

A Case for National Certification:

Sign Language Interpreters Working in K-12 Education

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Approved by the NAIE Board of Directors, June 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Definitions.....	2
Legal Foundations of Educational Interpreter Qualifications.....	3
IDEA Sec. 300.156 Personnel qualifications.....	4
Professional Standards.....	6
NAIE Professional Standards.....	7
State Requirements.....	8
Benefits of National Certification.....	10
Improve DHH Student Outcomes.....	11
Improve Working Conditions for Interpreters.....	12
Improve Hiring & Management Practices.....	13
Recommendations Moving Forward.....	14
References.....	15

[for educational interpreters] The absence of standardized training, higher education programs, certification, and state-level requirements has given rise to numerous challenges, ultimately impacting the educational outcomes of deaf and hard-of-hearing students across the United States.

Introduction

The field of sign language interpreting encompasses a wide range of environments, including education, legal, business, medical and more. Among these settings, K-12 education presents unique complexities that demand specialized knowledge and abilities from interpreters. Unlike other professions in the education field, however, the path to becoming a professional interpreter in K-12 settings, known as an ***educational interpreter***, is far from straightforward. The absence of standardized training, higher education programs, certification, and state-level requirements has given rise to numerous challenges, ultimately impacting the educational outcomes of deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students across the United States.

In contrast, other human service and practice professions have achieved professionalization by establishing acceptable qualifications, best practices, ethical guidelines, and standardized national credentials that are legally enforced by states. This publication aims to shed light on the progress made by the educational interpreting field in its journey toward professionalization, while also identifying the work that remains to be done.

Definitions

Practice professions refers to occupations that adhere to a set of *professional standards* and are defined by a nationally-recognized professional association. Examples of practice professions include psychologists, social workers, audiologists, speech language pathologists, school counselors, school nurses, and physical and occupational therapists.

Professional standards define the scope and nature of the profession, including the ethical framework that guides the practice. Professional standards outline the specialized knowledge required to be considered a professional confirmed through academic credentials, certification exams, and continuing education requirements. Professional standards tend to inform policies that regulate a profession as well as higher education programs that focus on the profession.

Certification is issued by a non-governmental certifying body. Obtaining certification is voluntary but may be required by states for licensing purposes. Certification provides the public with assurance that a professional has met the knowledge and skill standards endorsed by the profession. Typically, the professional association and certifying body work in tandem to determine the criteria for certification based on professional standards.

State regulations and licensing are government-based policies that give legal authorization for a professional to work in a specific occupation. Due to its importance in consumer protection, state regulations and licensing can often include requirements such as proof of higher education and training, certification from approved certifying body, state/federal criminal background check, or other criteria.

Practice professions within the field of education will often have these three pillars (i.e., professional standards, certification, and state regulations/licensure) working conjointly to shape expectations held by the profession and the general public. The triad also informs higher education and training programs to align curriculum with expected skills and knowledge. Thus, a pathway to becoming a professional is clear; along with appropriate accountability measures in place to protect consumers receiving professional services.

Legal Foundations of Educational Interpreter Qualifications

There are three significant federal mandates that ensure DHH students are protected from discrimination and exclusion in their education: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). All three laws support the provisions of interpreting services in public schools to DHH students who require them. Qualified interpreters are an integral part of ensuring school districts are in compliance with the law, while protecting students' civil right to access their education.¹

In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, now referred to as IDEA, mandated that each public school district provide a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to students with disabilities, including DHH students.² Prior to the passing of IDEA, a majority of DHH students were educated at specialized schools for the deaf until the new law created an immediate need for sign language interpreters to accommodate students in non-specialized public school settings.^{3,4}

Qualified interpreters are an integral part of ensuring school districts are in compliance with the law, while protecting students' civil right to access their education.

In the 2004 IDEA reauthorization, interpreting services were added and educational interpreters were specifically designated as Related Service Providers (RSPs); which is defined as the professional support services needed to ensure that each student benefits from their individualized education program (IEP).⁵ Interpreting services under the IDEA include oral transliteration, cued language transliteration, sign language interpretation, real-time transcription such as CART, and specialized interpreting services for deafblind students.⁵

In addition to interpreters, speech language pathologists, audiologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, and other professionals are identified as RSPs. The IDEA specifies that RSPs must be **qualified** in order to legally provide services to students.⁶

IDEA Sec. 300.156 Personnel qualifications

(a) General. The [State Education Agency] must **establish and maintain qualifications** to ensure that personnel necessary to carry out the purposes of this part are appropriately and **adequately prepared and trained**, including that those personnel have the **content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities**.

(b) **Related services personnel and paraprofessionals**. The qualifications under paragraph (a) of this section must include qualifications for related services personnel and paraprofessionals that—

(1) Are consistent with any State-approved or State-recognized certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements that apply to the professional discipline in which those personnel are providing special education or related services; and

(2) Ensure that related services personnel who deliver services in their discipline or profession—

(i) Meet the requirements of paragraph (b)(1) of this section; and

(ii) Have not had certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis; and

(iii) Allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulation, or written policy, in meeting the requirements of this part to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services under this part to children with disabilities.⁶

Equally important as qualifications for RSPs, the IEP team must consider the DHH student's unique language and communication needs as well as opportunities for the student to engage in direct communication with peers and professionals in their environment.⁷ Evaluating each student's unique language needs assists in the matching process with interpreters that can meet those needs.¹

While an IEP is the most common way DHH students receive educational interpreting services, Section 504 and the ADA are also an integral part of providing accommodations to DHH students in public schools. DHH students who perform on grade level and do not require any special education support/modifications receive accommodations under Section 504 and the ADA through a "504 Plan". The ADA's requirements for effective communication with DHH individuals state a qualified interpreter is someone who can "interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially" while using any specialized vocabulary.⁸

Available evidence indicates that many educational interpreters, or persons functioning as an interpreter under different titles, do not possess the level of skills necessary to provide effective access to the school environment, nor have they consistently been provided with standardized expectations and supervision.^{9,10} Yet, because of the impact

that educational interpreters have in the lives of DHH students, the lack of oversight over the quality of their services continues to be a concern within the field.^{3,9,11,12,13}

Even as **legally-mandated professional services**, there is little to no accountability on school districts to hire highly qualified educational interpreters. State requirements and licensing are inconsistent and wrought with loopholes to undermine existing requirements. For example, school districts may hire a person familiar with or learning sign language to work with DHH students under the guise of a signing paraprofessional, communication coach, or classroom aide where the requirements are significantly less than an educational interpreter.¹⁴ These positions traditionally are on the lower end of the pay scale and often do not require any academic or professional credentialing. Hiring under these positions allows school districts to bypass state regulations for educational interpreters and hire underqualified personnel. This practice significantly compromises the quality of services required to provide appropriate communication access to DHH students.

The practice of school districts hiring personnel without proper qualifications has gone largely unchallenged until a recent landmark decision by the Supreme Court pushed the issue to the forefront. *Perez v. Sturgis County School System* is a case about Miguel Luna Perez, now 27 years old, who spent a majority of his K-12 experience without qualified interpreters and equitable access to his education. Sturgis misrepresented his progress as well as the services he was receiving, including their use of classroom aides translating for him into “sign language” without formal training. It was only right before graduation that his parents learned he would not be earning a diploma, but a certificate of completion instead.¹⁵

While the primary reason this case escalated to the highest court was for the ability to pursue compensatory damages under the Americans with Disabilities Act in these situations, the importance of ensuring DHH students receive effective and qualified interpreters does not go unnoticed. In a joint statement, the National Association of Interpreters in Education (NAIE) along with the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), affirmed that school districts and educational interpreters must be held accountable in providing highly effective services for DHH students to lessen harm done to deaf people.¹⁶

RID and NAIE Joint Statement on *Perez v. Sturgis County Schools System*

In educational settings, related service providers such as speech therapists and occupational therapists are typically required to have some form of credentialing. The same should be true for individuals who provide communication access that impacts the safety, health, and welfare of Deaf students. **The school district is responsible for ensuring that educational interpreters are credentialed and equipped to provide this access as part of the child's free and appropriate public education.** The recent Supreme Court decision resulted from the school district's failure to fulfill this responsibility.¹⁶

Professional Standards

Educational interpreters have historically differed from other related service providers as they are not nationally required to demonstrate skills and competencies through a standardized degree, training, and/or certification.^{13,17,18} Service providers from practice professions will have a professional association and certifying body that outline the professional standards of practice that include degree, certification, and continuing education requirements. States will then create regulations or licensure that align with professional standards and certification, to allow eligible professionals to serve children in educational settings.

Table 1. Professional organizations and standards for audiologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists.^{19,20,21,22}

	Professional Association	Certifying Body	Degree Required	Continuing Education	State Licensure
Audiologist	American Speech-Language Hearing Association	Council for Clinical Certification in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology	Doctorate	30 Hours/ 3 Years	Yes
Occupational Therapist	American Occupational Therapy Association	National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy	Master's	36 Hours/ 3 Years	Yes
School Psychologist	National Association of School Psychologists	National School Psychology Certification Board	Master's or Doctorate	75 Hours/ 3 Years	Yes
Speech-Language Pathologist	American Speech-Language Hearing Association	Council for Clinical Certification in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology	Master's	30 Hours/ 3 Years	Yes

The interpreting field as a whole has struggled with consistency in pre-service education and training, certification, and licensing requirements.²³ This is not to say that the interpreting profession has lacked available credentials to ensure quality of educational interpreting services. RID has been in place since the 1960s and is the premiere association for sign language interpreters with an established certification program,

certifying interpreters who primarily work with DHH adults in community-based settings. For a period of time between 2007-2016, RID offered a specialized certification for interpreters working in K-12 education called the Educational Certificate: K-12 (Ed:K-12). Certified individuals demonstrated the ability to interpret classroom discourse, verified by achieving a minimum score of 4.0 on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA), successfully passing the EIPA written test (EIPA-WT), and meeting RID's academic requirement.²⁴ While the Ed:K-12 is no longer awarded, RID maintains their generalist interpreter certifications which primarily evaluate interpreter skill and knowledge based on the ability to work with DHH adults, not children.

The NAIE has stepped in to fill a void in the interpreting field by focusing on the complexities of working in the K-12 environment with DHH children. Since its founding, NAIE has published the *Professional Guidelines for Interpreting in Educational Settings* and the *Educational Interpreter Code of Ethics*.^{25,26} Both publications have laid the groundwork for NAIE to support the establishment of a certifying body for educational interpreters and accompanying certification. The NAIE's qualifications for professional practice include:

NAIE Professional Standards

Pre-Service Education: 4-Year Interpreting Degree

Skill Verification: 4.0 - 5.0 on EIPA

Knowledge Verification: Pass the EIPA Written Test

Continuing Education: Training and Professional Development

The EIPA is a primary element in the standards because it is the only performance exam available that is designed to assess interpretation skills in classroom settings. The assessment provides the test taker a score between 0 (lowest) - 5 (highest) based on level of proficiency in their interpretations. It is possible to receive a score numbered anywhere between 0-5 (e.g., 2.2, 3.5, 4.1, etc).²⁷ **A minimum EIPA score of 4.0 is recommended for working interpreters.**^{13,25}

The EIPA-WT is the only knowledge exam available that evaluates technical competencies unique to educational interpreting including critical information about working with DHH students. Both the performance and written tests are reliable means of evaluating the quality of educational interpreters. Both exams are available as

stand-alone assessments. EIPA exams are not certifications or a credential by which interpreters should identify themselves (e.g., “Jane Doe, EIPA”).

As seen with other RSP professions, examinations are not enough to ensure a well-rounded professional. NAIE’s professional standards emphasize obtaining a four-year interpreting degree that incorporates curriculum on educational theory, child and language development, and ethical practices as well as completion of a supervised internship in an educational setting.²⁵ Furthermore, standards of continuing education and training are to be relevant to the interpreting process while staying well-informed of evolving educational practices when working with DHH students.

State Requirements

The NAIE tracks state regulatory requirements and has found 45 states currently have requirements for educational interpreters, yet, many do not meet NAIE’s professional standards including the minimum skill verification of an EIPA 4.0.²⁸ State-by-state requirements are inconsistent related to minimum pre-service education, skill and knowledge verification, and continuing education requirements. In all cases, school districts hiring sign language interpreters are required to verify that an educational interpreter is properly credentialed to practice in their state.

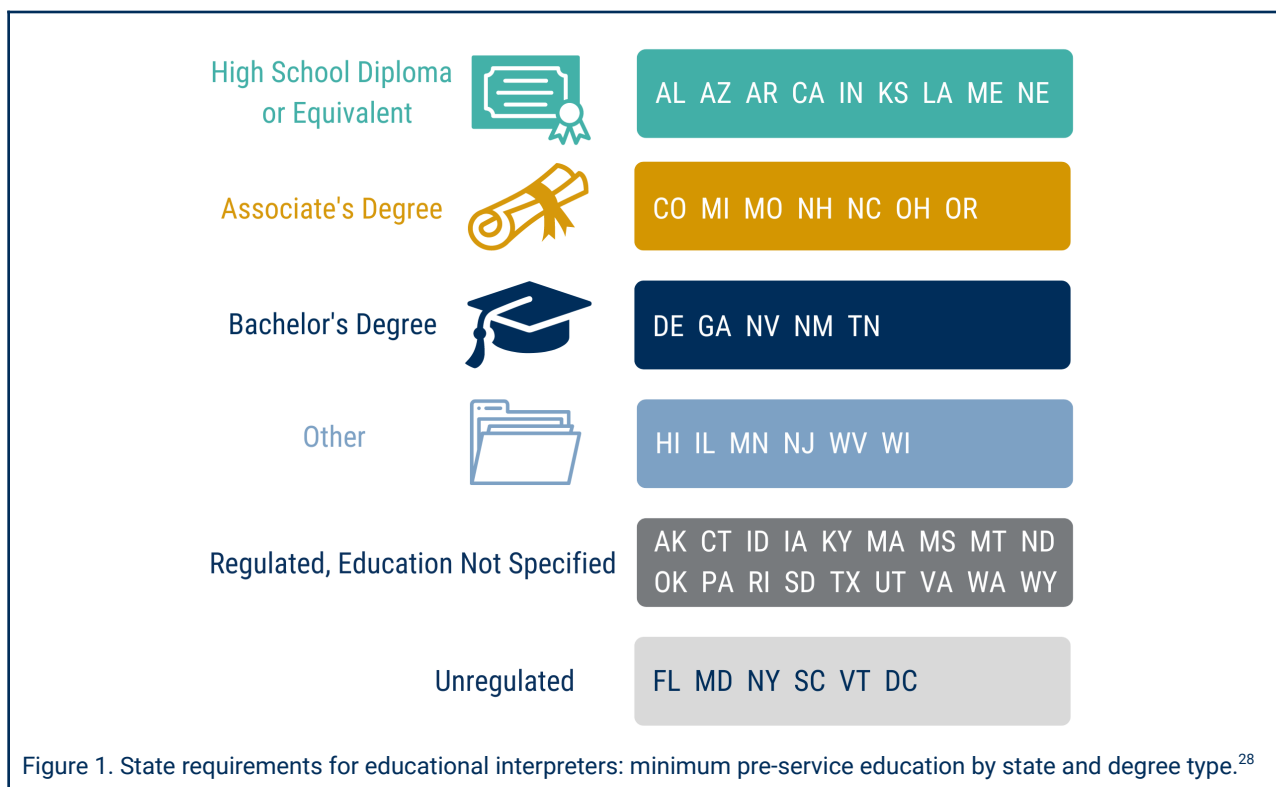


Figure 2. State requirements for educational interpreters: minimum EIPA score by state.²⁵

Aside from the EIPA, many states accept several different interpreter exams as alternatives for skill verification such as state-administered quality assurance

screenings and certifications from RID and the Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI). Providing alternative options has created an inconsistent quality standard as these alternative options do not specifically evaluate knowledge and skills when working with DHH children in education.

Research has shown there are stark differences between the expectations of interpreting for autonomous adults versus developing children. In addition to sign language interpreting skills, there are a multitude of considerations related to interpreting for children and youth in educational settings.^{9,13,18,25} Educational interpreters must apply expertise in language translation and cultural mediation along with child development and learning to support DHH students' access. Furthermore, unlike adults, children often do not have the ability to separate content they do not understand from interpreters they do not understand. For these reasons, it is necessary to ensure consistent standard requirements that focus on working with DHH students in K-12 environments to ensure providers have both knowledge and skill to work in these settings.

Benefits of National Certification

While the NAIE has established standards, it is difficult without a national certification program to standardize and enforce qualifications at the state level. The establishment of a national certification that would be legally enforced at the state level can create an environment where interpreters, DHH students, school districts, parents, and other stakeholders benefit. National certification can improve:



Outcomes for DHH students such as equitable access to education with credible services



Working conditions for interpreters including salary, IEP team participation, and professional development



Hiring and management practices for school districts recruiting qualified interpreters

Improve DHH Student Outcomes

Lack of standards and inconsistent application of standards across the United States puts not only DHH students' access to the curriculum at risk, but also endangers their opportunity to benefit from their education, which is required under the IDEA. For many DHH students, receiving direct instruction in sign language is the most effective approach to learning. Due to the location of specialized schools for the deaf and other extenuating family circumstances, DHH students are often placed in their local public schools. Approximately 77% of DHH students currently attend local public schools as opposed to specialized schools for the deaf.²⁹

It is the legally binding responsibility of a school district to ensure that the student has access to the entire school environment and experience. Therefore, it is imperative that school districts recruit and retain interpreters that have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide services to DHH students and expert support to IEP and 504 plan teams.

Emphasis on professional standards is imperative, as interpreters provide related services individually to DHH students who often do not possess a fully developed language.³⁰ This benefit extends to parents of DHH children to have freedom of choice to what school or program their child will attend and still have equitable outcomes through qualified, credentialed interpreters.

For example, research has historically shown interpreters who score a 4.0 or higher on the EIPA consistently convey classroom content.^{25,31} In a recent study, DHH student learning outcomes were assessed based on four conditions: 1) direct instruction in ASL, 2) direct instruction using simultaneous communication (i.e. spoken English and sign language conducted simultaneously), 3) access to an interpreter with an EIPA score of 4.0, and 4) access to an interpreter with an EIPA score of 3.0. The results of the study showed that direct instruction in ASL produced the greatest outcomes, followed by an interpreter with an EIPA score of 4.0 or direct instruction using simultaneous communication.¹¹ Interpreters with an EIPA score of 3.0 or below are unable to successfully convey classroom content and should not be interpreting for DHH students in a K-12 environment.

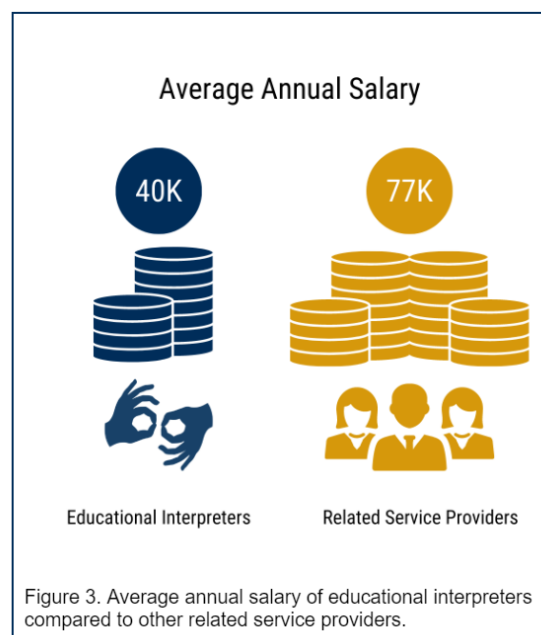
Whether an educational interpreter is scheduled to work with a DHH student for an entire class, for all classes in an academic year, or as a sub, national credentials can support a baseline of highly qualified professionals in the classroom. Students often experience multiple interpreters throughout their K-12 experiences and beyond; therefore, it is crucial that any interpreter the student encounters can provide consistent services to scaffold day-to-day learning. Consistent interpreters improve message

accuracy, enhance rapport and trust among participants, support student outcomes, and reduce hidden labor of students allowing them to focus on their learning.³² It is not recommended for DHH students to only have access to a single interpreter for their entire K-12 experience. Exposure to different users of American Sign Language is also crucial for a DHH student's language development.³³

Improve Working Conditions for Interpreters

The regulatory enforcement of a national standard for educational interpreters would align expectations for educational interpreters with that of other related service providers and result in better working conditions. Some educational interpreters are considered classified staff or “paraprofessionals” who are not required to have a minimum of a four-year degree.¹³ Low qualifications, by extension, lead to low wages and school districts without resources will hire unqualified or underqualified candidates to provide interpreting services.³⁰

In 2022, the NAIE held a nationwide study of educational interpreter working conditions and found that 62% of interpreters were hourly employees while 38% said they were salaried employees with a median salary of \$40k/yr.³⁴ Some interpreters are compensated for advanced degrees and additional credentials, others are not. The average salary of other related service providers is ~\$77k/yr and almost all are considered to be certificated personnel with pay grades that reflect the degree and credentialing requirements of their positions.^{35,36,37,38} Many educational interpreters (43%) work an additional part-time job during the school year.³⁴ Regulatory requirements should be accompanied by a standard classification for educational interpreters, where they are paid equitably for their credentials in the same way other related service providers are paid.



Related service providers also have a seat at the table when developing and maintaining a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) under special education services. If a student is served by an occupational therapist, speech language pathologist, or audiologist, those service providers are involved in the IEP process including setting specific goals in relation to their areas of expertise as well as monitoring progress throughout the school year. Many of these related service providers do not interact with students on a daily basis. NAIE's recent report found that 1 in 3 interpreters were not involved in IEP planning.³⁴ As a provider with specialized knowledge of language and

communication, who has daily interactions with the student, educational interpreters hold valuable information to develop and support IEP goals and assist with monitoring the progress of other related services.

Another critical component of working as an effective interpreter is advance preparation such as engaging in discussions with teachers regarding lesson plans, reading and reviewing classroom materials, and researching concepts to provide accurate interpretations. Interpreters who understand teacher discourse and instructional strategies create more effective interpretations of content and support student engagement in the learning process that considers the student's academic and language levels.^{25,39} Research evidence from experimental studies confirm that both novice and experienced interpreters' accuracy will increase from advance preparation.⁴⁰ However, more than half of educational interpreters are not compensated for advance preparation time outside of their workday and many are required to perform daily non-interpreting contractual duties such as recess/bus/lunch monitoring, captioning videos, and tutoring.³⁴ Adequate preparation time during work hours and/or appropriate compensation for preparation time outside of work hours can be advocated more effectively through national standards that adhere to NAIE's guidelines and code of ethics.

Improve Hiring & Management Practices

In addition to improving educational outcomes for students and working conditions for interpreters, minimum standards involving a national certification would enhance school districts' ability to recruit and retain qualified interpreters. As previously mentioned, whether educational interpreting services are required under IDEA, Section 504, or the ADA, these services must meet the needs of DHH students. At present, the variable types of exams, certifications, and other academic or professional credentials in the interpreting field are a barrier to school districts. Most school districts know little about interpreter qualifications and do not have the ability to evaluate certain skills such as ASL fluency.¹⁴

With the current variability of state requirements, it is also difficult for educational interpreters to work in multiple states or move to a different state for job opportunities. Competitive salaries, benefits, and appropriate expectations can make positions more appealing to interpreters working in other sectors and help increase the pool of interpreters willing to work in K-12 education. A national certification, alongside enforcement of state regulatory and licensing requirements, would give local school districts confidence in hiring qualified interpreters and expand their pool of candidates.

The interpreting profession, stakeholders, and policy makers must commit to supporting the NAIE in the process of establishing a national certifying body and accompanying certification program for educational interpreters.

Recommendations Moving Forward

The education sector continues to enable a cycle of circumventing the critical qualifications and federal mandates required for interpreting services by allowing districts to hire unqualified and underqualified practitioners. As with any cyclical pattern, something must give. The absence of a national certification that is governed by a professional association and certifying body specializing in educational interpreting requires immediate action. Educational interpreters need to be held to professional standards and expectations in the same way as other related service providers. Therefore, educational interpreters should expect and be required to obtain a 4-year specialized degree, a certification, and a license. In return, the role of an educational interpreter should reflect the same authority as other contributing experts to a student's IEP, commensurate pay, and professional development training that builds on their specialized knowledge and skills.

Moving forward, the interpreting profession, stakeholders, and policy makers must commit to supporting the NAIE in the process of establishing a national certifying body and accompanying certification program for educational interpreters. State policy makers and school districts must be prepared to dramatically raise the bar in regulations, hiring, and management practices by reinforcing qualifications at the local, state, and national level. National certification will develop a clear path to becoming a highly qualified educational interpreter, one that can be followed by all future generations of interpreters and ensure DHH students have equitable access to an interpreted education.

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