

Solutions in educational interpreting



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Afaf Steiert

Traditionally, educational interpreting has engaged interpreters who recently completed their training. The field is often used as an entry point for an interpreting career. In recent years, some US states have set the bar higher for educational multilingual and sign language interpreters, who

must have licensure and specific credentials like the Educational Interpreters Performance Assessment. Various states have also gone as far as establishing their own testing to ensure interpreters have a minimal skill set to adequately provide services within their communities.

In general, educational interpreting falls under the umbrella of community interpreting. The International Standards Organization (ISO) defines community interpreting as “bidirectional interpreting that takes place in communicative settings among speakers of different languages for the purpose of accessing community services.” No formal definition exists, at this stage, for educational interpreting, but a suggested definition is: a specialization of community interpreting that facilitates access to educational services in schools and other educational settings.

States with the highest employment level in the occupation of educational interpreting are found in Table 1, with national levels found in Figure 1.

State	Employment	Employment per thousand jobs	Location quotient	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage
California	8,670	0.52	1.39	\$26.70	\$55,540
Texas	4,850	0.41	1.09	\$24.81	\$51,600
Florida	3,110	0.37	0.99	\$20.85	\$43,370
New York	2,700	0.29	0.79	\$31.38	\$65,270
Arizona	2,550	0.94	2.53	\$19.88	\$41,340

Table 1: Highest number of educational interpreters by state. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics.

Table 1 provides an interesting snapshot of the employment situation for several states within this occupation. In California, the Orange County Department of Education took several steps to promote language access, specifically by supporting the translators and interpreters who provide the critical language bridge. The most eye-opening detail was the immense demand for translation and interpreting services.

- ◆ 77% of school districts in Orange County, California have monthly requests for interpreting and translation.

- ◆ 82% of these requests are for individualized education plan or program meetings, which are part of the special education process.

- ◆ 76% of these requests were related to meetings of the English Learners Advisory Committee, District English Learners Advisory Committee and the Local Control Accountability Plan.

- ◆ 66% of requests involved communicating with the family of students.

- ◆ As a result, an interpreter of the year award was established and California became involved in creating an annual interpreters and translators conference, providing training for trainers, defining ethical practices and standardizing educational terminology.

On the level of the individual, it is very important to be conscious of the responsibility that comes with educational interpreting — what is being spoken affects the life and the future of children during and after their education. With steadily increasing numbers of families migrating around the world, the education system is one of the most important concerns for a family trying to integrate into a new country and society. The interpreter should demon-

strate the ability to handle such delicate situations and have undergone interpreter training in order to adapt to such situations. Too often, however, it seems the typical scenario reflects a lack of quality control in how interpreting is being handled. The interpreters find themselves trying to deliver culturally adept information and choices pertaining to the child's education without a set of guidelines to follow.

Several pilot programs have been started at different institutions because of this. At Viterbo University, a mentoring pilot program was begun. Students were required to participate in the project and reflect on data-driven research about interpreting in the community. Although research is sometimes about trial, error and improved methods followed by re-experimentation, the students at Viterbo are now much better prepared for having a chance to work out in the field — in real-world settings that involve facing students, parents and teachers. Shadowing and mentoring programs are good methods to assure delivery of quality interpreting. The interpreter has to be well-trained and experienced to deliver information concerning the child's educational and intellectual progress in a correct manner to the parents. The interpreter must also be prepared to relate the questions of the parents to teachers or others present during parent-student-teacher meetings, including specialists from Social Services, the principal, vice principal or other education district officials.

Sometimes, the child will attend a meeting where they understand the language spoken at a high-proficiency level, but the parent requires interpreting. Having an interpreter can help not only for any comprehension difficulties with the English language, but can also provide a

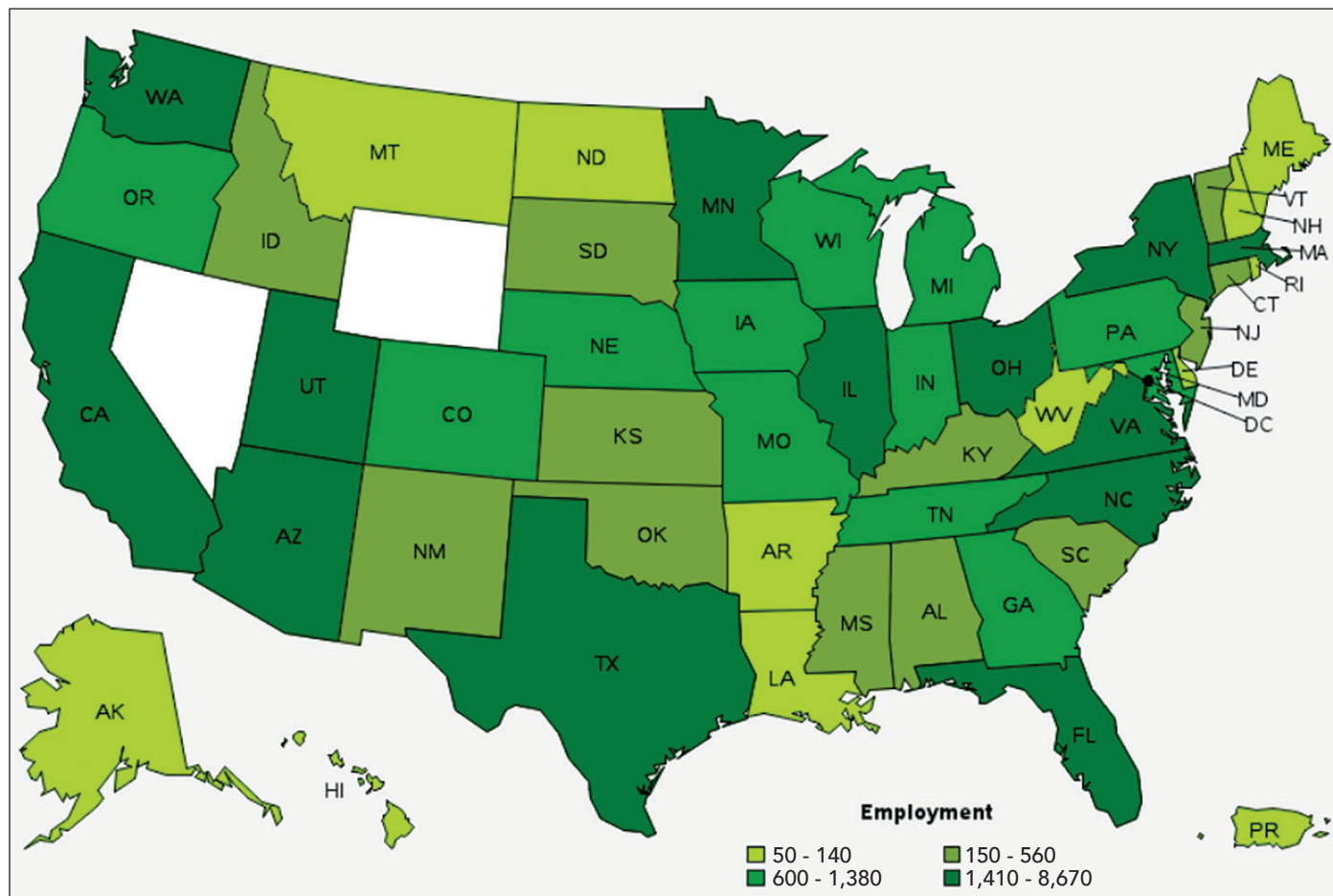


Figure 1: Educational interpreters by state. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, www.bls.gov/oes/2017/may/oes273091.htm

clearer understanding of the education system in the United States, which can be very different from other countries. This is particularly true with regard to standardized testing and evaluations of the child's academic and social skills.

Once I started interpreting, it was challenging for me to do the assessment evaluation for kindergarteners. We are required to provide interpretation of the evaluation questions without providing any help or suggestions to the student. During one of the assignments, the child had arrived to the United States a few weeks prior. He felt confused and stared at me with wide eyes, surprised that I was speaking to him in his native language.

As a professional interpreter, I needed to make sure that the child trusted me, so that he would answer "my" questions, as relayed through the education specialists, even though I was a stranger to him. He asked me: "how did you arrive to this school from Egypt?" I explained to him, "I came the same way you arrived to the United States — with an airplane." Experience may be needed to connect with the child and interpret their answers to all the questions in the assessment.

It can be difficult to certify interpreters in a single field such as legal, medical or educational interpreting. It is important not to limit the interpreters' capabilities and terminology skills to one field alone; rather a

more diverse and creative pool of interpreters is created when exposed to different subject areas by encouraging interpreters to attend different workshops to learn new terminology and new rules in the interpreting system. Avoiding over-specialization helps prevent interpreters from becoming too limited and encourages the interpreter to engage in continued learning.

Attending district meetings can also help interpreters become familiar with the school staff and ask questions to help improve the understanding of terminology (especially questions concerning the ever-increasing use of new acronyms utilized by educational specialists during parent-student-teacher meetings).

In some cases, for example, the parent may not understand the difference between a special education class and the general education class. Sometimes, during Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings, the parent does not want the child to leave the school to move forward to middle school or to another class, as the child is happy with the teacher and has no complaints. But of course, the child needs to progress. In other cases, the interpreter encounters the opposite situation, finding it difficult to explain in suitable cultural terms to the parent that their child is in need of special attention due to a particular disability, as the parent often argues that the child is fine and has no special needs. During IEP meetings, the role of the interpreter needs to be clear to allow a cultural bridge to be built between the parent and the school staff, and to explain the school system to the parent as a method of improving the child's educational capability. Parents may not realize the ways that education will provide building blocks for the future of the child throughout their time in the school system, leading up to becoming a professional as an adult.

As school districts across the nation struggle to fulfill language access requirements and the needs of their diverse multilingual families, our profession needs to step up, make space and provide specific resources for this new cohort of colleagues. Even if the language interpreter before or after us does not behave in a professional manner, we can still break the cycle with our own behavior. Besides education, a student's school life can often involve multiple facets. Community interpreters can facilitate deeper connection between the student and the school, be it through understanding what the student is struggling with or being able to communicate any problems

that may arise. By missing out on clear communication, problems will be left unsolved or be allowed to escalate. Likewise, with the parents, if the child feels safe and is being understood, the parents can build trust into the school system as well. This establishes a three-way connection between the school, parent and student.

It is my hope that educational interpreters and translators will soon receive the same recognition and support as those translators working in legal and medical settings. The impact of a translator in academic settings may seem small, but if more language interpreters start being accountable, eventually, the field of educational interpreting will earn the respect it deserves.

Community and education interpreting is a rewarding experience. Professionally, we can use simultaneous, consecutive and sight translation all in one assignment where we are helping a family integrating in the local community. Most of these families have immigrated to the United States with a primary goal of providing a better education and better future for their kids.

The small challenges may be frustrating — for instance, the school administration needs to understand the importance of sending accurate requests for interpreting to save the district money. Agencies can help improve interpreting services by working together with school districts to avoid notorious last-minute appointments that often result in no-shows on the side of parents or students. It is important to send the most suitable and experienced interpreter for each assignment.

A child's life is in the hands of a community working together to create a better future for everybody. Even a single interpreting session can make a big difference for a student and their parents. [M]



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