

Guidelines for School Personnel Collaborating with Interpreters



It is important that schools take extra steps to communicate with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Bilingual school staff may be able to help with casual communication. For meetings such as parent-teacher conferences, special education meetings, disciplinary hearings and others, it is necessary to take more deliberate steps to protect the integrity of the information. Here are some suggestions when collaborating with a professional interpreter in education:

- Remember: **Speaking the target language does not ensure** that a person will be a good interpreter.
- **Students should not be asked to interpret** as they may not have the language skills necessary to transfer messages from one language to another, and may be inclined to omit or edit crucial information for parents. When acting as interpreters, children may also be placed in an awkward situation which may disrupt family roles.
- Speak with the interpreter prior to the meeting to discuss goals, terminology and background. Share any documents that you will be reviewing during the meeting. Professional Interpreters in Education abide by a **Code of Ethics** that requires them to protect student and family information.
- Professional Interpreters in Education **should introduce themselves** explaining that all information will be kept confidential, that everything heard will be interpreted, and that they will be impartial members of the meeting. This information should be relayed to both, the school personnel and the bilingual/multilingual family.
- Advise the group that **only one person will speak at a time**. It is hard to interpret multiple conversations and the goal is to ensure that bilingual/multilingual families and schools have all the information they need.
- **Speak directly** to the parties involved, not the interpreter.
- Ensure comprehension by asking, through the interpreter, if the bilingual/multilingual family understands what you are saying. **Do not depend upon the interpreter to ensure understanding**. The interpreter is there to deliver messages in both languages. Feel free to ask the interpreter to clarify or rephrase any information.
- **Pause frequently** to allow the interpreter to relay thoughts in meaningful “chunks.” While your message may be short, interpreted messages are often much longer. The interpreter may request that speakers pause if the speech is occurring too quickly or if a term is unknown.
- **Avoid long, complex sentences**, slang, jargon and abbreviations. Humor can often be difficult to interpret.
- Professional Interpreters in Education **will speak in first person** to emphasize their impartiality in the meeting.
- Many people with some fluency in English may still prefer to use an interpreter due to the complexity of educational terms. Please **don't assume that a family does not speak or understand English**.
- Allow time for the family to provide additional information and ask questions. **It is important that families feel that they have been heard**.
- Professional Interpreters in Education can also be cultural mediators and can help you navigate through cultural dilemmas. However, **they are not experts in all cultures**.
- As a neutral party of the meeting, Professional Interpreters in Education **cannot provide their opinions**, suggestions or advice. Interpreters can provide cultural/language insight before or after the meeting if needed.
- Monitor the quality of communication. **Stop and make adjustments** at the first signs of miscommunication. More direct communication can be accomplished when you stay focused on the bilingual/multilingual family and their verbal and non-verbal communication.
- **When you are supported** by a Professional Interpreter in Education, you should be able to forget that you and the bilingual/multilingual family are speaking two different languages!

For more information about effective ways to collaborate with spoken language interpreters please visit: <https://naetisl.org/resources>

