

General Principles for Working with an Interpreter

Interpreters and translators need many different skills. Monolingual English-speakers also need skill and knowledge to work effectively with an interpreter. Monolingual staff should consider the interpreter a team member. Together their goal is to communicate as effectively as possible. Below is a list of things English-speakers can do to make things go smoothly:

- Brief the interpreter ahead of time. Explain the purpose of the meeting, discuss the interpreter's role and go over any materials that will be needed. Also be sure to call the interpreter ahead of time if the meeting has been cancelled.
- Allow enough time for the interpreting session. Interpreted conversations typically run longer because every statement must be made twice.
- Arrange the seating so that the interpreter is close to the parent but can also see and hear other participants at the meeting. The parent should be facing the facilitator.
- Introduce everyone present at the meeting, including the interpreter, and explain his/her role.
- Avoid excessive use of jargon, slang, or idioms.
- Avoid use of double negatives, passive voice or ambiguous language.
- Explain any technical terms or jargon that *must* be used.
- Speak clearly and pause for interpretation after every 3 or 4 sentences.
- Allow the interpreter to take notes to help with the interpretation.
- Arrange a signal for the interpreter to stop the speaker if something is not clear or if the speaker needs to pause for interpretations.
- Speak directly to the parents using first-person language (for example, In English say “what do you think about...” instead of “ask the parents what they think about...”). This makes the interpreter's work much easier and also shows respect to the parents.
- Make eye contact with the parents.
- Have only ONE person speak at a time and avoid side conversations. The interpreter will interpret *everything* that is said at a meeting.
- If you suspect mistranslation, rephrase your question. Or ask the interpreter to repeat your questions back to you.
- Say the same thing in different words if your questions or statement is misunderstood.
- After evaluation or meeting, *privately* ask the interpreter for feedback on the interaction or observations regarding the student's performance or about the family's understanding. This is part of the debriefing.

Working with Interpreters and Translators

What is an Interpreter or Translator?

Interpretation, performed by an interpreter, is the facilitation of oral communication from one language to another. If the target language has no exact word or phrase for a technical term, an experienced interpreter will give a brief explanation

of what the concept means. A message that requires several words in one language may require several sentences in another. An interpreter should not change the intent of the message, however, or add or delete information. Good interpreters possess the ability to process oral information extremely quickly, a demanding and tiring task. There are three ways of interpreting; consecutive and sight interpretation are the most commonly practiced.

- **Sequential or Consecutive:** the speaker pauses every few sentences, allowing the interpreter to interpret what has just been said.
- **Sight:** the interpreter reads a document written in English and orally interprets the information into another language.
- **Simultaneous:** the interpreter listens through a headset or other means and interprets the messages orally instantaneously. A simultaneous interpreter is able to listen and interpret at the same time without a pause.

Translator, performed by a translator, refers to written language. As with interpretation, a skilled translator will match the tone set by the original document. Good translators have excellent writing skills as well as knowledge of both languages.

Selecting an Interpreter

In general, schools should always use trained interpreters who are adults and who are not closely related to the student or family. In some situations, schools may prefer to select an interpreter who is the same gender as the student or parent. Whenever possible, schools should consistently use the same interpreter or translator for special education so that this person can become familiar with the special education system and materials the technical terminology, and the special education staff. Ideally, the special ed staff members and the interpreter work together a team whose goal is to communicate effectively with families and students.

Steps in working with an Interpreter

Make sure they:

- Understands the purpose of the meeting.
- Understands that he/she should interpret or translate precisely and completely; although interpreters may ask questions for clarification, they should not edit the discussion by omitting or adding information.
- Understands data privacy laws and the importance of confidentiality.
- Is fluent in English and the native language or dialect spoken by the family.
- Is an adult and is **not** closely related to the student.
- Is not biased toward the student or family because of personal, ethnic or linguistic reasons.

There are three steps involved when working with an interpreter:

- **Briefing: meeting** with the interpreter to discuss the purpose of the interaction and the desired style of interpretation and to review any materials and terminology that will be used.
- **Interaction:** introducing the interpreter and explaining that his or her role is to help the English-speaker who does not speak the subject's language.
- **Debriefing:** depending on the purpose of the interaction (a student evaluation vs. a parent meeting) ask the interpreter if he or she has any observations about the student's performance or about the family's understanding; ask what can be done in the future to improve communication.