

CASE STUDY: EDUCATION

# A Discussion with Middletown Public Schools NY

**Linda Bradt:** Director of Bilingual, ENL,  
and World Language Education  
Enlarged City School District of Middletown, NY

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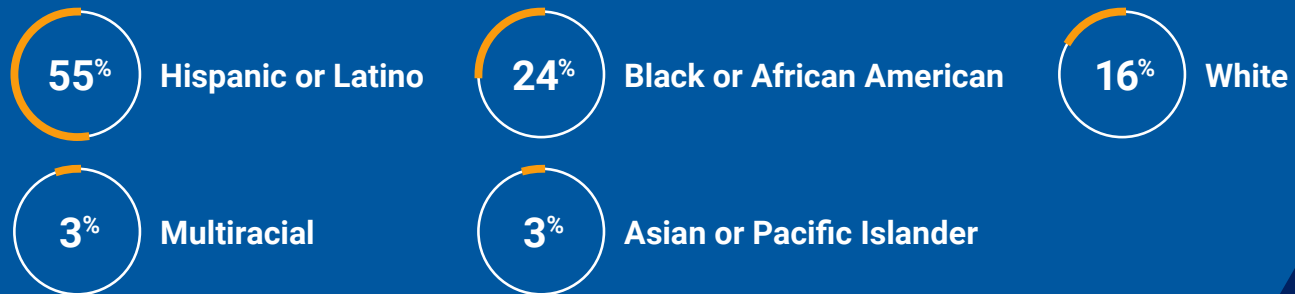


**Middletown City School District (New York) places an express value on diversity. Appreciating the eclectic nature of its student body is an active area of focus that sets the district apart nationally.**

As you'll read, Middletown goes far beyond minimum compliance requirements in an effort to level the academic playing field for English Language Learners (ELLs). The results speak for themselves. Linda Bradt, Middletown's Director of Bilingual, English as a New Language, and World Language Education, says the district understands the importance of building an educator's ability to teach in an environment that grows more diverse by the day.

LanguageLine sat down with Ms. Bradt to discuss how Middletown has gone about implementing their language access program.

**Middletown  
Enrollment by  
Ethnicity**



**“We make sure we respect the diversity that our student population and their families bring to us. We see that diversity as a strength.”**

**Q: Linda, thank you for taking the time to share all the things you've learned, as well as the things that have surprised you, in the three and a half years since you began implementing such a strong language access program with the Enlarged City School District of Middletown. I don't want us to get too far ahead of ourselves, so can you please give me the basics on the district?**

Sure. We're a suburban city school district located in New York's Hudson Valley, about an hour and 20 minutes outside of Manhattan. We have a total of 7,600 students enrolled district-wide from kindergarten through 12th grade. We have six schools: one high school; two middle schools that encompass sixth, seventh, and eighth grades; and three elementary schools.

**Q: Can you tell me about your English Language Learner population within the district?**

Of the 7,600 students in the district, we presently have 1,342 who are English Language Learners. That number exceeds the national norm by quite a bit. Comparable districts are typically at

10 percent ELLs; we're around 18 percent and growing. Currently, we have 23 languages that our students speak outside of English. Spanish makes up the majority of our ELLs, but we also see languages like Punjabi and Urdu. We don't have a particularly large refugee community in Middletown, but we do have a lot of displaced students. We have more than 30 students who were displaced by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and many are in our ELL program district located in New York's Hudson Valley, about an hour and 20 minutes outside of Manhattan.

**Q: What was the impetus for implementing such a robust program?**

Beginning in 2015, along with many districts, we implemented our program to be in compliance with New York State Regulation Part 154, [which] holds all school districts accountable for identifying and serving English Language Learners. Districts are required to adopt a policy on educating ELLs, plan and provide appropriate services for them, and report on their academic achievement. Originally the goal was to be inclusive, with all critical interactions

between home and school translated into the family's preferred language. The program rocketed the past three-plus years to the point that it's pretty end-to-end, both for students and parents. We really do follow our motto, "Every Student. Every Day." We take tremendous time to make sure that we respect the diversity that our student population and their families bring to us. We see that diversity as a strength.

We firmly believe in removing barriers. The goal is to erase the look and feel of poverty in the district. We do have a very high free-and-reduced lunch rate here, as well as poverty. We think language access is a huge part of making all opportunities available to our students and their families. Having [language access] available for any potential interaction between student, teacher, and family creates a much stronger bond.

**"We really do follow our motto, 'Every Student. Every Day'."**

**Q: How does what Middletown is doing differ from what one might experience in a different district?**

One thing that we do is give a 10-week grace period to our ELL students. When a new student comes into our district and is determined to be an ELL, rather than make them feel they must immediately become assimilated to our culture, we give them a 10-week period for acculturation. We let them get to know the United States, our customs, our culture, and what’s expected of them academically. We give them that time free of assessment [and] free of stressors as they become familiar with the culture of the school without losing their own identity.

The ultimate goal is to help our ELLs get to a point where they can learn as seamlessly in English as they do in their native language. Until they get to that point, we want to be sure they understand the assessment [exams] they are taking so we can get an accurate gauge of their command of the subject matter.

The New York State exams are translated through the state into the five languages that are most commonly spoken. We extend beyond that to the more uncommon languages—the 23 languages that are spoken in Middletown schools—so that students can take those assessments in the languages they feel most comfortable with.

**Q: If I’m a student that requires language assistance, at what touchpoints would I come in contact with these services?**

They’d be available to you from the very beginning—from start to finish. They’d be used during the registration and evaluation process. Once you go to school, you’re given access to technology that helps with translation. Throughout the day, there is not a single point where you couldn’t have language access based on the tools we have here. These tools are easily available to any school; we just make sure that we have easy access to them and that teachers know how to use them.

Every student in the district from kindergarten through sixth grade has access to a Chromebook on a cart for translation or document viewing. In grades 7-12, students have their own Chromebook they can use in flipped learning environments.

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**Q: At what points do parents come into contact with your language access program?**

I’ll take this from the phone standpoint first. If a parent calls one of our buildings and requires language access, the receptionist uses a key catchphrase and then connects to LanguageLine. From there, we engage in a three-way call between the caller, the school representative, and the interpreter. If the parent

# Middletown Enrollment by the Numbers



**7,600**

Total Enrollment



**1,342 (18%)**

English Language Learners



**5,243 (73%)**

Economically Disadvantaged

comes to our building in person, we have a portal where we can look up the student and see their home language. Once we have that information, we contact LanguageLine, request the appropriate language, and get an interpreter on speakerphone. We also use face-to-face interpreters for more highly sensitive conversations. Those interpreters have to be scheduled in advance. We can get the phone interpreters on demand.

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**Q: Do you use language access for parent-teacher conferences?**

Yes. All of our teachers have access codes that allow them to reach an interpreter on any given day, so they can use one for a phone call with a parent at a moment's notice if need be. If the teacher knows they are having a family come in that needs language access, the teacher reserves a confidential room, which is usually just a classroom with an outside line, and the interpretation is done from that point.

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**Q: What do you do in terms of teacher education? How do you let them know that these services exist, and how do you empower teachers to use them?**

We have a local guideline that's shared districtwide every year. Additionally, I've created a PowerPoint [presentation] that walks teachers

through our language program end to end. It includes access codes, login information, a Client ID number, and step-by-step directions so everything is at their fingertips. We make it a priority at the beginning of each school year that the teachers are aware of these services and know how to use them.



**Q: What lessons have you learned along the way as you've implemented your program?**

We've certainly learned through trial and error. It's one thing to have these tools and another

to use them. To get people to actually use them, you have to really communicate. You have to communicate that they exist to the stakeholders in the district. That doesn't just mean teachers—it means getting the word out to the transportation company, for example. Every arm of the school has to have this accessibility. It also means communicating it to the parents, letting them know that they are welcome and we'll accommodate them and their children.

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**Q: Have some families been reluctant to take advantage of these services?**

Yes. We're living in interesting political times. Some of the kids like to fly under the radar. Their families don't want to bring attention to themselves. They're scared to take advantage of these programs. It's up to us to reach out to those families. We monitor attendance. We monitor communication. We're like detectives. Whatever the circumstance, we want them to know we'll try to support them in any way possible. It's personal relationship building; trust building. We're here to support and not hurt.

**“Having [language access] available for any potential interaction between student, teacher, and family creates a much stronger bond.”**



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**Q: Any other lessons that you've learned?**

We've learned a lot about controlling costs. The cost of interpretation and translation is very worthwhile when you see the success it creates, but it's still an expense that can build if you don't watch it closely. It seems like the thing that prevents some districts from expanding their program is cost, but it can be managed if you're smart about it.

**Q: Have you learned any tricks in terms of managing costs?**

Yes. First, a person has to be in charge. There needs to be a central person who holds the keys and manages the costs. A priority for that person should be eliminating redundancy. We do our assessments on a quarterly basis. We keep track of which exams have already been translated so we don't accidentally do it twice. Also, having things prepared in advance makes a huge difference. There are often things I receive that have to be translated last-minute, and there's a rush fee involved. A little anticipation goes a long way in eliminating those fees and making everything easier for all involved.

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**“We've learned a lot about controlling costs. The cost of interpretation and translation is very worthwhile when you see the success it creates.”**

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**Q: How is your program funded? Do you have a grant?**

No, we never had a grant. It's an unfunded mandate. That's why different districts have different approaches. It's financed through our district fund. The money comes

out of the general budget. Fortunately, our district sees the home-to-school connection as critical to a student's success.

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**Q: What evidence do you have that your program is working? Have you seen a difference in graduation rate?**

We are measuring the impact of the program, but it's still relatively early so our metrics aren't conclusive. We have had an increase in graduation rate [since implementation], but we can't definitively attribute it to language [access]. Our primary evidence right now is anecdotal. We've had parents coming in asking for more and more engagement, which is incredible. We also finally have a real read on how our ELL students are performing because they're taking assessments in their own languages now. They're being score accordingly and not based on a language they're still learning.

In terms of the teachers, I thought I'd get phone call after phone call with issues, but it was the opposite. It was quiet. I'd ask, "How'd it go?" They said, "It couldn't have gone smoother or have been more intuitive." The whole rollout was great. I thought [the program] would be met with more hesitancy, but it wasn't. I really didn't think it would be so positive. It was a very pleasant surprise.

**Q: What's the next frontier for your language access program?**

Currently, we're looking at doing a trial run of video interpreting to see how that goes. You see what video has done for medicine and it seems like it could do the same in a school setting. It's a different feel when you have someone looking at you who looks like you. This is a sensitive time for many families that are coming to the United States, and we want them to feel as comfortable and nonthreatened as they possibly can.

**Q: How are you thinking of implementing video?**

It could potentially be valuable right from the start when a family comes to the district and gives [their] information. I'll give you an example. We had a Chinese family come in and it took 90 minutes to address their questions using a phone interpreter. We had a great outcome, but I think that could have been reduced significantly if there was a screen set up and a more personal experience. It would have been more fluid.

I can also see video interpreting being used in the actual classroom. We already have the technology in our classrooms—Chromebooks, camera capabilities, Sharp Board technology, and crystal display boards and monitors. In

ENL [English as a New Language] classes where there are just a few students, you could have the interpreter there on the screen. Of course, you could also use Chromebooks and headsets to see and hear the video interpreter. It's exciting to think of the bridges that video [interpretation] might build.

**Q: Now that you're three-plus years into your program, what are your reflections?**

It's been time-consuming to get it up and running, but very worthwhile. The constant "thank you"s we receive ... It's really neat to watch students grow even before they've set foot in the school because from the moment they come through our doors, they know they're welcome. It's wonderful to be inclusive rather than isolating them.



# Contact Us

For over four decades, LanguageLine® Solutions<sup>SM</sup> has been working with school districts across North America to bridge cultural barriers between students, their families, and educators. We provide on-site, over-the-phone, and video interpreting solutions, as well as translation, localization, and testing and training for bilingual employees. We consider it a privilege to be a key partner in the pursuit of educational equality for all students, regardless of language or culture.

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