Strong relationships are built on trust and the ability to communicate through conflict. Anyone who has attended a meeting to discuss Special Education services or to review school re-entry after a suspension understands the importance of conflict resolution in building and maintaining family-school relationships. Families of all backgrounds, including those who are immigrants and refugees and who have communication disabilities, need to be able to communicate with educators to build a relationship based on mutual respect, access information to support their student’s growth, and engage in the decision-making process. Unfortunately, many families are not able to communicate with educators due to insufficient access to interpreters and translations. Educational language access is defined as meaningful two-way communication between families and educators via quality interpretation and translations. While language access is necessary for all communications, it’s critical for high-stakes meetings such as those related to Individualized Education Programs, Section 504 Plans, discipline, safety, and/or mental health. Though required by federal civil rights law, language support services are often poorly organized and underfunded, if they are offered at all. Frustrated, advocates across the state have decided to take action. Engrossed 2nd Substitute House Bill 1153, better known as HB 1153, aims to increase language access in Washington’s public schools. Signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee

“"We can’t understand what decisions are being made on our behalf. When things feel wrong, we are essentially silenced.””

–Spanish-speaking parent of a student with disabilities
in March, this new legislation is an ambitious package of K-12 educational policy and professional certification standards. Proponents argue that the bill will bridge the opportunity gap facing families and students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds and forge a path for more equitable family engagement at school.

**Acting on Intersectional Need**

Throughout Washington state, thousands of immigrant and refugee, deaf/hard of hearing, blind/visually impaired families are not able to communicate with their children's schools. In our state, 27.9% of parents of children ages 5 years or older, and enrolled in public school, speak a language other than English (National Center for Education Statistics). According to 2019-20 data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), in Roosevelt, Inchelium, Wapato, Wahluke, and Mount Adams school districts, 50% of students are English Language Learners. In Seattle, Kent, Federal Way, Lake Washington, Edmonds, Highline, Bellevue, Everett, Mukilteo, and Spokane school districts, families speak more than 75 languages (2017-18).

Inadequate language access hinders communication between schools and families and leaves students having to navigate a complex and historically hostile education system on their own. The devastating impact on students of color with or without disabilities is evident whether you look at national, state, or local data across a range of indicators:

- **Restraint and Isolation:** According to 2019-2020 OSPI data, K-5 students with disabilities are 15x more likely to be restrained or isolated than their peers without disabilities. While students with disabilities make up 14.4% of total enrollment, they make up 85.6% of students who are restrained or isolated. Low-income students are more than 3x more likely and Black/African American students are twice as likely relative to their enrollment.

- **Least Restrictive Environment:** OSPI also reports that while 56.6% of students with disabilities are placed in general education for 80-100% of the day, this percentage falls to 49% for students of color.

- **Mental Health:** Students with disabilities are 2.4x more likely to feel sad and hopeless than students without disabilities (2021 Healthy Youth Survey).

For most students, establishing a strong communication plan among the student, family, and educators from the very beginning prevents small mishaps from snowballing into significant and costly challenges. Given inadequate opportunities for communication, it is no surprise that youth of color with disabilities are the least engaged in postsecondary opportunities, such as employment and higher education, which leads to long-term and costly employment and health outcomes.

“Language access is a lifeline for families like mine. English is not my first language. My son has a disability. He has higher needs than most children, and I have more challenges in engaging in his care and education.”

—Spanish-speaking parent of a student with disabilities
And for families, communication is all about access to information:

“My daughter is deaf/hard of hearing, her principal and athletic director decided without parent consent that my daughter and her parents don’t need interpreters for volleyball and special events. They assumed that because we speak ok, we don’t need an interpreter. It’s not about how we speak, it’s about why we don’t have full access to communication.”

For more family stories, please see our 2021 Family Feedback Report on Language Access in Schools.

Journey to Olympia

HB 1153 is an example of community-led change that has grown into a state-wide movement. For years, Open Doors for Multicultural Families has heard from families from different cultural backgrounds that they were having trouble communicating with their children’s schools.

Our journey for legislative change began in 2015 when Open Doors gathered families in our Kent Office to meet with Representative Tina Orwall. While “language access” is a common phrase now, it took time to educate the rest of the Legislature and advocate on the issue. Even education experts conflated language access with English Language Learner services or dismissed the matter by saying, “we’ve already solved this issue. It’s required by state and federal law.”

In 2019, working with Rep. Orwall, we passed HB 1130, which required the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Office of Education Ombuds (OEO) to convene a group of experts, called the Language Access Workgroup, to make policy recommendations to the Legislature. Most of the time, workgroups convene for several months and agonize over recommendations, then their report is shelved. Our workgroup was a convening of passionate activists dedicated to change. We knew we had gotten our foot in the door and were ready to pry it open. After 18 months of Workgroup meetings, we were confident that the recommendations were sound and that now we needed the strategy to get them through the Legislature.

At Open Doors, we mapped out our strategy: build and

“My daughter is deaf/hard of hearing, her principal and athletic director decided without parent consent that my daughter and her parents don’t need interpreters for volleyball and special events. They assumed that because we speak ok, we don’t need an interpreter. It’s not about how we speak, it’s about why we don’t have full access to communication.”

– American Sign Language deaf family

Above: House Speaker Pro Tempore and HB 1153 Bill Champion Tina Orwall (33) speaks about the importance of language access at the House Floor Debate on February 8, 2022.

strengthen relationships with Legislators, mobilize families and youth, secure media attention, and determine a communication plan to get the word out. What follows, are several of the steps we took to implement our strategy.

We worked for two years to build our Multicultural Family Leadership Training Program and are grateful to the Family Leaders who met with legislators, testified at public hearings, and ensured that the proposed legislation would help families. We joined forces with OneAmerica to ensure that we heard from youth and leveraged their knowledge and connections. The Developmental Disabilities Council connected us to legislators. The League of Education Voters hosted webinars and pushed out calls to action. Everyone pitched in. Educators came to testify in support. Interpreters and interpreters unions expressed support for the legislation as a tool that would bolster their industry and workforce. Seven plus years later, the bill has been signed into law. But we know the work has just begun.

Bill Overview

HB 1153 envisions family-centered solutions with specially designated funding. Bill language stipulates a number of policy changes for districts and schools, as well as increased professional training and credentialing for interpreters and translators in education settings.

“For parents like me, quality language access and interpretation is the only way to feel confident about leaving our children in the school’s care.”

– Cantonese-speaking parent of a student with disabilities
Overview of HB 1153 Policy Changes to Improve Language Access

**Technical Assistance and Coordination**

OSPI must implement a language access technical assistance program that supports school district language access programs across Washington. OSPI is also responsible for monitoring compliance on issues related to language access needs and services.

Beginning in the 2023-2024 school year, school districts with at least 50% English-learner enrollment or greater than 75 languages used by students or families must hire a full-time language access coordinator. Alternatively, districts may also report the total number of hours school district staff spend performing the language access coordination activities.

**Interpreter Training and Credentialing**

Standards, testing, and credentialing in education-related terminology will be provided at no cost to interpreters; the hope is to build a qualified workforce of specialized interpreting professionals, capable of accurately representing families in general and special education settings. This will ensure families are able to effectively understand and participate in their student’s education, especially in interactions where there are legal stakes and/or other significant impacts on their student’s education.

OSPI and the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) will collaborate to establish credentialing guidelines and create a mandatory professional code of conduct to minimize historic miscommunications between families, interpreters, and school staff.

**Data Collection for Families**

To better forecast future need and projected growth for newly implemented language access programs, the bill also stipulates that school districts collect more comprehensive data surrounding families’ spoken language preferences and support requirements. Work is already underway to improve and standardize the existing Home Language Survey to include information from parents, guardians, and caregivers.

School districts and charter schools must also perform a more comprehensive review of language access support requirements and implement, beginning with the 2023-2024 school year, language access programs that reflect these findings.

**Community Advisory Committee**

An advisory committee will be convened to monitor and report on language access program milestones and offer guidance to oversight entities like OSPI and PESB. Comprised of educators, service providers and impacted families, the advisory committee will provide necessary and regular evaluation to ensure community voice remains centered during the bill’s implementation phase.
The Future of Language Access

The road ahead for language access is long, but not altogether uncertain. Each school district in Washington must adopt language access policy and procedures by October 1, 2022, and WSSDA must issue a model policy by the end of the summer. Further changes and full-time language access coordinator hiring will begin in the 2023-2024 school year.

Down the line, bill-watchers are eager to see how language access is addressed with more precision. Experts acknowledge that rural areas of the state will require a targeted approach to support their success and may not be fully addressed in the current legislation. Funding sources for HB 1153, which currently come from the state budget, will also need to be increased as changes roll out over the coming school years.

Yet for advocates, it is time to celebrate. “We can’t let perfect get in the way of good,” said Moses Perez, Advocacy & Civic Engagement manager at Open Doors. “I am thrilled to see community feedback becoming a bill... and now, Washington State law. It makes me feel proud to live in a state where bipartisan support is still possible in crucial spaces like our public schools.” Thousands of families and students across Washington are rejoicing at the thought of no longer shouldering the burden of accommodation. There is relief, but also a hope for a more equitable future.

Emily Fung is an Advocacy Program Coordinator and Joy Y. Sebe, Ph.D. is Assistant Director, Director of Community Parent Resource Center for Open Doors for Multicultural Families, which provides culturally and linguistically relevant information, services, and programming to culturally and linguistically diverse families of persons with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

“Having access to language within my school district has helped me feel part of this community—but most of all it has helped me to be a better mom.”

—Spanish-speaking parent of a student with disabilities

Based on House Bill 1153 – Public Schools – Language Access Provisions, WSSDA has made non-substantive revisions to 2110 – Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program, which is an Encouraged policy. These limited revisions include cross-references to other policies and do not need board approval. In addition, WSSDA has made substantive revisions to policy and procedure 4218/4218P – Language Access, which, based on provisions in House Bill 1153, is now an Essential Policy. Approval by your own local school board is necessary for these revisions.