTERPRETERS (IN-PERSON, REMOTE AND RELAY)

As an educator in a public school, communicating with the diverse families in your school community is a key part of your job. When you need to communicate with a family that does not speak or understand English or uses ASL or another language to communicate, you will need to work with an interpreter unless you can communicate education-related information proficiently in the family's language. Even when you can communicate to a family directly in their primary language, you will need an interpreter if others are joining the conversation and they do not also speak that language. Follow these steps to make each conversation with an interpreter as effective as possible:

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### PRE-PLANNING FOR INTERPRETED CONVERSATIONS:

1. **Know when you will need an interpreter.** Inform families early, often, and in a language they can understand, of their right to have interpretation for communicating with the school or district. Keep track of the need for an interpreter once it is identified, and check your records before making a call or scheduling a meeting. (See if your school or district has a process for indicating the need for interpretation for a student's family member.)

2. **If at all possible, request an interpreter who is the same gender and age, with a similar background to the family with language access needs. Realize that getting closer alignment to the family member's identity can build comfort and rapport. Even when this is not possible, recognize that the differences could be barriers for sharing confidential information or expressing opinions fully.**
3. **Schedule meetings to allow for twice the time generally expected.** Interpreted conversations generally take longer not only because of the time taken in the interpretation, but also to allow time for families and educators to ask questions, check for understanding, avoid miscommunication, and prevent feelings of being rushed.
4. **Brief the interpreter on the topic of the conversation and provide any documents that may be reviewed during the meeting. Share documents with the family, too.** Both families and interpreters benefit from getting documents as soon as possible.

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#### **AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INTERPRETED CONVERSATION:**

1. **Provide families with a copy of the INTERPRETATION SUPPORT TIPS CARD**, designed to help them feel confident in asking for clarification during an interpreted conversation. Families might feel hesitant to interrupt; at the start of the conversation, welcome families to use the card and pause the meeting as needed.
2. **Clarify the expected role of the interpreter:**
  - Explain your expectation that the interpreter will interpret what each person says without adding or removing information or providing the interpreter's own opinions or insights.
  - Ask the interpreter to let you know if the interpreter or the family does not understand something you have said.
  - During the conversation, if it appears that the interpreter is only summarizing what is being said, you can refer to the expectations shared at the beginning of the meeting and ask that the interpretation be given fully. Check to see if time is the barrier.
  - If it appears the interpreter is being asked for, or is offering his or her own explanation in response to a family's question, ask the interpreter to interpret the family's question for you so that you can respond directly as the educator.
  - If you are working with a bilingual co-worker who has been trained as an interpreter to serve in this role as needed, take some time to clarify for everyone involved in the conversation that the co-worker will only act as an interpreter in the conversation, not provide guidance or make decisions.

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#### **DURING THE INTERPRETED CONVERSATION—MONITORING YOUR OWN COMMUNICATION FOR CLARITY AND TIMING:**

- **Speak directly with and face the family members. Focus the conversation on them and the student. Avoid phrases like "Tell her" and "Explain to them."** Let the interpreter serve *as your voice*. Note that interpreters for Deaf/HOH families might sit next to the educators at the meeting so that the families can glance at you and pick up nonverbal cues and expressions. See—National Institutes of Health, 10 Tips for Using a Sign Language Interpreter: <https://www.edi.nih.gov/blog/communities/10-tips-using-sign-language-interpreter>
- **Avoid personal side conversations with the interpreter during the professional situation.** He or she is working as a means of language and communication transmission, not as a meeting participant.
- **Use simple language and avoid metaphors, slang, abbreviations, and technical jargon.**
- **Speak in your normal tone and pace, open to feedback from interpreters.** For interpreters assisting families in a language other than English, expect to stop and pause for the interpreter to catch up with your speech. Interpreters for Deaf/HOH families usually prefer that you speak at your normal pace.

Know that interpreters will direct you to pause or slow down, if needed. They might also ask you to repeat or spell an unfamiliar word.

- **Try to avoid acronyms**, but if you must use them – define them clearly and repeat the definition later in the conversation.
- **Relax.** If you feel uncomfortable or worried, check in with the family to ask how and what you can improve.

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#### **DURING THE INTERPRETED CONVERSATION: CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING:**

- **Check in regularly with families for understanding** and let them explain what they understand after each idea or allow time for them to summarize the conversation.
- **When discussing technical terms, be sure to define them clearly.** Ask families to explain back to you what they understood when covering essential information.
- **Offer families opportunities to ask questions throughout the conversation.**
- **Share with families that they can end the interpretation or request another interpreter if they feel like their needs are not being met.**
- **Listen carefully.** If the family does not respond the way you expect given what you have shared, check for understanding.
- **Ask questions** if anything is unclear to you about what the family understands or is trying to communicate.

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#### **FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE MEETING:**

**Seek feedback from the family** about how they felt the interpretation process went so that you can decide if a follow-up meeting is necessary, and the interpreter should be used again at future meetings. Family feedback can help identify areas for further training for interpreters and/or staff who work with interpreters.

#### **CONTACT US IF WE CAN BE OF ASSISTANCE WITH YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE ACCESS:**

Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds

Toll-free phone: 1-866-297-2597 \*Phone interpreter services available.

Email: [oeoinfo@gov.wa.gov](mailto:oeoinfo@gov.wa.gov) Website: <https://oeo.wa.gov/en>