Working with

Language Interpreters

Building a relationship and maintaining open communication with a student's parents or guardians is an essential part of supporting your students' learning. If communicating in English with parents or guardians is a challenge, you may need the support of a language interpreter.

Understanding what support an interpreter can provide and how to make the most of the interaction is essential in developing open communication and establishing a trusting relationship with students who are English learners and their parents or guardians.

What role do interpreters play?

Interpreters facilitate communication by orally relaying messages between speakers of different languages. Interpreters will convey your messages in a different language, taking cultural context, nuance, and the appropriate register into consideration. Interpreters are an impartial participant; they will not counsel, advise, or add their own interpretations.

Interpreters work in real-time, fast-paced communicative environments. Sometimes there are services that will provide interpreting by phone or computer. However, because a great deal of communication is nonverbal, it is important for families to see and hear the interpreter in person whenever possible. In-person interpreting is especially important for conveying non-routine information to families, such as during parent-teacher conferences, meetings about special education, or any other conversations about a student's needs.

What to consider when using an interpreter:

- Interpreters should not be close relatives or friends of the family. Friends and family members may not be impartial participants in a meeting about a child. They also may not have training on U.S. school and

district policies or practices. Having a child interpret for parents or guardians may create stress within the family—particularly if the child's academic performance is the topic of discussion.

- Using the same interpreters consistently builds familiarity with school processes and develops a good working relationship.

- In some cultures, successful communication with an interpreter may require consideration of the interpreter's gender and ethnicity or clan affiliation. For example, it may be inappropriate to provide a male interpreter to communicate with a female parent or guardian. In addition, a parent or guardian from one ethnic group or clan may have conflict with an interpreter from a different ethnic group or clan within the same country.

Three steps you can take to make the most of your interaction with an interpreter:

1. Brief the interpreter before the meeting:

   a. Communicate the purpose of the conversation, clarify your expectations of the interpreter during the meeting, and preview any materials you will be using.

   b. Review any specific terminology, such as test names, common acronyms, or other technical language that the interpreter may need to understand.

   c. Plan for the meeting time. Interpretation takes longer than a normal conversation because each statement is presented in two languages.

2. Support clear communication during the meeting:

   a. Arrange seating so that you are facing and speaking directly to the parents or guardians and the interpreter can see and hear everyone in the meeting.

   b. Make introductions and clarify the interpreter's role.

   c. Make frequent pauses to allow the interpreter to speak.

   d. Check to make sure the parent or guardian understands what you have said about a topic before moving on to the next topic.

   e. Be conscious of your own language: avoid jargon, slang, or overly complicated language. If you must use jargon or technical terms, explain them ahead of time.

   f. Debrief the interpreter in private after the meeting: Ask the interpreter for an observation about the student's performance, the parent's or guardian's understanding, or advice to improve future communication.

Keep in mind:

- Parents or guardians of English learners must have access to the same quality information as parents or guardians of students who are not English learners. By supporting the use of an interpreter, you are increasing accessibility for your students and their parents or guardians.

- The interpreter is a team member who shares the same goal as you: to provide clear, effective communication to your students and their parents or guardians.

- Trained interpreters must comply with ethical standards and are a trustworthy linguistic and cultural resource. It may be important to reassure your students' families of this.

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