



June 23, 2023

Dear House Chair Garlick, Senate Chair Lewis and other members of the Joint Education Committee,

On behalf of the Multistate Association for Bilingual Education's (MABE) and the Coalition for Equity, Diversity and Disability (CEDD), a coalition formed for interdisciplinary collaboration to address the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students with disabilities and their families, we would like to express support for H.437/S.253, *An Act relative to the training, assessment, and assignment of qualified school interpreters in educational settings*. We agree that this legislation would help establish a long-awaited statewide training system and workforce development opportunity that will meet the demand for qualified school interpreters and translators. Due to the requirements of the federal and state special education laws to provide translations of key documents, we believe it is critical to expand the structure of trained qualified interpreters to include trained qualified translators. Translators replace written messages in one language with the same messages in another language, while interpreters convert messages from one language to another orally.

MABE and the CEDD are committed to the view that access to oral and written language access is essential to ensure meaningful family engagement and address the widening achievement and opportunity gaps. This proposal is consistent with the **unanimous** recommendations of the 2019 DESE-led Task Force formed (and of which MABE and CEDD were members of) pursuant to § 81, ch. 154 of the acts of 2018 regarding the training and credentialing of school interpreters and translators. Task Force members recommended the following:

- Establishment of a tiered system for training, assessment, and determining the qualifications of school interpreters and translators,
- Development of an effective, comprehensive school interpreter and translator training curriculum, and
- Provision of statewide school interpreter and translator training.

Nearly 30% of students across the Commonwealth come from families whose first language is not English. Despite well-established federal and state legal requirements to provide competent interpreters, families throughout the Commonwealth continue to face significant language access barriers. The harm from these barriers has only been exacerbated by the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant communities.

Many school districts rely on untrained employees or volunteers who are unqualified as interpreters and unprepared to effectively interpret information crucial for parents to make informed decisions about their children's education. These staff are often unfamiliar with the terminology being used and may not be fluent in both languages, yet they are asked to interpret for meetings regarding expulsion, special education, and other important matters. This directly impacts their children's access to a high quality, appropriate education.

This bill will help districts implement language access requirements of federal and state law. The US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has stated that schools must: “provide language assistance to LEP parents effectively with appropriate, competent staff... It is not sufficient for the staff merely to be bilingual.” OCR has further clarified that individuals acting as interpreters must be trained in interpreter ethics, confidentiality, and have knowledge of specialized terms and concepts in both languages. Massachusetts DESE has also issued guidance echoing these principles.

We thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,

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