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Texas Schools Deploy New Technology to Overcome Language Barriers

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Schools across the United States have been struggling to find ways to communicate effectively with new students and their families who are being resettled as refugees from war-torn parts of the world. Nowhere is the impact as great as in Amarillo, Texas, where the rate of resettlement is higher than in any other American city.

Amarillo and the neighboring schools are working to assimilate students, parents, and community members speaking more than 43 different languages and, thanks to a new technology called “ELSA”, that job is going to be a whole lot easier.

ELSA (Enabling Language Services Anywhere) is a small, hands-free cellular device that connects school officials with live, professional interpreters in any of more than 180 languages in less than a minute.

RTT Mobile Interpretation, the Minnesota-based company that produces ELSA says the device is already making a difference in schools throughout the United States. “Our mission is to eliminate language as a barrier to effective communication,” said company president and CEO John Grove. “ELSA enables school officials to deliver the same level of service regardless of the language spoken by the student, parent, guardian, or community member.”

According to Region 16 Education Service Center Executive Director Ray Cogburn, “ELSA gives us the ability to establish the kinds of relationships with students’ family and extended communities that is so essential to success in the classroom and beyond.” Cogburn explained that the challenge does not end in the Amarillo proper area.

“The language barrier is a challenge for schools across the Panhandle. For this reason, we are making ELSA available to all schools throughout Region 16.”

In addition to ELSA, RTT Mobile is providing Region 16 schools with its ELSA Lite app for both iOS and Android. According to Grove, “The ELSA device is designed for high noise environments like a busy school hallway, the recreation areas, gyms, and other areas where there are large numbers of people and lots of noise. The app, ELSA Lite, works extremely well in a quiet office space, a conference room, or other places where external noise is not a factor.

Cogburn believes that this strategic partnership with RTT Mobile Interpretation represents much more than a bridge across the barrier imposed by language. “By demonstrating that we care enough to communicate effectively, we will be drawing otherwise disparate communities closer together. And together, we can work to create a single, school-based community that is dedicated to the success of all our children.”

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