**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 two ways of interpreting; consecutive and simultaneous.

- **Sequential or Consecutive**: the speaker pauses every few sentences, allowing the interpreter to interpret what has just been said.
- **Simultaneous**: the interpreter listens through a headset or other means and interprets the message orally instantaneously. A simultaneous interpreter is able to listen and interpret at the same time and without pause.

Another form of communication is the oral interpretation of something that is written out in English. This is called **sight translation**. This is also a demanding task, requiring the interpreter to read the entire text, comprehend the meaning, and interpret the meaning verbally. Whenever possible, written texts should be given to the interpreter in advance of the meeting to give them adequate time to read it and prepare for interpretation.

**Translation**, 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.

**Reminder**: Not all good interpreters are good translators and vice versa!

*Types of Special Education Interactions with Interpreters*

There are two main situations in special education when interpreters are needed:

1. for evaluations that are conducted in the student’s native language
2. for meetings with the family, either to gather information or to share evaluation results and plan an IEP

Interactions for the purpose of student evaluation are different from other types of communication. In most instances, the interpreter acts as an assistant to the evaluator. Some professionals refer to this function as the “ancillary examiner.” Meetings with parents are more similar to other types of situations where interpreters are used to facilitate communication. Following are some basic principles to ensure that communication goes smoothly.
**Steps in Working with an Interpreter**

For a new interpreter that has never worked in your school before, make sure he or she:

- 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 in 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:

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**: 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 future to improve communication.

An additional list of tips for working with interpreters is found at the end of this document.

**Selecting an Interpreter**

In general, schools should always use interpreters who are adults and who are not closely related to the student or family. In some situations, schools may also 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 licensed special education staff. Ideally, the special education staff members and the interpreter work together as a team whose goal is to communicate effectively with families and students.

**Qualifications**

At the present time, the only requirements for training and certification in Minnesota are for interpreters who work in the legal system. There are no state requirements for interpreters working in education or health care. Because interpreting for special education requires a high level of knowledge and skills, schools are recommended to select interpreters who have some or all of the following qualifications:
◆ Is listed on state roster of court interpreters
◆ Has completed interpreter/translator training coursework offered by the University of Minnesota
◆ Has participated in special ed workshops for interpreters offered by the Minnesota Department of Education
◆ Has received specific on-the-job training in special education

**Payment**
The school or district employing the interpreter is responsible for paying the individual. Rates vary depending on training, experience, and whether the person works independently or is contracted through an agency. Some interpreters charge for a minimum amount of hours. Translators may charge per page or by the hour.

When interpreters or translators are used for special education purposes including assessments and IEP meetings, the cost is reimbursable. Districts may claim reimbursement in the same manner as they do for other special education expenses.

For further information on funding, roles, legal standards, and training for interpreters and translators, see Chapter 5 of *The ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation*. 
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 used.

♦ 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.

♦ Introduce everyone present at the meeting, including the interpreter, and explain his or 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 interpretation.

♦ 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 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 part of the debriefing.