



**Testimony Before the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives  
of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court**

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MABE, Board Member

To the Honorable Members of the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, my name is Bertha-Elena Rojas and I am here today in my capacity as a Board Member of the Multistate Association for Bilingual Education, MABE for short.

MABE is a non-profit organization that promotes the belief that bilingualism and multiculturalism are assets that provide cognitive, social, emotional, educational, and employment advantages for all students, as well as assets that strengthen our social and economic growth within a global economy. MABE is also a founding member of the Language Opportunity Coalition, which was instrumental in the passing of the LOOK Act and the Massachusetts Seal of Biliteracy. MABE is in favor of the bill H2025/S 347, An Act Relative to the Certification of Interpreters in Educational Settings. Passage of the bill is not only a natural following step to the aforementioned bills, but one that would have a dramatic impact in promoting meaningful communication between parents and schools as well as preservation of students and parents' civil rights. Furthermore, maintaining diligence about building cultural and linguistic competency in our schools will lead to improvements in school culture that would address the achievement gap that remains between English Learners and monolingual students.

I provide this written testimony in favor of this education bill because I have had direct experience as an interpreter and translator in both medical and educational settings. I have also worked in public education for over 20 years, both as a consultant and as a public-school employee. Specific to public education settings, I worked in the Worcester Public Schools for a total of 13 years, first as a Bilingual School Psychologist, then as a Program Administrator and lastly as a District Leader. I was the Manager of English Learners (EL) and Student Supports for four and a half years in the Worcester Public Schools, a post that I held until December 2017. I continue to work closely with many districts as a consultant and throughout my different roles in public education, I have consistently observed the pervasive challenges created by the lack of competent interpreters in schools. When working as a central administrator, collaborating with

district leaders and other districts' EL Directors, my colleagues and I were deeply concerned about the fact that there has been no legislation that validates and supports meaningful communication between schools and parents as a foundational component of education success, and most importantly, the matter that we consider essential, which is the securing of true informed consent from Limited English Proficient (LEP) parents and guardians for decision making on behalf of their children. Therefore, the passage of this bill is expected to have tremendous impact, considering that almost 22% of the homes of Massachusetts public school students are homes where English is not the first language.

The need for cultural and linguistically proficient interpreters has been predominantly associated with fostering a welcoming environment for all parents and guardians. However, such need has been mostly addressed at a surface level, and even within this level, the availability of skilled interpreters remains scarce and inconsistent. For many years, the medical field and the judicial court system have been validated as settings where skilled and trained interpreters are required due to the technical language embedded in the standard operating procedures and due processes involved. The same conditions exist in public education. For instance, special education proceedings are all anchored under due process, which requires an understanding of legal and technical language and terms. Information at Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings often includes very technical language associated with the science of learning, the technical language of assessment and testing of cognition, academic performance, social-emotional and behavioral functioning, all of which also require understanding of assessment processes and of how to communicate assessment results. In addition, there is a fair amount of technical language embedded in the description of specialized instruction and of different educational programs when placement considerations are made.

There have been district efforts, focused predominantly within Special Education operations, where procedures have been standardized to provide translated documents, such as IEPs and to having interpreters present during IEP meetings as much as possible. Yet, meaningful communication remains a challenge as even though documents may be translated, the translated versions are not available at the time of the meetings, and even when an interpreter may be present at the IEP meeting, the quality of the interpretation is often substandard. Therefore, the critical decision making that still takes place during the meetings is frequently made without the parent's appropriate informed consent.

Another area that is regularly affected is Discipline. Discipline regulations and guidelines are complex and include due process that typically is resolved within a short period of time. Yet, within the context of a due process that is already conflictive and/or stressful for all parties involved, parents frequently go through this process without true informed consent. There are many other areas aside from special education and discipline where school information and procedures are complex, and where the availability of certified skilled interpreters would enhance parent participation and improve decision making. These areas include student enrollment, meetings with guidance, meetings and interactions with school nurses, to name a few. We argue that, the passage of this bill will be instrumental in addressing one of the most important gaps present in public education today in regard to parent engagement, which is that of addressing the issue of properly informing parents and guardians of school proceedings, within a culturally competent context, and with appropriate resources, such as the mediation of a skilled

interpreter, so that parents and guardians truly have a voice and be in a better position to meaningfully participate in all decisions pertaining to their children and with their best interest at heart.

Finally, the passing of this bill will legitimize the presence of professional interpreters in school settings, at least of those proficient in the most common minority languages. We argue that, legitimizing the presence of these professionals is also a very important step towards increasing the overall cultural and linguistic competence in our schools. It would provide acceptance and validation for both students and their families of the assets that they bring through their culture and language by having professional role models in direct contact with students and parents within an environment where they see minimal representation of themselves and their community. Such positive influences would eventually have an impact in helping students see themselves as viable candidates for public education roles where they are so much needed.

Based upon the information and considerations above, and on behalf of MABE and the students and families we represent, I urge you to pass bill H2025 / S 347, which will undoubtedly have a significant impact in improving true informed consent by LEP parents, meaningful parent engagement in our schools and educational outcomes for all of our students.