Employment Standards for Our Students' Interpreters: Lacking and Badly Needed

By Laurie A. Bolster, Leilani J. Johnson, and Marty M. Taylor

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Interpreters are some of the most important people in the lives of our deaf and hard of hearing students, yet hiring and retention requirements are weak, variable, or nonexistent. Despite this, many school interpreters have become skillful and effective professionals driven by their desire for competence and sense of integrity. State employment standards, however, have created a national emergency regarding interpreting services for our students. Establishing and strengthening standards to ensure high quality interpreting services is an urgent need in public schools. This article is about what is happening in schools and what change is needed.

Many deaf and hard of hearing students require sign language interpreting services to access a free appropriate public education. Interpreters provide the communication bridge between our students and everyone else in the school environment—peers, teachers, coaches, administrative staff, and other personnel. The individualized nature of children's evolving language, communication goals, academic learning needs, and social-emotional maturity requires specialized knowledge and advanced interpreting skills, especially when interpreting for younger students. When interpreter knowledge and/or skills are deficient, our students are excluded from equitable participation in the language-rich environments of public schools, limiting their learning opportunities and social development.

When "sign language interpreting" is added to an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the educational team members, including the student's parents, assume effective communication is occurring. This includes access to teacher-driven lessons, after-school activities, peer interactions, and the services of speech-language pathologists, school nurses, and other professionals. Too often school interpreting is inadequate, and sometimes incomprehensible or even erroneous. Students who are supposed to be provided a ramp into language-rich environments instead face an additional barrier.

Photos courtesy of the University of Northern Colorado photography staff

Above: Interpreters provide the communication bridge between students and their peers, teachers, coaches, administrative staff, and other personnel in the school.

In 2004, the revised IDEA added educational interpreters as one of 11 categories of related services personnel (or RSP, including audiologists, counselors, and speech-language pathologists). These professionals work alongside teachers supporting students. In 2024, interpreters are the only RSP group that is not held to commonly accepted professional standards. The major reason is that interpreters are typically not hired or compensated as professionals and, despite the law, K-12 interpreters are not expected to meet the employment standards required of other professionals in public schools.

North America's Professions *Built on Established Foundations*

RSPs require specific foundations that individuals must document and maintain to be recognized as members of that profession. The four foundations of professional endeavor are typically recognized as:

- Academic preparation
- Professional credentialing
- Continuing education
- Informed supervision and oversight

The first two foundations are necessary for entry-level professionals prior to being hired for the school environment. The next two foundations occur after interpreters are on the job. State education agencies are responsible for setting standards for hiring and retaining educational interpreters. By federal law, these standards are to be made publicly available.

In a 2021 national review of state education agencies' employment standards (Johnson et al., 2023), requirements varied widely among the 50 states and Washington, D.C. No state addressed all four foundations in their published standards. Six states had no published employment standard at all for school interpreters. Worse, states have exceptions allowing schools to hire individuals for our students who could not meet their state's minimum standard for interpreters.

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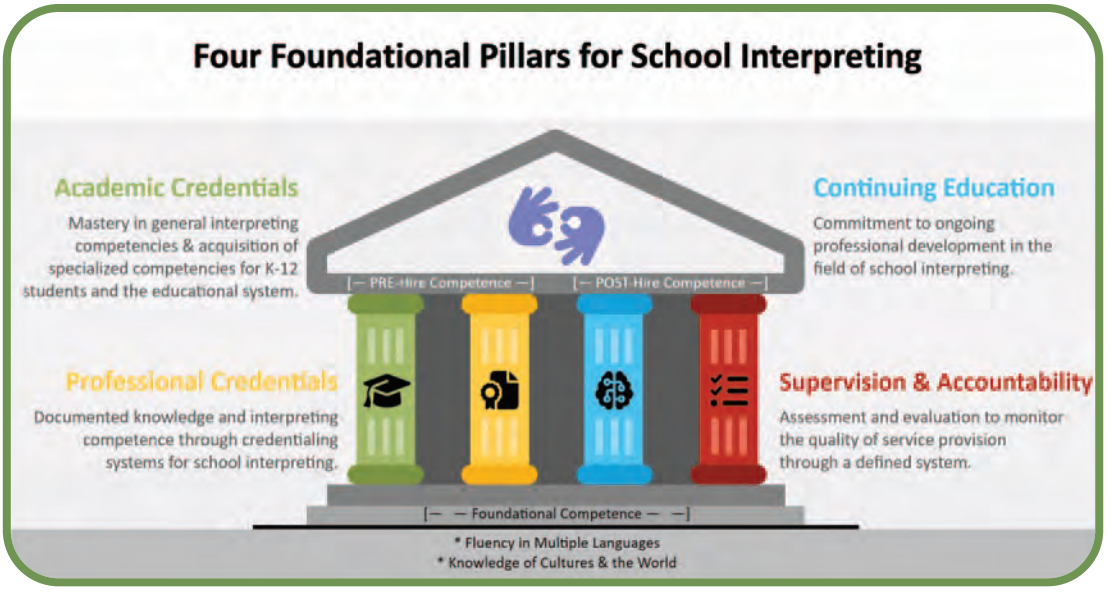
On behalf of the authors, Bolster welcomes questions and comments about this article at *LBolster@protonmail.com*.



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Left: The four foundational pillars for school interpreting are pre-hire and post-hire requirements that individuals must document and maintain to be recognized as members of that profession.

Prior to Employment

Academic Preparation and Professional Credentials

School interpreters should be some of the highest qualified practitioners in the interpreting profession. Their educational interpreting coursework should include child and language development, the impact of a hearing loss, learning theory, teaching/tutoring strategies, and working as a team member within school systems. They should have advanced expressive and receptive American Sign Language (ASL) and English proficiencies and be able to move seamlessly between interpreting and transliterating to accommodate students' individual language abilities, complexity of course content, expectation of class participation, and relationships of individuals with whom they interact.

To effectively interpret throughout the school day, interpreters continually assess a child's overall language, comprehension and expression related to meaning and intent. Appropriately prepared interpreters can contribute these insights to the IEP team, make recommendations about communication that works well for the child, and identify issues that need further consideration.

Right: Interpreters should have advanced expressive and receptive ASL and English proficiencies and be able to move seamlessly between interpreting and transliterating to accommodate students' needs.

Academic Credentials

A bachelor's degree, preferably in educational interpreting, is the minimum for a professional interpreter in a school setting. However, only three states required classroom interpreters to have a bachelor's degree in any discipline in 2021. Seven states required an associate's degree. Nine states specified a high school diploma or GED. Thirty-two states (including the District of Columbia) had no published minimum academic preparation required. This means that students in 41 states could have had an interpreter who was less academically prepared for specific course content than they were.

Professional Credentials

The Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) has both a knowledge test and a skill assessment, and it is the

most common evaluative system in the United States specifically designed for K-12 school interpreters. [See EIPA sidebar.] Prior to beginning their work in schools, interpreters should demonstrate successful completion of the EIPA Written Test and a minimum average score of 4.0 on the 5-point skill assessment. However, in the 2021 count, only 19 states required successful completion of the EIPA Written Test, and 42 states required, or included as an option, the EIPA Skills Assessment in their published employment standards. An EIPA average score of 4.0 was specified by only 11 states; other states set an average score of 3.0 or 3.5 on the 5-point scale, which is utterly inadequate for full access to the language-rich academic environment.

On the Job

Continuing Education and Oversight

Continuing education and oversight are two commonly accepted aspects of professional life. Most educational professionals expect to take higher education coursework or professional training to maintain their credentials, as well as for retention and advancement in the workplace. This was not the case for school interpreters in 2021.

Continuing Education

Interpreters, like other professionals who work in education, should engage with and be supported in lifelong learning. They should be expected to meet standards like other RSPs to maintain and renew their credentials, as well as for retention and advancement in the school system. However, expectations for interpreters are highly variable regarding type, frequency, and substance and, as of 2021, 26 states (including Washington, D.C.) had no published requirements at all for continuing education.

Informed Supervision and Oversight

As most school interpreters are hired without having appropriate academic and professional interpreting foundations, they must receive informed supervision by a knowledgeable member of their field. However, no state has published a supervision and accountability system for school interpreters. Weirick (2021) found that only 23 percent of interpreters received any knowledgeable supervision, meaning 77 percent of the nation's interpreters work autonomously. They—and too often our deaf and hard of hearing students—are on their own.

When interpreter knowledge and/or skills are deficient, our students are excluded from equitable participation in the language-rich environments of public schools, limiting their learning opportunities and social development.

How Low Can the Bar Go?

In addition to missing or inadequate employment standards, some states take two other actions that have a harmful effect on our students.

First, most states permit schools to hire interpreters who cannot meet the state standards by calling them "temporary," "provisional," "emergency," or "developmental." Some systems allow that status to be renewed for years. When the renewals are finally exhausted, another unqualified person may be hired, basically to start their "on-the-job training." On-the-job training cannot "catch up" individuals who do not have the necessary knowledge and skill foundations to begin interpreting work; it simply lowers the bar for the entire workforce. Fitzmaurice (in Johnson et al., 2023) showed that in a state with no published standard, after five years of state-sponsored, free of charge workshops, classes, mentoring, and EIPA testing, the interpreting workforce showed negligible improvement in their interpreting skills and on average remained at well below acceptable competencies.

Second, instead of hiring qualified interpreters, schools sometimes reclassify interpreting positions as "sign language assistants," "communication aides," and "signing paraprofessionals." Regardless of the title, these individuals are assumed by others in the environment to function as interpreters. In fact, such "interpreting services" force deaf and hard of hearing students to make their own sense of whatever these non-professionals provide.

A Cautionary Tale

These types of practices have already resulted in a successful administrative complaint and lawsuit. In 2023, Miguel Luna Perez, from Michigan, sued the school district for monetary damages when he and his parents learned he was so poorly educated that he could not graduate with a high school diploma. The administrative complaint was settled when the school agreed to provide an additional year of schooling, but they fought the simultaneous ADA lawsuit—maintaining that Perez had no right to sue until all remedies under IDEA were resolved. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled against the school system, saying nothing in law prevented lawsuits under both IDEA and ADA simultaneously, and returned the case to the lower courts for financial resolution. Perez may still receive the compensation he asked for, but he is an adult now. His youth has passed. His right to access a language-rich environment for his first 12 years of education has been lost (RID/NAIE, 2023).

Left: Skilled school interpreters strengthen students in every way—in learning, information processing, interactive skills, and social-emotional maturity.

The case of Luna Perez shows how sub-standard interpreting services can continue for a student's entire public school life. The cumulative effect is deficient and fragmented access to communication, resulting in learning failures compounded year after year. This type of failure is generally invisible to school personnel and parents.

The Bottom Line
Our Students Deserve Better

Interpreters are critical. Skilled school interpreters strengthen students in every way—in learning, information processing, interactive skills, and social-emotional maturity. We must require that the state education agencies embrace and enforce standards for interpreters as they have for other RSPs; that means academic preparation and professional credentials prior to hiring, and continuing education and informed oversight once they are on the job.

In 2019, the National Association of Interpreters in Education (NAIE) published the *Professional Guidelines for Interpreting in Educational Settings* (*https://naiedu.org/guidelines/*) using the four foundations for school interpreters discussed in Johnson et al. (2018). The NAIE has advocated for standards that would ensure quality interpreting services for our students, but state education agencies are either unaware or have chosen to disregard them. NAIE now maintains a map of state education agencies' employment standards for the nation's school interpreters (*https://naiedu.org/state-standards/*).

Everyone—parents/caregivers, students, school personnel, and decision makers—concerned with the education of our deaf and hard of hearing students must take a stand. Without access provided by truly qualified interpreters, our students cannot take advantage of the language-rich school environments to which they are entitled. Not just their education—which is critical—but their cognitive and social development are also at stake.

Now, after decades of talking, it is time to act. There are some schools that employ highly qualified interpreters who perform as professional members of the educational team. We must demand states adopt the four foundations identified for school interpreters to make certain that level of interpreting service becomes the norm for all of our deaf and hard of hearing students.

Authors' note: This article is based on research published in 2023 in Complexities in Educational Interpreting: An Investigation into Patterns of Practice *(2nd ed.), which was co-authored with three other authors.*

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A Look at Interpreting Assessment: The EIPA

By Laurie A. Bolster, Leilani J. Johnson, and Marty M. Taylor

The Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) has a written and an interpreting skills component. The EIPA is psychometrically valid and reliable, having undergone continuous reviews and revisions over the last 30+ years to maintain reliability and validity.

The EIPA Written Test is pass/fail, measuring interpreters' knowledge of nine education-related topics. These are: child language development, culture, education, English, interpreting, linguistics, literacy and tutoring, professionalism, and technology. Each topic is scored 0-100 percent.

Analyzing approximately 800 interpreters' tests showed the mean scores ranged from 70-85 percent in the different categories (Johnson et al., 2023). Due to which topics an interpreter may have low scores in, it is imperative for those hiring interpreters to scrutinize applicants' scores *per category* to ensure they are appropriate to support a specific student's needs. If a student is struggling with English, for instance, an interpreter with a low score in English may not be able to effectively provide the support the student deserves and the parents expect.

The EIPA Performance Assessment measures 39 proficiencies in sign language and English, using a 5.0 Likert scale, in four categories (Vocabulary, Voice to Sign, Sign to Voice, and Overall Factors). Professionally prepared school interpreters should demonstrate a minimum overall average rating of 4.0 out of 5.0. This is the EIPA score needed to provide more equitable access to a language-rich environment. (See Cates, 2021; Fitzmaurice, 2017; Girardin, 2023; Schick et al., 2006; Williamson, 2020.)

The averaging of the four EIPA skills categories to create the Overall Score is problematic. Frequently, an especially high rating in Vocabulary can pull the overall EIPA score up, even with unacceptably low ratings in Sign to Voice, Voice to Sign, and/or Overall Factors (e.g., message cohesion, coherence, and completeness). That average score might technically satisfy the state employment standard, but clearly vocabulary alone (e.g., knowing a lot of signs and words) will not create comprehensible messages for the student.

If Voice to Sign Interpreting (e.g., teacher talking to student) is weak, the person interpreting cannot reliably produce grammatically intact sentences and paragraphs, and the student receives less than meaningful information. If Sign to Voice Interpreting (e.g., student signing to teacher/others) is weak, it might be incorrect, incomplete, or sound odd. That can result in incongruous visual responses to the student from others, confusing and embarrassing them, and leading them to withdraw from further participation. The Overall Factors score documents the interpreter's level of knowledge and skills necessary to adapt language and information by delivering rich, conceptually intact equivalent messages to an individual student in a specific situation. And, in turn, these interpreters can do the same when the student is expected to interact with teachers, peers, and staff.

Readers are strongly encouraged to review the contrasting videos and written transcriptions comparing an interpreted message as conveyed at EIPA overall average scores of 2.5, 3.0, 3.5, and 4.0 at *https://eipa.boystown.org/eipa-levels-in-action.*

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