

The IEP team's guide to communication access

The questions to ask before you trust any interpreter or captioning placement.

Communication access for a Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing student is one of the most important, and most misunderstood, parts of an IEP. The hard truth is that putting a person in the room isn't the same as giving a student access. The difference usually comes down to questions that are easy to forget in a busy meeting.

You shouldn't have to become an expert in interpreter credentialing to know your student is covered. So bring this to your next IEP meeting or vendor conversation. Good providers will have clear answers to all of it.

1 Qualifications and credentials

- Is the interpreter or captioner credentialed for K-12 classroom work, not just generally available? (Look for RID certification, your state's educational interpreter requirements, and EIPA where it applies.)
- Who verifies those credentials, and how often are they re-checked?
- Does this provider have experience at my student's grade level and in these subjects?

Why it matters. "Available" and "qualified for a classroom" are not the same thing. Ask who is responsible for confirming the difference.

2 Consistency and continuity

- Will my student work with the same interpreter(s) all year, or a rotating pool of whoever's free?
- If the assigned provider leaves mid-year, what's the plan to keep access uninterrupted?

Why it matters. Access improves as a provider learns your student's language, classes, and pace. Continuity is part of the accommodation, not a bonus.

3 Coverage and reliability

- What happens on a day the interpreter is absent or sick?
- Is there a backup plan, and how quickly does coverage get filled?
- How are last-minute schedule changes handled?

Why it matters. A single provider with no backup means one absence equals a lost day of access. Ask what stands behind the person.

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4 The right fit for the student

- How was it decided that this modality (on-site ASL, virtual ASL, CART captioning, TypeWell/C-Print, or a Certified Deaf Interpreter) fits my student?
- Is there a plan to reassess if a particular class or activity isn't a good fit for that choice?

Why it matters. The best plans match the service to the student and the setting, and blend when needed. (Note: assessing communication access is different from a language assessment of the student; that's a separate, specialized evaluation. A good partner will flag when that's needed and refer you.)

5 Technology (if any service is virtual)

- Who sets up and tests the technology, and is it done before the first day, or during class time?
- What's the plan if the connection drops during a lesson?

Why it matters. A student's first morning shouldn't be a "can you hear me now?" It should already work.

6 Compliance and documentation

- Is the access written into the IEP specifically (the service, the frequency, and the qualification standard) so it's clear and enforceable?
- Who monitors that the access is actually working, not just present?
- If someone asked us to show that access was qualified and consistent this year, could we produce it?

Why it matters. Vague language ("interpreter as needed") is hard to hold anyone to. Specific language protects the student and you.

7 Mid-year changes and growth

- If my student's needs change, or a new Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing student enrolls, how quickly can services be added or adjusted?

Why it matters. Needs shift during the year. Adding a service should be a phone call, not a three-month search.

8 Support and accountability

- Who is my single point of contact when something goes wrong during the school day?
- Is support available outside normal business hours?

Why it matters. You shouldn't be troubleshooting access from the hallway at 7:55 a.m.

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A quick self-check

If you can't get clear answers on credentials, backup coverage, and who's monitoring the access, those are the gaps worth closing before the school year starts, while there's still time to fix them.

A note on writing it into the IEP

The stronger the language, the better it protects the student: name the specific service, the qualification standard, the frequency and duration, and the expectation for coverage when a provider is absent. Your district remains the responsible party for all IEP decisions; this guide is informational and is not legal advice.

Want a second set of eyes on your plan?

Partners Interpreting is owned and operated by nationally certified interpreters, and helping districts think through exactly these questions is what we do. A 20-minute consultation is a no-pressure way to pressure-test your communication-access plan for the year, and you'll leave with a written quote your district can budget against if you want one. Reserving a team for Fall 2026 secures capacity and starts recruitment while the paperwork is finalized.

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