



**Cindy Huff** received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Kansas State University and her master's degree in deaf education from Gallaudet University. She is the director of Statewide Outreach Programs at the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD). Huff taught deaf and hard of hearing students in both integrated and residential settings for a total of 10 years. After a stint as a designer and facilitator of training programs in the international nonprofit arena, she returned to deaf education when joining NMSD in 2004. She welcomes questions and comments about this article at [Cindy.Huff@nmsd.k12.nm.us](mailto:Cindy.Huff@nmsd.k12.nm.us).

## determining a student's readiness to successfully use interpreting services

*By Cindy Huff*

**P**rior to the passage of the All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975, signed language interpreting was a service reserved almost exclusively for deaf adults. Only when deaf students began attending their neighborhood schools at an accelerated rate did children become consumers of interpreting services in order to access their academic programming. In the 30-plus years since the passage of this law, the fields of deaf education and signed language interpreting have only recently begun to take a look at the implications of a student receiving the bulk of his or her school experience through third party communication.

Ideally, all students would experience direct, multidimensional communication in the K-12 setting. This experience is generally considered to be more efficient, effective, and



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empowering. Interpreted communication, because it involves a third party, tends to be more linear. This makes it critical that quality standards for interpreting services be in place when direct and multidimensional communication is not possible for all or part of the educational process for a deaf or hard of hearing student.

A common assumption is that providing a deaf or hard of hearing student in grades K-12 with an interpreter is enough for that student to access his or her total school experience in integrated programs. The reality is that innumerable factors have an impact on whether a student experiences success with an interpreted education. To address these factors, it is vital that an interactive and trained educational team carefully consider each child's individual needs, skills, and readiness for accessing learning through an interpreter. It is the collaborative work of this team that will lead to successfully serving each student



Figure 1

<b>Broad-Spectrum Student Competencies</b>	
<b>STUDENT COMPETENCIES</b>	<b>CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL TEAM</b>
<b>Ability to maintain eye contact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the length of time a student can attend to the interpreter?</li> <li>• Can the student navigate other visual supports in the classroom while watching the interpreter?</li> </ul>
<b>Ability to ask for clarification or repetition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the student assertive?</li> <li>• Can the student proactively monitor whether or not he or she is receiving a clear message?</li> <li>• If a student is confused, does he or she have the ability to distinguish whether the interpretation is weak or the teacher's content or teaching style is unclear?</li> </ul>
<b>Social-emotional abilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do student behaviors compare with their chronological age?</li> <li>• What are the student's emotional responses to stress, transitions in the daily schedule, discipline, and typical peer interaction?</li> <li>• What is the student's level of self-confidence and autonomy?</li> <li>• What are the student's social problem-solving skills?</li> </ul>
<b>Visual capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any vision issues that would impact the way an interpreted message is received?</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive abilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the student's academic problem-solving skills?</li> <li>• Did the student have early language exposure and acquisition?</li> <li>• Will interpreted messages need to be adapted to ensure comprehension by the student?</li> </ul>
<b>Self-awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the student know that he or she is deaf?</li> <li>• Does the student have a concept of how and when hearing people access auditory information and his or her own need to access that information visually?</li> </ul>
<b>Awareness of the interpreting process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the student understand the concept of third party communication?</li> <li>• Can the student separate the message of the speaker from the interpreter delivering the message?</li> <li>• If applicable, does the student have the ability and flexibility to use a variety of interpreters who potentially have different linguistic signing styles?</li> </ul>



Figure 2

according to his or her individual language and communication profile.

How do educational teams determine when, or if, a student is ready to effectively use interpreting services? Considering “student readiness” may seem like routine practice, although more often than not, placing a student in an interpreted setting happens without a systematic analysis of student competencies to guide program design.

## Student Language Competencies

Educational teams are asked to consider student language competencies in three categories: signed language, spoken language, and other languages. Within each category, the following details should be examined.

**Pragmatic Skills**—Ability to use language across a variety of formal and informal settings and outside of the present and immediate environment, abstract reasoning and theory of mind, discourse skills, effectiveness of mode(s) or language(s) used to communicate in a variety of settings

**Receptive Skills**—Ability to understand questions, conversations, or dialogue, simple or connected communicative language; ability to understand references to the immediate and/or to the not present, abstract, or imaginative

**Expressive Skills**—Level of self-expression (i.e., questions, conversations, simple or connected communicative language; references to the immediate and/or to the not present, abstract, or imaginative)

**Semantics/Vocabulary**—Number and variety of vocabulary words or phrases that are understood and can be used competently both receptively and expressively

**Syntax**—Structure and complexity of the language(s) used by the student, metalinguistic ability across languages; for young children and delayed language users, type and variety of semantic relations between words and concepts

STUDENT COMPETENCIES	CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL TEAM
<b>Signed language skills</b>	In addition to the detailed exploration described above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is the student considered fluent in signed language or is he or she still in the process of acquiring language skills?</li> <li>● What is the student's ability to read and understand fingerspelling?</li> </ul>
<b>Spoken language skills</b>	In addition to the detailed exploration described above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Will the interpreted message be supporting the spoken language message or replacing it entirely?</li> <li>● What is the functional use of amplification or cochlear implant(s) for the student regarding his or her understanding of spoken language?</li> <li>● What is the intelligibility of the student's spoken language?</li> <li>● Will the interpreter be needed to make the student's message clear to his or her peers and teachers?</li> </ul>
<b>Other language skills</b>	In addition to the detailed exploration described above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are the language skills in all other languages used by the student (i.e., English, including Cued Speech; Spanish; Navajo; a signed language of another country)?</li> </ul>



### Considering Student Readiness to Use an Interpreter

The Outreach Department at the New Mexico School for the Deaf has developed specific procedures to help programs determine the appropriateness of providing interpreting services

to individual students. A crucial part of making this determination is deciding, based on solid information, whether or not the student is prepared to receive those services. Not all students are ready to access instruction through an interpreter. Before a student is placed with an interpreter for any part of his or her academic schedule, it is essential to consider and evaluate a spectrum of student competencies (Figures 1-3).

This information will assist the educational team in determining the student's strengths and needs in accessing both the academic and non-academic components of his or her school program through an interpreter. Once this information has been gathered, the team can better determine if a student is "interpreter ready" and which aspects of his or her programming could be successfully provided via interpreting services. The

Figure 3

### Continuum of Student Readiness

Student is likely "ready"	Student may be "ready" with added support	Student may or may not be "ready"	Student is not "ready"
<p>This student is developmentally on track in language, social-emotional and cognitive skills. He or she is able to handle the standard curriculum in an integrated setting with minimal support. He or she is familiar with the interpreter role and developmentally "ready" as determined by the educational team to receive interpreting services for some of his or her academic schedule.</p>	<p>This student is developmentally on track in language, social-emotional and cognitive skills. He or she is able to handle the standard curriculum in an integrated setting with added support. He or she is familiar with the interpreter role and developmentally "ready" as determined by the educational team to receive interpreting services for some of his or her academic schedule.</p>	<p>This student is lagging developmentally in language, social-emotional and/or cognitive skills. He or she may be able to handle the standard curriculum in an integrated setting with intensive support and supplemental instruction. He or she is familiar with the interpreter role and may be developmentally "ready" as determined by the educational team to receive interpreting services for some of his or her academic schedule.</p>	<p>This student is limited developmentally in language, social-emotional and/or cognitive skills. He or she is not able to understand an interpreter or handle the standard curriculum in an integrated setting. He or she is unfamiliar with the interpreter role and not developmentally "ready" as determined by the educational team to receive interpreting services for any of his or her academic schedule.</p>
<p><b>Implications for staff roles and student programming</b></p> <p>This student will likely do well in an interpreted setting. The educational team will need to monitor student progress, making adjustments to the interpreted programming as necessary to ensure ongoing success.</p>	<p><b>Implications for staff roles and student programming</b></p> <p>This student may do well in some interpreted settings with added supports such as pre-teaching or content review. The educational team will need to monitor student progress often, making adjustments to the interpreted programming as necessary to ensure ongoing success.</p>	<p><b>Implications for staff roles and student programming</b></p> <p>This student may or may not do well in some interpreted settings. Interpreting will require significant supports such as tutoring and supplemental instruction. The educational team will need to monitor student progress frequently, making adjustments to the interpreted programming as necessary to ensure ongoing success.</p>	<p><b>Implications for staff roles and student programming</b></p> <p>This student is not ready to receive interpreting services and requires direct instruction from an educational team trained in working with deaf and hard of hearing students and fluent in the student's language and communication mode.</p>

examination of student competencies is applicable to American Sign Language/English and to any type of transliterating (i.e., Cued Speech, Signed English, oral interpreting).

### When a Student is Not Ready for Interpreting Services

When the educational team determines that the deaf or hard of hearing student cannot effectively access some or all aspects of instruction and/or interaction with peers and staff through an interpreter, the student should have:

- An environment where he or she can communicate directly and fluently with staff and peers
- An educational team that is formally trained in working with deaf and hard of hearing students
- An educational team that is able to meet identified student needs in all incidental and structured learning opportunities outside the classroom
- An educational team that has knowledge and skills in assessing student progress in communication and overall language and consistently incorporates assessment information into educational programming
- An educational team that can provide a parallel experience in the classroom, exposing him or her to the same concepts being introduced to all students
- An educational team that can simplify or expand concepts as appropriate
- An educational team that can develop a specific plan to monitor and assess the development of his or her language

### In Conclusion

With escalating numbers of deaf and hard of hearing students using interpreters, many aspects of an interpreted education have been explored. Interpreter skill and qualifications are frequently considered when determining whether or not a student is receiving quality access to the curriculum. As vital as this and other factors are, a student's readiness to effectively use interpreting services is independent of interpreter credentials. Student readiness should become a standard consideration for educational teams when planning and implementing programming that may include interpreting services.



### Resources for Professionals Working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in a Rural State

Determining student readiness for accessing educational programming through interpreting services requires collaboration among the student's complete educational team. The team needs high quality evaluation and assessment information to inform their programmatic decision making. As a largely rural state, New Mexico school districts often do not have educational and diagnostic team members who can communicate directly and fluently with deaf or hard of hearing students. In some cases, an interpreter may be the only team member with this ability. Using an interpreter for the administration of language assessments and learning competencies will very likely not produce valid results.

Serving as the state resource on the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, the Outreach Department at the New Mexico School for the Deaf provides layers of services to support students attending public schools in their home communities. The Outreach team conducts formal student observations that result in reports containing information about student access to the curriculum and their overall school experience as well as the students' use of language and communication and recommendations for student programming. The observation reports and the ongoing relationship with the program can support the team's determination of whether or not a student is ready to use interpreting services. In addition, educational teams statewide can request comprehensive evaluation services, ensuring the evaluation is completed by a qualified team of staff specialists certified in their areas of expertise. This team administers evaluations using direct and fluent communication.

