



## Taming the translation challenge of SARCs and more

WHEN THE LEGISLATURE passed AB680 a year ago in the 2005–2006 session, it put teeth into a section of the Ed Code, Section 48985, that became law in 1977. The CDE’s Deputy Superintendent, Gavin Payne, showed those teeth to district leaders in a memo dated February 23, 2007, declaring that Categorical Program monitors would strictly enforce this provision of the Ed Code. And to demonstrate this new earnest attitude, the CDE would be identifying all schools subject to this requirement.

For reference, here is the exact language of the first part of EC 48985:

If 15 percent or more of the pupils enrolled in a public school that provides instruction in kindergarten or any of grades 1 to 12, inclusive, speak a single primary language other than English, as determined from the census data submitted to the department pursuant to Section 52164 in the preceding year, all notices, reports, statements, or records sent to the parent or guardian of any such pupil by the school or school district shall, in addition to being written in English, be written in the primary language, and may be responded to either in English or the primary language.

[Read the full text<sup>1</sup> of EC 48985]

The new spin to this old law has been causing many districts to scramble to comply. Leaders are trying to answer many questions: what exactly needs translating, in addition to SARCs, students’ report cards, principals’ newsletters, NCLB parent notification letters, and truancy notes; how are they to be translated; who is

qualified to do the translating; where are they going to find the money to pay for all this work; what is a reasonable quality standard for translations.

SARC liaisons face an additional challenge. Federal law requires that accountability “... report cards shall be concise, and presented in an understandable and uniform format and, to the extent practicable, provided in a language that parents can understand.” (Subsection (1)(B) of Section 1111[h]) How can SARCs be concise if they are supposed to convey so much writing and data? How can they be in a language parents can understand in any translated version if SARCs are not understandable in English?

Some more practical district leaders are wondering what makes for effective communications in any language. This may be one of those moments where a fork in the road separates those who favor practical and effective solutions from those who pursue formal compliance alone.

### WIDE RANGING RESPONSES BY DISTRICT LEADERS

Our daily knocking on the doors of district leaders to discuss accountability reporting gives us a peek into the practices of hundreds of districts. Because we’re not auditors or compliance monitors, district officials tend to be more candid. Here’s a sample of what we’ve seen.

Some districts have responded by taking a literal approach to the CDE’s new policy on language equity. Everything sent home gets translated. If this means turning 16–page SARCs in the format of the CDE template into Hmong versions of the CDE template, they do it. This is the Literal Leader, who declares, “If our dis-

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trict can pass its Categorical Program Monitoring review by publishing equally impenetrable SARCs in three languages, then, by God, we'll give them what they want." Several years ago, Rowland USD printed full-length SARCs in three languages for their 18,000 students' families, and distributed them all.

Other literalists have taken a more "refusenik" approach to the matter. On reading EC Section 48985, and discovering that it only pertains to things "sent home" to parents, some districts started cutting back homebound communications altogether. In what might be considered a "penny-wise, pound-foolish" approach, this "refusenik" district leader simply cuts communications to cut translation costs.

Other districts, led by veterans of the Prop. 227 wars, favor an "English only" approach and maintained their school-to-home and district-to-home parent communications in the King's English. It is often board members with a drum to beat that call for this quiet mutiny.

But those who are in harmony with the notion of a multilingual California, and who agree with the spirit of the law and the CDE's policy, are stepping up to the plate. They are hiring interpreters for meetings and parent conferences. They are making fuller use of the Clearinghouse for Multilingual Documents. They are hiring translators. And they are turning to firms who offer a mountain of parent notices in many languages for pre-fabricated communications.

### ASK YOUR PUBLIC THEIR LANGUAGE PREFERENCE

Given these startling factors, wouldn't it make for a wiser policy to allow districts to ask their public in what language they'd prefer to receive district-to-home or school-to-home communications? No longer would districts risk insulting their public by sending them communications in the wrong language. This approach is also likely to save your district money in the end, by minimizing the need for unwelcome translations.

This customer-centered approach follows logically from the US Census data available on the language skills of Americans. Here is the evidence: The Census Bureau's *American Community Survey* tells us that about half of the Spanish-speakers in the US also speak English well. Furthermore, among Spanish-speaking

households, only about one-fourth are indeed "linguistically isolated," which means they are Spanish-only households.

A deeper study by the Pew Charitable Trust's Hispanic Center reveals that only 47 percent of Latinos in the US communicate primarily in Spanish. Fully 30 percent are bilingual, and another 23 percent are English-dominant communicators.

Another Pew study goes further to look at the language and news media preferences of Latinos in the US. Among those who are first generation (not born in the US), only 38 percent rely on Spanish language media alone. Fifty percent rely on both Spanish and English language media, and 11 percent rely on media that uses English alone. Interestingly, second generation Latinos shift dramatically. Only 3 percent of them rely on Spanish language media alone. About 43 percent rely on both, and 53 percent rely on English language media alone.

### CONSIDER USING THE TELEPHONE

In fact, some families might tell districts they prefer to hear all important messages by phone or in a face-to-face conference setting. For Hmong speakers, in particular, this would be a helpful alternative. Hmong has been a written language for only three decades, and Hmong speakers are frequently not readers of Hmong at all. What purpose is served by providing them "access" to written information in Hmong if they simply don't read it?

A superintendent in Coalinga-Huron USD in Fresno County, Marco Sigala, told me that many of his Spanish-speaking parents have become suspicious of everything given to them in writing. In their home countries, some of them lost their land by signing papers presented to them by government officials that disguised predatory language in legalese. So for these parents, someone looking them in the eye, reading them a letter or SARC report, and giving them their word that what they say is true, is far more credible.

You can set up a subscription-based communication service that lets parents and guardians choose their mode of communications—phone, email, or mail. By shifting communications from the most expensive channel (mail) to lower cost alternatives, you can save a bundle. Automated outbound telephone calls are now easier to manage from your front office, and all provide for multilingual messaging. This article

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from *Education World*<sup>2</sup> may help get you started. And this column from *ESchoolNews*<sup>3</sup> by school communications maven Nora Carr should spark your internal discussions of the benefits of reaching parents by email.

### MANAGE THE COST OF TRANSLATIONS

Talk to your business services director about identifying the true cost of parent communications, in English and in other languages. If you know that it costs a lot, you may find it worthwhile to manage it more efficiently. A little extra coding of expense lines from both schools and the district office, within the SACS accounting code structure, will make you more in command of true costs.

Before you translate anything, make sure it's clear, concise, and necessary. SARCs are too often a cryptic and clumsy collision of poor thinking, weak writing, and bad design. Before you invest in translating your SARCs, make sure they make sense. Purge them of jargon. Edit your principals'

writing. Explain what the data means. Remove inaccurate reporting. Only after you've done the hard work of preparing your accountability reports to be read are they worthy of translating.

### LOBBY TO GET YOUR TRANSLATION COSTS REIMBURSED

Districts that serve a non-English speaking public are shouldering the higher operating costs of educating students who are learning English. For this they receive categorical funds. But what state or federal funding source enables districts to spend money to communicate with parents who speak Armenian, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Spanish, or Chinese? Those districts that have gone to great lengths to communicate with these parents have spent a lot of money to do so. Why shouldn't they be compensated for their efforts, either by state or federal funds? If the principle of offsetting the unequal cost burdens of ELL education has been established, why hasn't the unavoidable cost of meeting the language requirements of parents also been equalized?

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### NOTES

1. Full text of EC 48985: [http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/asm/ab\\_0651-0700/ab\\_680\\_bill\\_20060929\\_chaptered.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/asm/ab_0651-0700/ab_680_bill_20060929_chaptered.html)
2. *Education World* article: [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin446.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin446.shtml)
3. *ESchoolNews* column: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showstory.cfm?ArticleID=5756>

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- School Messenger, a California company based in Santa Cruz, calls itself "... a leading provider of notification solutions for education." [http://www.schoolmessenger.com/corporate\\_overview.html](http://www.schoolmessenger.com/corporate_overview.html)
- Connect-ED describes its technology's purpose this way: "... to record, schedule, send, and track personalized voice messages to tens of thousands of students, parents, and staff in minutes." <http://www.ntigroup.com/products/connect-ed.asp>