



Guidance on Interpreters, Translators, and Cultural Liaisons

State law requires local education agencies (LEAs) to provide all important information to parents who are not proficient in English in a language or mode of communication that they understand. See 22 Pa. Code §4.26 and [Educating English Learners \(ELs\) Basic Education Circular](#).

To provide parents with effective communication, interpreters and translators must understand and be able to express in both languages any specialized terms or concepts used in the communication. It is also important that translators and interpreters understand the ethics of interpreting and translating and the need for confidentiality. This guidance document reviews the roles played by translators, interpreters and liaisons, ethical standards that should be observed, options for professional development, interpreting styles for different situations, and strategies for working with interpreters.

These requirements also are outlined in the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights fact sheet, [Information for Limited English Proficient \(LEP\) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them](#).

Definition of Interpreter, Translator, and Cultural Liaison

An interpreter facilitates oral communication from one language to another. Interpretation often goes beyond word-for-word transference or language. Experienced interpreters will convey the speaker's nuances, using technical or colloquial language as appropriate. Interpreting is an evolving profession and practices may differ according to the context (e.g., medical, legal, business, conferences, and educational). In general, however, interpreters only convey messages between speakers of different languages. Interpreters do not offer opinions or advice and do not work with individuals independently to gather or explain information. Interpreters typically do not interact with families on their own, even to schedule a meeting or go over a questionnaire. They are engaged by the LEA to communicate important information to families and/or students in a language that the student or family understands.

A translator works with written language. As with interpretation, a skilled translator will match the tone set by the original document. Good translators have excellent writing skills in addition to knowledge of both languages. Translation and interpretation are very different cognitive tasks and require different training. Not all interpreters have the skills to be good translators and vice versa. Skilled translators might struggle when asked to orally interpret in real time.

A cultural liaison is a person who has knowledge in the following areas:

- School systems (policies, procedures, activities, structures, etc.);
- Cultural differences, such as differences in customs, relationships between people and institutions, norms and roles, assumptions about rules of conduct, values, etc.;
- Experiences of newly arriving students and families; and
- The local community.

Cultural liaisons have broader roles than interpreters and typically have autonomy to communicate with families or school personnel independently. A trained liaison may explain school programs to parents or help them to fill out forms. A liaison may also provide information about culture and language to school staff members. Cultural liaisons can be LEA employees, volunteers, or be employed under contract. Additional information regarding their roles is provided below.

Training and Certification

There are no specific certification or training requirements for interpreters, translators, or liaisons working in or for public schools in Pennsylvania. LEAs are advised to work with interpreters, translators, and liaisons who have had some type of training whenever possible, though. At a minimum, LEAs should ensure that those engaged in the various activities associated with their role are qualified to do so based on the intended goal of their work and with regard to the guidance contained in this document.

Several commercial organizations offer training and certification for interpreters and cultural liaisons. Many of these focus on medical interpreting, but some offer additional focus areas. LEAs may research these options if they do not wish to employ a screening process locally. The Pennsylvania Department of Education does not endorse any particular organization or service. The decision to engage with a commercial organization, which requires the appropriate due diligence, is at the sole discretion of the LEA.

Selecting and Hiring Interpreters

LEAs may employ interpreters and/or translators full time or may contract as needed. This will depend largely on the nature of the populations served and available resources. When hiring employees or contracting with individuals, it is up to the LEA to screen an individual's qualifications, including an assessment of the person's language proficiency. LEAs may use formal measures such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which is an over-the-phone language proficiency testing program developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), or they may use less formal measures such as screening by a qualified staff member or other contracted personnel or with a locally developed screening instrument. LEAs may also contract with an interpreting agency. When contracting with an agency, LEAs should ask for information about the process used to screen interpreters and about any training provided by the agency.

In addition to language groups, LEAs may need to consider geographic regions and various dialects of languages. For example, some of the regional varieties of the Spanish language are quite divergent from one another, especially in pronunciation and vocabulary.

To the greatest extent possible, LEAs should use the same interpreters consistently so that they can become familiar with how the program and staff operate and can develop smooth working relationships with them. Additionally, in most cases, the interpreter should be an adult and, whenever possible, should not be closely related to the student or family.

LEAs may struggle to find interpreters for languages that are not commonly spoken in Pennsylvania. Schools may use a variety of strategies in these situations.

- Contact LEAs with larger enrollments of the language group to ask for recommendations.
- Contact a commercial interpreting agency.
- Contact social service organizations that work with the specific cultural group.
- Contact local hospitals or county offices to see if they can recommend an interpreter.
- Work with an interpreting agency that provides “video remote interpreting” if it is not possible to arrange for an in-person interpreter.

Data Privacy

Confidentiality of certain information is required by federal law, namely the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 \(FERPA\)](#). LEAs are required to provide training on data privacy to all employees. In addition, confidentiality is an extremely important aspect of interpreting. If parents or community members even suspect that an interpreter will not maintain confidentiality, their trust in the LEA will be damaged.

Most interpreters are aware of the importance of confidentiality but should receive specific training on school data privacy practices, nonetheless. Both interpreters who are hired as employees and those who work under contract individually or through agencies are subject to data privacy rules.

Professional Ethics and Standards of Practice

Interpreting is an emerging profession, and its standards are evolving. In 2015, the Minnesota Department of Education, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota, developed a code of ethics for interpreters working in educational settings. Minnesota based its code on standards developed by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, a document that guides interpreting practices in many hospitals and health care systems around the country. The [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#) was modified to reflect the needs of public school special education programs, but its content is applicable for broader applications.

The salient features of this code are as follows:

Confidentiality: The interpreter treats as confidential all information learned in the performance of their professional duties, while observing relevant legal requirements regarding disclosure.ⁱ

Accuracy: The interpreter strives to render the message accurately, conveying the content and spirit of the original message, taking into consideration its cultural context.ⁱⁱ

Impartiality: The interpreter strives to maintain impartiality and refrains from counseling, advising, or projecting personal opinions, biases, or beliefs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Respect: The interpreter treats all parties with respect.^{iv}

Professional boundaries: The interpreter maintains the boundaries of the professional role, refraining from other types of involvement.^v

Advocacy: When the student's health, well-being or dignity is at risk, or when student educational access and outcomes would be compromised, the interpreter may be justified in acting as an advocate.^{vi}

Cultural awareness: The interpreter promotes and maintains respect for the cultural beliefs and practices of all parties involved in the interpreting encounter and continuously strives to develop awareness of potential cultural conflicts.^{vii}

Professionalism: The interpreter must, at all times, act in a professional manner.^{viii}

Continuing education: The interpreter strives to continually further his/her knowledge and skills.^{ix}

LEAs should consider these tenets when hiring and/or engaging with interpreters. This information should be shared with interpreters, and they should agree on adherence to them prior to any communication.

Cultural Liaisons

When licensed education staff do not have enough in-depth knowledge of specific ethnic or cultural groups, schools may draw upon the expertise of staff who are hired or volunteer to serve as cultural guides or bridges. Schools may employ a single person who fulfills both the liaison and interpreting roles, or they may separate these functions.

“Cultural liaison” means a person who is of the same racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic background as the student, and who:

1. Provides information to school staff about the student's racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and/or linguistic background;
2. Assists school staff in understanding how racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and/or linguistic factors impact educational progress; and
3. Facilitates the family's understanding and involvement in school activities and processes.

If a person who is of the same racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic background as the student is not available, then a person who has knowledge of the student's racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic background may act as a cultural liaison.

Cultural liaisons are not required in Pennsylvania, but they are recommended when education professionals in an LEA are concerned that cultural or linguistic issues are affecting educational outcomes for students or overall engagement with families.

Below are examples of activities that cultural liaisons might undertake.

Provide info to school staff members	Facilitate parents' understanding
Talk about customs, beliefs, history, language	Help parents register their children for school and complete other paperwork
Plan cultural activities for school staff	Contact parents to review the education programming and parental rights
Help connect staff with other appropriate groups, such as organizations that provide social services to new immigrants and refugees	Contact parents to make meeting arrangements
Help involve minority parents in parent advisory councils and other parent groups	Call parents to let them know about something that happened at school

Balancing the Roles of Interpreter and Liaison

The purpose of interpretation is to ensure that parents, students, and school personnel can communicate with each other. Liaisons have a broader role in the school system.

When hiring or contracting staff, administrators may wish to consider several questions:

- Do you want this person to primarily serve as an interpreter, facilitating spoken communication between monolingual staff and non-English speaking parents?
- Do you want this person to prepare written translations?
- Do you want this person to work with parents independently? For what purposes?
- Do you want this person to be a resource to help other staff understand cultural differences?
- Do you want this person to attend problem-solving meetings to discuss issues related to specific students?
- Do you want this person to be involved in special education evaluations?
- How will English-speaking staff be made aware of the roles played by the interpreter/liaison?

Many interpreters are comfortable serving as cultural liaisons, particularly interpreters who work primarily in schools or social services. However, they cannot serve in both roles at the same

time. In conversations with other staff members, they can serve as the liaison and answer cultural questions. During meetings with parents, their primary role is to serve as an interpreter. Other staff should not ask questions or ask for their opinion during meetings with parents. For example, if staff want the cultural liaison to give you background information about Islamic religious practices, these questions should be asked and answered at a separate time. Do not ask the liaison to provide this type of background information during a meeting with the parents when he or she is serving as the interpreter. During meetings, it is more appropriate to direct questions about cultural practices to the family.

Below are tips to help interpreters/cultural liaisons balance their competing roles:

- At the beginning of a meeting with parents, the interpreter/liaison should introduce him/herself and explain what the role will be in the meeting. Make sure family members know that decisions will be made by the parents and the licensed staff, not by the interpreter or liaison.
- Tell parents ahead of time that they can bring someone to the meeting (i.e., a family member, a friend or an advocate).
- If school staff has a general interest in learning about a student's language or culture, they should talk with the interpreter at a time other than a parent meeting or arrange for a speaker for a staff development event.
- In a complicated situation, the team may need to have both a cultural liaison and an interpreter. For example, if a student is having severe behavior problems, school personnel and the family may not agree on whether the behavior is related to cultural differences, lack of appropriate instruction, racism, stress at home, or a mental health problem. It would be appropriate in this situation to include one person who serves as the cultural liaison and another person who interprets.
- If a cultural question comes up during the meeting and there is no cultural liaison, the team can first ask the parents to explain the cultural issue via the interpreter. If needed, they can then ask if it is acceptable for the interpreter to also share some cultural information. The team needs to give the interpreter time to "switch gears" and give him or her time to interpret back to the parents.

Reminder: An interpreter or translator who is not familiar with the LEA or public education in general should not be expected to automatically function as a cultural liaison without training and support from the LEA. Some professional interpreters feel comfortable with this role, but others do not. Discuss your expectations ahead of time.

Culturally Responsive Schools

Culture is a complex concept. It cannot be reduced to a well-defined set of precepts, and no one can completely understand and/or represent an entire culture. It is difficult to understand one's own culture and the ways in which it impacts daily life, let alone someone else's that may be far removed. Culture is a way of knowing and understanding the world shaped by a multitude of factors. Two people who speak the same language, are from the same country, are of the same race and ethnicity, and even belong to the same religion may have diverging beliefs, views, and

understandings of the world. Cultural liaisons are only meant to help facilitate understanding, a willingness to accept other's points of view, and build relationships.

The point of cultural awareness and competence is to foster an understanding that one's own culture affects the way one sees the world and interacts with others, and that it is not the only way of seeing the world. It is an understanding and acceptance that there are different and equally valid ways to perceive the world than one's own. This is an ongoing practice in which individuals must continually engage. Even if the LEA employs cultural liaisons, the responsibility to maintain a culturally responsive environment in a school belongs to everyone. LEAs should consider ways to promote culturally responsive attitudes and a culturally responsive environment in their schools through guidance and training for all staff. Liaisons can be an excellent starting point for staff development in this area but should not be the only component.

Interpreting Skills and Styles

In a joint [January 2, 2015 "Dear Colleague" letter](#), the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office for Civil Rights wrote that "It is not sufficient for the staff merely to be bilingual. For example, some bilingual staff and community volunteers may be able to communicate directly with [limited English proficient] parents in a different language, but not be competent to interpret in and out of English (e.g., consecutive or simultaneous interpreting) or to translate documents."

Interpreting is a skill that is developed through considerable practice over a period of time; bilingual individuals do not naturally have the capacity to interpret from one language to another easily and smoothly. Good interpreters need to develop their memory and ability to focus on a task that is cognitively demanding and tiring. They need to know the technical terminology of whatever environment they are working in and have strategies in place to request repetition or clarification in order to assure accurate interpretation. Interpreters also need skills to manage the flow of information so that all parties can communicate seamlessly.

There are three ways of interpreting:

1. **Simultaneous:** In a large meeting, the interpreter listens through a headset or other means and orally interprets the message instantaneously. In small meetings such as a meeting to review a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), the interpreter will sit next to and slightly behind the parents and interpret as other people are speaking. A simultaneous interpreter is able to listen and interpret at the same time and without pause.
2. **Sequential or Consecutive:** The speaker pauses every few sentences, allowing the interpreter to interpret what has just been said.
3. **Sight:** The interpreter reads and orally interprets a document written in English.

Simultaneous interpreting is generally considered a more advanced skill than consecutive interpreting and requires more time and experience to master. Some people find simultaneous interpreting to be distracting and prefer consecutive interpreting even though it usually takes longer.

Use of Technology for Interpreting

Telephone services for interpreting are readily available, and many schools utilize these services for routine communication or for emergency situations.

However, telephonic interpreting will not convey 100% of a message. A large proportion of communication is conveyed nonverbally through body language and facial expressions or through tone of voice. “Video Remote Interpreting” (VRI) is commonly used because it allows all parties to see each other and is a solution that often works well for American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting. But the technology is not foolproof. VRI requires fast and reliable internet connection, and not all families have access to the Internet or to the technology needed to facilitate VRI. Some families also may not feel at ease communicating in this manner. For these reasons, schools should provide in-person interpreting whenever possible, especially for very formal interactions such as IEP meetings and meetings on complex issues. There may be situations where telephone or VRI is the best option, however, such as when an uncommon language makes it difficult or impossible to engage with an interpreter in-person.

The U.S. Department of Justice and Office for Civil Rights addressed the use of computer-generated translation in their [January 2, 2015 “Dear Colleague” letter](#):

“The Departments caution against the use of web-based automated translations; translations that are inaccurate are inconsistent with the school district’s obligation to communicate effectively with [limited English proficiency (LEP)] parents. Thus, to ensure that essential information has been accurately translated and conveys the meaning of the source document, the school district would need to have a machine translation reviewed, and edited as needed, by an individual qualified to do so.”

Some artificial intelligence (AI) applications have made significant gains in their ability to translate text from one language to another and are far superior to other computerized translations. However, use of computerized translation of any kind on its own is not recommended. A qualified person should always review any translation before it is published or shared with students or families.

Working with an Interpreter

Steps for Working with an Interpreter

There are three steps involved when working with an interpreter:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Debriefing:** Ask the interpreter if he or she has any observations about the family’s understanding; ask what can be done in the future to improve communication.

General Principles for Working with an Interpreter

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

- Brief the interpreter ahead of time. Explain the purpose of the meeting or encounter, discuss the interpreter's role and go over any materials that will be used.
- Allow enough time for the interpreting session. Interpreted conversations typically run longer because every statement must be made twice.
- If seated in a formal meeting, arrange the seating so that the interpreter is close to the parent but can also see and hear other participants at the meeting.
- Introduce everyone present at the meeting, including the interpreter, and explain their role.
- Avoid excessive use of jargon, slang, idioms, double negatives, passive voice, or ambiguous language to the greatest extent possible. This requires some pre-planning and practice on the part of school staff. Make sure that everyone is aware of this and prepares well in advance of any meetings if possible.
- Explain any technical terms or jargon that **must** be used.
- Speak clearly and pause for interpretation after every three or four 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 interpretation.
- Speak directly to the parents (for example, in English say, "what do you think about..." instead of "ask the parents what they think about..."). This shows respect to the parents and also makes the interpreter's work much easier.
- Face the parents, not the interpreter.
- 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 question back to you.
- Say the same thing in different words if your question or statement is misunderstood.
- After the evaluation or meeting, **privately** ask the interpreter for feedback on the interaction or their observations regarding the student's performance. This is the debriefing.

Notes on Special Situations

Parents Who Do Not Want An Interpreter

Many adults who are native speakers of another language are very fluent in English. But cultural values, personal pride, and the desire to not create a burden for the school may lead some parents to claim a greater degree of English proficiency than they actually possess. There may be situations where the parents refuse the right to an interpreter, but staff members suspect that they do not fully understand the complex information being presented. There also may be situations where parents prefer to use a friend or relative as an interpreter, but the school is not certain whether that person is skilled to serve in this role. In these cases, LEAs may wish to try the following steps. In all cases, it is important for the school staff and parents to take some time to get to know each other and develop a trusting relationship.

- Consult with the English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingual Education staff. These staff members usually have the greatest knowledge of the family's circumstances and may be able to mediate.
- Consider whether the parents have a conflict with one particular interpreter. There are sometimes issues of dialect, ethnic group, or clan affiliations that make a given interpreter unacceptable to a family. Families also may be concerned that an interpreter will not maintain confidentiality. Gender can also be an issue for the family or the interpreter.
- Explain to parents that certain educational contexts can be very complicated and that many English-speaking parents have trouble understanding it.
- Explain that the school needs help to understand their language and culture. Place responsibility for communication barriers on the **school** rather than on the family.
- Consider the best interests of the child. Is the school missing critical pieces of information that can only be obtained from the family via an interpreter? It is important to be sensitive, but the student's interests may override those of the parents.
- Remember that having an interpreter does not guarantee good communication if the parents and the school do not have a good relationship.
- If the family prefers to have a friend or relative interpret, the school might consider involving its own interpreter attend the meeting so that communication is fully transparent.

Parents Are Unable to Read

Because of lack of opportunity for education, some parents of English Learner (EL) students are unable to read or write in their first language. Other languages, such as Hmong, did not historically have a written form and many speakers of these languages do not read or write them. LEAs should provide oral interpretation in these cases so that parents can be involved in their child's education in a meaningful way.

Even when parents are unable to read, LEAs are advised to have their interpreter use translated forms when they are available for communicating certain standard information. This is recommended for the following reasons:

- In many languages, there are no exact equivalents of some education terms. Different interpreters may use different words to explain concepts. Using written translations can increase consistency in interpretation. This is especially true if the interpreter is not trained in education.
- Interpretation of educational documents from English into another language is complex and time-consuming. Using the translated forms should greatly simplify the interpreter's task.
- It is also helpful to audio record oral interpretations of educational materials. Educational information may be complex, and the information shared at meetings can be difficult to absorb in one sitting. A recording would give parents the chance to listen to the information several times to refresh their memory.

Documenting Interpretation

It is important for LEAs to keep records of interpretation. This can be done in whatever format is most convenient. For example, it can be recorded electronically in the local student information system or it can be a written record stored in the student's cumulative folder. The record should, at a minimum, contain the date and time of the interpretation, the information that was communicated, the name of the interpreter, the language(s) used, and the names of all who were involved in the communication. If a document or form was interpreted for a family or student rather than translated into their preferred language, then a note should be placed with the document or form that indicates this along with the name of the interpreter and language.

Legal Standards

Parents have the right to receive information regarding school programs in the language that they understand. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, LEAs must:

“...adequately notify limited English proficiency (LEP) parents of information about any program, service or activity of a school district or state education agency (SEA) that is called to the attention of non-LEP parents. At the school and district levels, this essential information includes but is not limited to information regarding: language assistance programs, special education and related services, IEP meetings, grievance procedures, notices of nondiscrimination, student discipline policies and procedures, registration and enrollment, report cards, requests for parent permission for student participation in a district or school activities, parent-teacher conferences, parent handbooks, gifted and talented programs, magnet and charter schools, and any other school and program choice options.” ([Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents, pp 38-39](#))

The [Educating English Learners \(ELs\) Basic Education Circular](#) identifies these requirements and other essential information that must be provided to parents:

- School registration and enrollment instructions;

- A description of the EL identification process and the reason that their child was identified as an EL;
- Their child's current English proficiency level and a description of what that means;
- A description of the language instruction educational program (LIEP) as outlined in the [Educating English Learners \(ELs\) Basic Education Circular](#);
- Information explaining their right to refuse enrollment of their child in the LIEP (see Parental Right to Refuse Specialized Programming in the [Educating English Learners \(ELs\) Basic Education Circular](#));
- A description of the criteria for reclassification and an expected timeline for achieving proficiency;
- Notices required by special education laws and regulations;
- Grievance procedures and notices of non-discrimination;
- Student discipline policies and procedures;
- Report cards and progress reports;
- Notices of parent-teacher conferences;
- Information regarding gifted and talent programs;
- Results of the annual English proficiency assessment, ACCESS for ELLs®;
- Requests for parent permission for student participation in school activities; and
- Other information provided to native English-speaking parents such as invitations to join school-related councils or groups as well as parent handbooks.

References

- [Educating English Learners \(ELs\) Basic Education Circular](#)
- [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Education Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#)
- [January 7, 2015 Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents](#), U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division / U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights
- [Information for Limited English Proficient \(LEP\) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them](#), U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights

ⁱ Pg. 8, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

ⁱⁱ Pg. 8, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pg. 9, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Pg. 10, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

^{vi} Pg. 11, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Pg. 8, [Minnesota Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#), August 2015.

^{ix} Ibid.