



# **Collaborating with Spoken Language Interpreters and Translators:**

## **A Primer for School Leaders**



A publication of  
**NAETISL**

**National Association of Educational Translators  
and Interpreters of Spoken Languages**

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# **Collaborating with Spoken Language Interpreters and Translators: A Primer for School Leaders**

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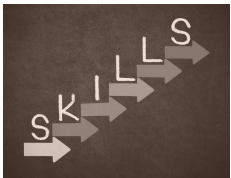
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# Key Points

**Research has consistently demonstrated that family engagement is one of the most significant factors that cuts across language, socioeconomic, cultural and other barriers to support student academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014).**

**Engaging families in their student's education at every stage of development improves school readiness, produces higher gains in academic achievement, and increases graduation rates. Communication is the basis for any good partnership and the formation of strong relationships, and that holds true for every family, including emergent bilingual families.**

**Bilingual school personnel and trained interpreters and translators play an essential role in strengthening home-school connections. These individuals ensure that language access services are provided not only to emergent bilingual students and families currently enrolled in a school district, but also to other potential users of their services and programs. This may include parents or guardians who are in contact with school for the first time to get information about registration, and caregivers who are designated to drop off/pick up a student or as emergency contact.**

**This guide will provide school leaders with research-based knowledge and resources related to language access, qualifications of interpreters and translators, and sustainable options to ensure equity in communication.**



**For additional information and resources, please visit us at [naetisl.org](https://naetisl.org)**

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# Legal Responsibility for Providing Language Access

## I. Federal Legislation

### The Civil Rights Act of 1964



Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states, “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Under the Act, the denial of adequate language access is a form of discrimination based on national origin.

### The Equal Education Opportunity Act of 1974

The Equal Education Opportunity Act of 1974 declares that all children enrolled in public schools are entitled to equal educational opportunity without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin and that deliberate segregation by school districts due to these characteristics is not allowed. The failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome barriers that impede equal participation by its students on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin (which includes language difference) in its instructional programs is considered an unlawful practice under the Act. Furthermore, under the Act, students and parents may enforce their right to language access through the filing of individual or class-action lawsuits against school districts.



### Executive Order 13166 of 2000: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency



The Executive Order sought to expand and ensure meaningful access for emergent bilingual individuals seeking services from federal agencies and from all federally funded activities. This includes developing language access plans and Title VI guidance from federal agencies distributing financial assistance to other entities, such as state and local governments.

### The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, addresses language access in education for students as well as parents/guardians. Regarding students, the IDEA requires that emergent bilingual students be tested in their home/native language and that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) be written in a language they understand. Regarding parents/guardians, written materials and oral communications, including at IEP meetings, must be provided in a language that they understand in order to comply with procedural safeguards described in the Act. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Justice has noted that Title VI and the EEOA require the written translation of all “vital” documents, including an IEP.



## Resources

This report from the Migrant Policy Institute is an excellent reference, along with learning about relevant state and local laws on language access: [A Framework for Language Access Key Features of U.S. State and Local Language Access Laws and Policies.](#)



## II. Federal Guidance

To clarify specific responsibilities of school districts under federal nondiscrimination laws, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education (2015) have provided guidance about language access in the form of a fact sheet for parents and school districts. In addition to other information, the fact sheet states:

**"Schools must communicate information to limited English proficient\* parents in a language they can understand about any program, service, or activity that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English."**

\*The term "Emergent Bilingual" is preferred over "Limited English Proficient" as it is descriptive of bilingual development, focuses on linguistic assets and supports educational equity.

School districts should ensure that all personnel who serve as interpreters and translators have subject matter knowledge including specialized terms used in education in ALL working languages and (b) training on the roles of interpreters and translators, the ethics of interpreting and translating, and the need to maintain confidentiality. Being able to speak two languages does not mean that the individual has the skills to interpret, nor does it mean that they are necessarily able to translate written materials between English and their

other language(s). It is important to verify the language proficiency of the bilingual staff member, as well as their ability and experience in all the languages they intend to interpret and translate. A bilingual staff member may not be fully biliterate and thus may need support if translation is expected.



### What should be translated?

#### Information related to:

- registration and enrollment in school and school programs
- grievance procedures and notices of nondiscrimination
- language assistance programs
- parent handbooks
- report cards
- gifted and talented programs
- student discipline policies and procedures
- magnet and charter schools
- special education and related services
- meetings to discuss special education
- parent-teacher conferences
- requests for parent permission for student participation in school activities
- general school information about policies, transportation, calendars, meals and more

### III. Federal Enforcement

There have been a number of federal enforcement actions against school districts across the nation for violations of language access laws for emergent bilingual students, including students with disabilities, and their families that have ended with settlement agreements to reverse discriminatory practices (<https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-summaries>).

Many have included the allegation of failing to provide adequate interpreters and/or translation services, a practice that compromises the ability of emergent bilingual parents to effectively participate in their child's educational experiences and school-parent decision-making. Settlement stipulations have included:

- Identifying parents requiring language access
- Providing transparency about how to request an interpreter or a translated document
- Collaborating only with trained and vetted interpreters
- Creating and maintaining an inventory of translated forms in target languages
- Establishing district deadlines for providing comprehensive interpreter and translation services by qualified individuals

### Resources

Latino Parent Group: [Holyoke Public Schools and State Settlement](#)

Open Doors for Multicultural Families: [Family Feedback Report on Language Access in Schools](#)

Garcia, O. (2009). Emergent Bilinguals and TESOL: What's in a Name? TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 43(2), pp. 322-326

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27785009>



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# Who are qualified educational interpreters of spoken languages?

Qualified educational spoken language interpreters are professionals who contribute to the provision of meaningful language access across a variety of school settings and situations by interpreting information accurately and ethically. These individuals have passed a language proficiency test in all of the languages they interpret. They have also received training specific to special education procedures, early childhood and K-12 terminology, code of ethics, protocols and standards of practice of interpreting in education, and have mastered interpreting skills and techniques in these settings.

## What are the roles and responsibilities of qualified educational interpreters of spoken languages?

Qualified interpreters in early childhood and K-12 settings support emergent bilingual families and educators as they collaborate to promote student achievement and family engagement. Interpreters and educators collaborate to share and help clarify information for families who are unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system. Education settings often use academic vocabulary, abbreviations and jargon which may cause confusion to all families, including English-speaking families. Trained interpreters help educators to clarify new terminology and school policies for families and promote trusted relationships that lead to meaningful and accurate communication.



## What knowledge and skills are needed by qualified educational interpreters of spoken languages?

Whether communication takes place in person, over the phone or through video, it is important that the interpreter receives training specific to education settings and is culturally and linguistically competent. The interpreter must also have sufficient knowledge of educational terminology and concepts, as well as mastery of interpretation skills and techniques to accurately convey the meaning of the information discussed. To help ensure that these responsibilities are met, NAETISL has developed [a nationally-vetted code of ethics and standards of practice](#) which can serve as a framework for interpreter training in this setting.



## How should school leaders select interpreters based on their knowledge and skill?

In the field of interpreting, the knowledge and skill level of interpreters is typically described using a leveled or tiered framework. Following recommendations from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Interpreter Task Force, and the Language Access Workgroup convened by the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Office of Education Ombuds, NAETISL suggests establishing three tiers of skill level for educational interpreters based on the complexity of the tasks required for the situation. NAETISL strongly recommends that interpreters not be expected to provide services beyond their demonstrated level of knowledge and skills.



## Resources

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: [School Interpreters Task Force – Recommendations](#)

Language Access Workgroup: [Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#)



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# Qualified Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages Tier System

## Tier 1 - Roles and Responsibilities



**WHO:** A Tier 1 interpreter is at a beginning level of knowledge and skill and is prepared to support schools and emergent bilingual families with:

- Basic enrollment activities.
- Communication when a family has a spontaneous visit to a school
- Unplanned communication on the same basis as it is available to English Speakers.
- Parent-teacher conferences to communicate basic student progress.

If the Tier 1 interpreter discovers that the encounter is about a more specialized topic, the Tier 1 interpreter must bring this to the attention of the school staff so that a Tier 2 or Tier 3 interpreter can be requested.

### **QUALIFICATIONS:**

NAETISL recommends that a Tier 1 interpreter, whether the individual is a staff interpreter, other bilingual staff or an independent contractor, possess the core competencies below:

#### **Demonstrated spoken language proficiency in English and other languages of interpretation.**

Language proficiency verification pathway: For individuals that have not served as professional interpreters or who are not certified in other fields of interpretation (medical, legal, etc.), a minimum score of "Advanced-Mid" on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) earned within the prior 5 years; or assessment of language proficiency by a vendor with expertise assessing language competency.

#### **Successful completion of foundational training specific to early childhood and K-12 settings.**

Interpreters new to early childhood and K-12 settings, or those with experience in other fields such as medical and/or legal interpretation, must have specific training related to education settings. Such training must include:

- Basic terminology, abbreviations, jargon used in education settings in English and the other language/languages to be used.
- Overview of the unique roles and responsibilities of the interpreter in an education setting.
- Review of NAETISL's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Interpreters in Education.
- Overview of cultural factors that may influence communication.
- Review of consecutive interpreting techniques and sight translation procedures (see pg. 9 for definitions).

## Resources

NAETISL: [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#)

NAETISL: [Clearinghouse of Resources for Interpreters and Translators](#)



# Qualified Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages Tier System

## Tier 2 - Roles and Responsibilities



**WHO:** A Tier 2 interpreter is at a moderate level of knowledge and skill and is prepared to support schools and emergent bilingual families with:

- Parent-teacher conferences or meetings that involve student support issues.
- Meetings that do not have a legal context.
- Meetings where consecutive\* and sight translation skills\* are essential for communication.

### **QUALIFICATIONS:**

NAETISL recommends that a Tier 2 interpreter, whether the individual is a staff interpreter, other bilingual staff or an independent contractor, possess the core competencies below:

- **Verified minimum Tier 1 skills and competencies.**
- **Demonstrated experience and skills in consecutive\* and sight translation\* in English and the other language(s) to be used.**
- **Knowledge of basic educational concepts and terminology (reading/writing rubrics, attendance protocols, discipline terms, grading) and basic knowledge of special education terms in English and other language(s) used.**
- **Active participation in ongoing professional development and skill-building opportunities specific for interpreters in education.**

### **\*What are consecutive interpretation and sight translation?**

- **Consecutive interpretation** takes place when the speaker says a sentence or two, then pauses while the interpreter repeats the same information in another language. It can take place in person, over the phone or via video conference. Consecutive interpreters take notes in order to capture the entire message accurately and completely.
- **In sight translation**, interpreters read a document (e.g., letters, report cards, special education forms, educational material, etc.) out loud in the language of the emergent bilingual family. Sight translation is a supplemental skill that requires different abilities than consecutive or simultaneous interpreting. Interpreters in Tier 2 may not have yet mastered the skills to sight translate lengthy, technical or legal documents. In addition, it is important to remember that school personnel **must remain present** during the sight translation to clarify or answer any questions from the interpreter or the emergent bilingual family. **One page** is generally considered an appropriate maximum length for sight translation requests.

## Resources

National Council on Interpreting in Health Care Working Papers Series: [Sight translation and Written Translation Guidelines for Healthcare Interpreters](#)



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# Qualified Educational Interpreters of Spoken Languages Tier System

## Tier 3 - Roles and Responsibilities



**WHO:** A Tier 3 interpreter is at the highest level of knowledge and skill and is prepared to support schools and emergent bilingual families with tasks including:

- Academic planning
- Career counseling and post-secondary education
- Transition planning
- Psychoeducational assessments
- Individualized Education Plans
- Section 504 Plans
- Behavior or Safety Intervention Plans
- Functional Behavioral Assessments
- English Learner program placement meetings
- Promotion/retention meetings
- Meetings involving law enforcement or school resource officers (SRO)

- Disciplinary meetings and hearings
- Truancy meetings and hearings
- Meetings involving communication about harassment, intimidation, bullying, discrimination, physical restraint and seclusion of students
- Facilitating parent participation in meetings such as Board Meetings, Parent-Teacher Association meetings, Title I activities, and meetings for which \*simultaneous interpreting may be required

### **QUALIFICATIONS:**

NAETISL recommends that a Tier 3 interpreter, whether the individual is a staff interpreter, other bilingual staff or an independent contractor, possess the core competencies below:

- **Minimum Tier 2 skills and competencies.**
- **Demonstrated experience and skills in \*simultaneous interpretation.**
- **Knowledge of specialized educational terminology (psychoeducational assessments, best practices to work with speech pathologists and school psychologists, mediation/discipline/legal terminology, etc.) in English and the other language(s) used.**
- **Active participation in ongoing professional development and skill-building opportunities specific for interpreters in education.**

Interpreters who already hold certifications in either healthcare or legal interpretation can be considered as Tier 3, provided they acquire specific training in educational terminology and frameworks.

### **\*What is simultaneous interpretation?**

The simultaneous interpreter delivers the speaker's words in real time. Simultaneous interpreting may require interpreters to work in pairs, due to the mental strain of simultaneously listening to one language while speaking in another. Audio and technical equipment is available to make simultaneous interpreting more efficient.

## Resources

European Commission, Knowledge Centre on Interpretation: [What is simultaneous interpreting? What does it entail?](#)





# What are best practices for hiring qualified educational interpreters of spoken languages?



Creating interpreter positions is the best solution to provide language access and equity in school districts. Qualified educational interpreters may be hired externally or internally. Some school districts rely on external agencies to provide these services. If this is the case, external agencies should provide evidence of the interpreter's background and training, which school leaders can compare to the tier framework provided by NAETISL. Interpreters who have been formally trained for legal or healthcare interpretation have advanced skills in the process of interpreting but may require additional training on specific educational vocabulary and frameworks needed to interpret in schools. School leaders may find it necessary to require additional professional development for these individuals prior to contracting them.



For small school districts, a more common resource to provide language access is to collaborate with their existing bilingual school personnel. These individuals often include bilingual staff members who were hired for a role other than interpretation. Having bilingual teachers, parent liaisons, family engagement facilitators, bilingual cultural mediators and others who act as interpreters may be convenient and cost effective for schools, but under no circumstances should these individuals interpret without appropriate verification of language proficiency skills, preparation and ongoing professional development.



More professional and sustainable options include creating interpreter positions among school staff or hiring part- or full-time staff whose sole job responsibility is interpreting. In both cases, these individuals will need to be provided with appropriate training if they are not already qualified. In the case of individuals who have other responsibilities at the school, their employment responsibilities should be fully articulated, including the prioritizing of interpreter tasks during or outside of the typical workday. For example, a school district and a bilingual teacher qualified to interpret may enter into a contractual arrangement for the teacher to provide services when needed at special education meetings, but only outside of the school day so as not to interfere with classroom responsibilities.

**When bilingual school personnel collaborate as interpreters, they must be intentional and specific when identifying their role and responsibilities when interpreting. Any individual serving as an interpreter - including cultural liaisons, parent facilitators, administrators, paraprofessionals, or other bilingual staff called upon to interpret- must fully comply with the interpreter's code of ethics and standards of practice while they are interpreting.**

## Resources

NAETISL: [Working with a Professional Interpreter in Education: Guidelines for School Personnel](#)

NAETISL: [What to Expect from an Interpreter \(13 languages\)](#).



# What steps can school leaders take to improve their language access services?



## Identify families who may need language access support and the languages they speak at home

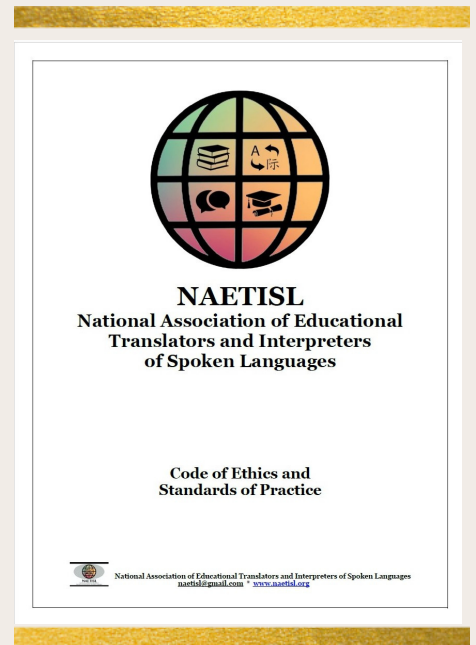
School districts typically use a Home Language Survey upon registration not only to identify a student's primary language but also to determine the language of preference of the parents/caregivers when receiving school communication.

Policies should be established to collect and report family language data to guide the recruitment and training of bilingual school personnel.

## Require that all bilingual individuals in the district who engage in spoken language interpretation with families receive adequate training in the role of the interpreter and have demonstrated competency in interpretation skills

Far too often, individuals without the appropriate skills or training are called upon to provide interpretation services, leading to breakdowns in communication between schools and families. They may not have been screened or asked to document their proficiency in English and their language of interpretation. In addition, these individuals may not have received training in the specific ethics and methodologies for interpretation, or may not be familiar with education terminology.

Now that a set of national standards is available for spoken language interpreters in education, training of bilingual staff in the methods and ethics of interpretation should be a minimum requirement for all districts. Requirements for language proficiency, and knowledge and skill expectations of interpreters should be reflected in each district's written language access policy.



## Resources

- LEP.gov: [I Speak Cards](#)
- NAETISL Professional Development: <https://naetisl.org/professional-development-Home-Language-Survey-Translations>
- <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/cr/elforms.asp>
- <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/Home-Language-Survey.aspx>



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# What steps can school leaders take to improve their language access services?

## Establish a language access plan that specifies how to provide qualified and trained interpreters to serve emergent bilingual families and staff

Clear district policies and procedures on how to access quality interpretation and translation services should be available to staff and families. The policies should specify minimum requirements for any individual providing interpretation or translation services, including that the district will not rely on minors to provide interpretation to families.

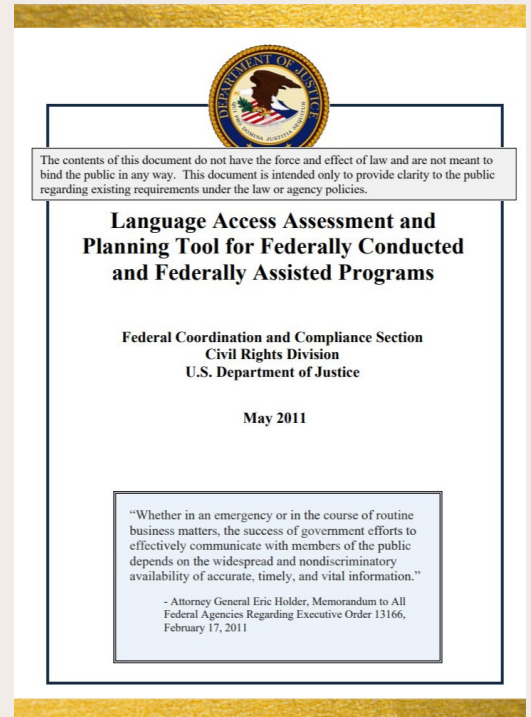
Policies should also specify the use of machine translations for home-school communication including information provided in multiple languages in the school district's website. Machine translation products must always be reviewed and post-edited by a qualified translator.

## Provide readily-available and ongoing training to district staff on language access requirements

This training should include how to arrange for qualified interpreters at district schools, effective ways to collaborate with interpreters, and risks of relying on untrained individuals to communicate with emergent bilingual families. Access [NAETISL's resources](#) to learn about legal requirements to provide language access to emergent bilingual families, and how to collaborate effectively with interpreters, including best practices to work with interpreters on-site, and remotely through over-the-phone and internet-based video interpreting services. Until district staff members successfully complete this training, the services of qualified and trained educational interpreters from external agencies should be used.

## Consult with school district counsel and risk management for legal advice about establishing language access policies and procedures in the district

Procuring legal advice is a smart way to begin to develop or enhance language access policies and procedures. Risk management and legal advice should reflect an awareness of the enforcement of federal language access law by the Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education and by the U.S. Department of Justice. In this way, school leaders can be proactive about providing language access and avoid pitfalls that can not only harm the engagement of emergent bilingual students and families, but result in financial losses for the district.



## Resources

Sample Language Access Plans and Policies:

[Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool for Federally Conducted and Federally Assisted Programs](#)

NYC Department of Education: [Language Access Policy](#)

Buffalo City School District: [Language Access Plan](#)

Bellingham Public Schools: [Language Access Plan](#)



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# What steps can school leaders take to improve their language access services?



## Support the development of a national certification process for spoken language interpreters and translators in education

For interpreting, as for many other professions, earning approval from a national certification process allows individuals to show that they have met evidence-based criteria which reflect standards of practice in their field. This is different from obtaining a certificate upon completion of a workshop or professional development module. Certification candidates are required to demonstrate knowledge and skills in various components such as content knowledge, vocabulary specific to their field, code of ethics pertinent to their profession, and interpretation skills. National and state standards exist for individuals providing sign language interpretation in public schools, interpretation services in our state courts, medical facilities and social services.

NAETISL is now developing a similar process to certify individuals providing spoken language interpretation services in schools. After establishing a nationally-vetted Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, NAETISL and its committees are working on developing a pilot test to provide a certification path for interpreters. Our national certification test will include the following components:

- A written test in English (ethics, roles, vocabulary and compensation techniques such as asking for clarification, repetitions, professional introduction of the interpreter's role, and more)
- A sight translation test with two components: English to non-English language and non-English language to English
- Consecutive Interpretation Test (education terminology, protocols, vocabulary, idioms / slang, preservation of register, etc.)
- Simultaneous interpretation test from English to the non-English language

From the first phase in the test development process, NAETISL has worked with subject matter experts and speakers of less-commonly spoken languages in specific communities to ensure the inclusion of as many languages as possible in the certification process.

## At NAETISL, we know that:

1

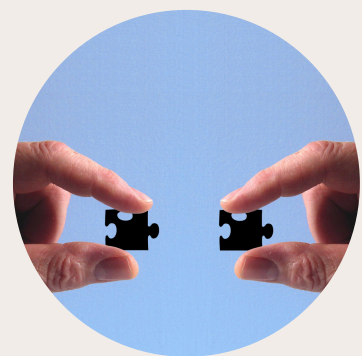
When schools, families and communities work together, students do better in school and are more likely to complete and enjoy their education.

2

Providing emergent bilingual families access to qualified interpreters and translated materials is a requirement of the law and an integral part of school-community relations.

3

Beyond language access for individual families, educators, and school personnel, having trained and qualified interpreters ensures that emergent bilingual families using these services have an equal footing and chance to participate meaningfully in the education of their students and support their academic achievement.



# VISION

In order to engage in their student's education, emergent bilingual families must receive the basic opportunity to share and understand information and concerns that are vital to their child's well-being, health, safety, and education.

Language rights are civil rights which are inextricably linked to the rights of students. If we have a genuine interest in providing a free and appropriate education for all students, then our commitment should also extend to meaningfully including all families as a critical part of their support base. Language access policies and practices must be centered in inclusive schooling practices and promoted as an integral piece to preserving the rights all families have to accessing the full benefits of public education in this country.

Family engagement, through quality communication, is a core component in strategies to eliminate the opportunity gap and appears in social justice goals that seek to disrupt discriminatory systems that perpetuate disparate outcomes based on race, ethnicity, and country of origin.

## **NAETISL believes:**

...that emergent bilingual students, their families, and the educators that support them, should have access to, and be able to collaborate with, professional, highly qualified, and nationally certified educational translators and interpreters of spoken languages.

## **NAETISL acknowledges:**

...the impact of professional, highly qualified, and nationally certified educational translators and interpreters of spoken languages, on family engagement and student achievement in early childhood and K-12 education.

## **NAETISL promotes:**

... high standards of ethical practice and professional integrity of educational translators and interpreters of spoken languages in early childhood and K-12 education, by developing and disseminating the academic and professional credentials required to attain and maintain a national certification in the field.

## **NAETISL advocates:**

...for emergent bilingual students, families, school districts, school administrators, teachers, educational translators and interpreters of spoken languages, and other community stakeholders, by striving to enhance the quality of translation and interpretation through the promotion of high standards, best practices, and accountability.

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