

CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Compliance With Translation Requirements Is High for Spanish but Significantly Lower for Some Other Languages

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the California Department of Education's (department) and California public schools' compliance with California Education Code, Section 48985 (state translation requirements) revealed the following:

- Compliance with the state translation requirements is high for Spanish, but significantly lower for some other languages.*
 - Some schools are unaware of this state law or may use incorrect methods to identify languages that require translations. In addition, some schools believe there is little demand for translated notices.*
 - Although the department has a process that may assist schools in meeting these requirements, recently enacted legislation requires it to take a larger role in ensuring that schools comply with the state translation requirements.*
 - The department created an electronic clearinghouse for multilingual documents, but it has not achieved much participation from school districts.*
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REPORT NUMBER 2005-137, OCTOBER 2006

California Department of Education's response as of January 2007

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee (audit committee) requested that the Bureau of State Audits determine whether the California Department of Education (department) and California public schools are in compliance with California Education Code, Section 48985 (state translation requirements). This code section requires that when 15 percent or more of students enrolled in a public school speak a single primary language other than English, all materials sent to the parent by the school or school district must be provided in that language as well as in English. Specifically, the audit committee requested that we identify and evaluate the department's role, if any, in informing local education agencies of the state translation requirements and in monitoring and ensuring their compliance with these requirements. The audit committee also asked us, to the extent possible, to determine how pending legislation would affect the department's distribution of information and oversight of local education agencies' compliance with state translation requirements. Finally, the audit committee asked that we select a sample of districts or schools and identify and evaluate measures taken to include parents in their children's education, the process through which schools meet the state translation requirements, and the extent to which schools comply with these requirements. We found that:

Finding #1: Some districts do not perceive a demand for translations and the home language survey may overstate the need for translations.

About half of California's 10,100 public schools had at least one primary language that required translations in fiscal year 2004-05, and we found that compliance for fiscal year 2005-06 was high for Spanish. Specifically, a survey requesting information about certain notices schools send to parents that we sent to 359 schools, to which 292 schools responded, indicated that schools are providing required Spanish translations for 4,136 of 4,534, or 91 percent of the notices for which we received responses, while for 1,134 notices we did not receive a response. However, compliance rates drop significantly for some of the languages other than Spanish. For example, our survey indicates

that schools are providing Mandarin and Hmong translations for only 54 percent and 48 percent, respectively, of the notices for which we received a response. We did not receive responses regarding the translations of 36 and 18 notices in Mandarin and Hmong, respectively. We found a variety of reasons for these lower compliance rates. For example, 16 percent of the survey respondents were not aware of the state translation requirements. In addition, some schools may not be meeting state translation requirements because their districts may use incorrect methods to identify the languages requiring translations.

As indicated by the results of our site visits, some school districts do not comply with state translation requirements because they believe there is little demand for translated notices. For example, San Diego Unified School District (San Diego) asserted that the main reason it stopped translating documents into Tagalog was a lack of requests for Tagalog translations from schools. Furthermore, although Tagalog was the primary language spoken at home by nearly 40 percent of the students enrolled at San Diego's Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary School during fiscal year 2004–05, a survey initiated by the principal in June 2006 resulted in only 5.6 percent of parents requesting that notices be sent home in Tagalog. Similarly, Cupertino Union Elementary School District generally does not provide Mandarin translations, even though this primary language is spoken by at least 15 percent of the students at several of its schools, because it perceives little demand for these translations. Finally, two districts indicated that in addition to low demand, some parents actually resented receiving translated documents. For example, both San Diego and Fountain Valley School District recalled instances in which parents had called the district to complain that they did not want to be sent translated documents in Tagalog and Vietnamese, respectively.

School districts should use a home language survey developed by the department to determine each student's primary language. Specifically, when parents enroll their children in a new school, the school district should administer the home language survey, which contains a series of questions to assist the school district in identifying the primary language spoken at home. However, the home language survey may overstate the need for translations because it does not account for parents who are fluent in English. The survey was designed to identify the primary language that a student speaks at home and to determine whether the district must assess the student's English proficiency using the California English Language Development Test. It was not designed to identify those parents who are bilingual. Consequently, this tool may overstate the need for translations for those parents whose primary language is not English but who are also fluent in English. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate for districts to assume that there are no parents who need documents translated into the languages that meet the 15 percent threshold under state law. Without asking parents whether they require translations, districts and schools have no way of knowing what the actual demand is and therefore cannot justify sending documents home in English only.

To ensure that translated notices are sent only to parents who need them, the department should modify the home language survey to include a question asking parents to indicate the language in which they would like to receive correspondence. To ensure that this modification does not conflict with current law, the department should seek legislation to amend state law to allow parents to waive the requirement that they receive translated materials in their primary language when they do not need such translations.

Department's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department reports that its program offices that oversee or provide input to the home language survey are coordinating efforts to modify the survey to include a question asking parents to indicate the language in which they would like to receive correspondence and whether they elect to waive the receipt of translated materials. If deemed necessary, the department will seek legislation to amend state law to modify the requirements pertaining to the home language survey. The department expects to implement this recommendation by May 2007.

Finding #2: Although not extensively utilized, the clearinghouse for multilingual documents could become a useful tool.

Pursuant to state law, the department created an Internet-based electronic clearinghouse for multilingual documents (clearinghouse) on which local education agencies and the department can post links to translated parental notices. The purpose of the clearinghouse is to provide increased access to translated documents, to assist local education agencies in meeting legal requirements for parental notification, and to reduce redundancy in document translation work. Launched in September 2005, the clearinghouse is an online resource designed to help local education agencies locate, access, and share parental notification documents that have been translated into languages other than English. Through the clearinghouse, local education agencies voluntarily provide information regarding translations they have made and are willing to make available to others. The department hosts the clearinghouse on its Web site.

Despite the department's efforts to promote the clearinghouse, it has not achieved much participation from school districts. Specifically, 12 school districts and the department had posted links to translated notices on the clearinghouse as of mid-September 2006. In addition, 80 percent of the 230 translated documents available through the clearinghouse were available only in Spanish as of mid-September 2006. The value of the clearinghouse as a resource cannot truly be achieved without greater participation from school districts.

To increase the value of the clearinghouse as a resource for translated parental notices, the department should encourage school districts to form coalitions for the purpose of leveraging their combined resources to translate standard parental notices into the languages they have in common. In addition, the department should consider using its available funding to encourage districts to upload links to their translated documents, especially in languages that are currently underrepresented in the clearinghouse.

Department's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department reports that it plans to send letters to school districts that will include information about forming translation consortia. In addition, the department plans to inform school districts about new reports that contain data by language group that will help them identify other districts with common translation needs. The department will make these new reports available on its Web site. Finally, the department states that it will consider using available clearinghouse funding to encourage school districts to participate in the clearinghouse. As part of this effort, the department will determine whether clearinghouse funds can be spent in this manner in light of existing provisional language contained in the budget act.

