

Holding Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meetings with English Language Learner (ELL) Families and Interpreters

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings depend on good communication between parents and special ed service providers. When parents do not speak English, schools must bring in an interpreter to ensure that team members understand each other and that parents can give informed consent. Even when the team invites an excellent interpreter, however, things can still go wrong.

Following are tips on how to conduct effective IEP meetings when an interpreter is involved. These tips are based on input from experienced special education interpreters and from parents.

Before the Meeting — Briefing

The case manager or other person who will lead the IEP meeting talks with the interpreter ahead of time to review:

- The purpose of the meeting.
- Tentative agenda.
- Relevant background information.
- Any technical terms that will be used.
- Who will be at the meeting.
- Seating arrangements.
- How the interpreter will be introduced.
- Style of interpretation – consecutive or simultaneous.

Also give the interpreter a chance to read through any written materials that he/she will be asked to orally interpret during the meeting.

Interpreting styles: “Consecutive” means one person speaks a few sentences, then pauses for interpretation. “Simultaneous” means that the interpreter sits next to the family and quietly interprets what is said as the person is speaking. Some interpreters and families are more comfortable with one style or the other.

During the Meeting — the Interaction

Introduce the Interpreter: explain that the school has invited an interpreter to help the parents communicate because special ed uses a lot of technical terminology that is difficult for many parents to understand. Discuss what style of interpretation will be used.

- Explain that everything that is said is confidential, but that the interpreter will interpret everything that is said.
- Explain that the interpreter's role in this IEP meeting is to facilitate communication; he/she will not give advice or opinions.
- Ask participants to avoid side conversations, unnecessary jargon, and to pause every few sentences.
- Explain that the interpreter will ask for rephrasing or clarification when necessary.

Questions: At the beginning of the meeting, encourage the parents to ask questions whenever they like. Ask for questions several times during the meeting.

Face the family: Team members should face the family and direct their words to them.

Use first person language: Talk the way you would to any family. Say "I assessed Jose on March 3." Don't say "tell the family that..."

Speak plainly: Don't use ambiguous language. If the team feels that the child has a disability, families need to understand this fact clearly.

Be patient: it takes time to interpret. Technical terms in English don't exist in many languages: something said in one word in English might take many words in other languages (and vice versa).

Speak one at a time: the interpreter can't do his/her job if several people talk at once.

Getting signatures: If you want parents to sign a consent form, provide a copy written in their language if possible. Put the form in parents' hands and give the interpreter time to go over it so parents know what they are signing. Explain that services cannot begin until they sign, but that they can change their mind at a later date.

At the end of the meeting:

- Summarize any decisions made and ask parents again if they have questions.
- Explain exactly what will happen next and when.
- Tell the family whom to contact if they think of questions in the next few days. Have a plan for interpretation if they call in with questions.

Documentation:

- Include the interpreter in the list of team members present at the meeting.

- Tape record sessions, particularly if the interpreter interprets an evaluation report or IEP goals.

After the Meeting — Debriefing

The case manager should stay and talk with the interpreter for a few minutes after the meeting. This is the time to ask the interpreter if he/she has any impressions about what happened during the meeting or if there are any questions.

If the case manager was puzzled or confused by anything that the interpreter did, ask for clarification. Also ask the interpreter if everything went well from his/her perspective; talk about what can be done better next time.

Selecting an Interpreter

Schools find interpreters to assist with IEP meetings in a variety of ways. Whichever route is used, remember that good interpreting for special education requires knowledge and experience. The licensed staff also need to learn how to work with the interpreter — the goal is to work together as a team. *Whenever possible, use the same interpreters consistently for special education.*

Online database: *The Minnesota Department of Education maintains an online searchable database of interpreters.* [View the database \(http://education.state.mn.us/InterpreterDB\)](http://education.state.mn.us/InterpreterDB).

School employees: *Many school employees are also asked to work as interpreters. Be certain they have the necessary skills in both languages and that they have training in special education.*

Agencies: There are many professional interpreting agencies. Ask what type of training is provided for agency employees and whether staff have had any training or prior experience with special education.

For Further Information

Check out *The ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation*, particularly Chapter 5 on “Cultural Liaisons, Interpreters and Translators.” Contact Elizabeth.Watkins@state.mn.us

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