

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meaningful parental involvement is widely recognized as a key factor in the successful education of children. Recently, Congress and the California Legislature have underscored the importance of parental involvement through legislation that will take us into the next decade. As elected officials, administrators, and advocates alike determine how best to improve public school education, they must be mindful of the vital role that limited-English proficient (LEP) parents can play in improving education for their children.¹ This report describes the need for parental language access in California, details what the state Department of Education and local school districts with diverse immigrant student populations are already doing to communicate with LEP parents, and presents policy recommendations on improving state support for translation of important written communications into languages that parents can understand.

Background

Student performance and school participation greatly suffer when parents cannot understand communications from their children's teachers or school administrators on matters such as school programs and services, standardized testing, and disciplinary codes. To facilitate participation by LEP parents, California Education Code Section 48985 requires school sites to translate all notices, reports, statements, and records when at least 15 percent of the student population at any given school speaks a common primary language other than English. However, there is currently no systematic review and enforcement of this provision. Many important documents are not translated, particularly into Asian languages, and school districts often duplicate efforts to translate the same information into different languages.

CAA's analysis indicates that while a number of state-mandated notices and documents are common to all school districts, each school district independently translates almost all documents, resulting in inefficient and costly duplication of efforts. Most school districts also have significant gaps in what they translate. Of the information that is translated by the California Department of Education (CDE) centrally, translations are primarily in Spanish only.

Policy Recommendations

Allocate Sufficient Federal NCLB Funds for District Translation

- The state should allocate sufficient federal No Child Left Behind Act funds for grants to school districts with a demonstrated need to translate critical documents into languages spoken by substantial numbers of LEP parents.

Increase Centralized Translation and Information Sharing

- CDE should increase its own centralized translation of model forms and notices regarding state-mandated information distributed to the various school districts.
- CDE should develop and host a centralized online clearinghouse of translated documents and translation resources that can be accessed by local school districts and the general public in order to facilitate information sharing and avoid duplication of translation.

Strengthen Monitoring and Enforcement of California's Parental Language Access Law

- School districts should annually provide CDE with information about language demographics and translation practices at schools that meet state law thresholds for translation of parent documents.
- The Legislature should direct the State Auditor to evaluate school and district compliance with current state translation requirements.