

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NORTH DAKOTA

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*Guidelines:*

*Identification and*

*Evaluation of*

*Students with Specific*

*Learning Disabilities*



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Special appreciation is extended to Ida Schmitt for her contribution to the field of Specific Learning Disabilities in North Dakota. Ida's contribution to the original *Guide XI: Identification and Assessment of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* (1984) established a solid foundation for identifying and serving children with learning disabilities.

Ms. Schmitt, a true educational genius and visionary, presented a view of special education that has stood the test of time. She recognized the unique needs of children, teachers, and parents involved in providing the knowledge and understanding necessary for effective programming for children with specific learning disabilities. Ida's work included recommendations for collaboration, mutual respect, and dignity among all stakeholders.

It is with appreciation and admiration that the members of the SLD Task Force dedicate their work on these *Guidelines: Identification and Evaluation of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* to Ms. Ida Schmitt.

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## Introduction

The Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) Task Force was appointed by the North Dakota Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) Committee in December 1996. The *Charge to the SLD Task Force* was to “review and discuss the contemporary issues relative to the education of students with specific learning disabilities and prepare written recommendations on needed changes in state policies and guidelines to assure that appropriate services are provided to students with specific learning disabilities.” The SLD Task Force met quarterly from January 1997 through January 1999. In addition, SLD Task Force members solicited input from North Dakota SLD teachers through a statewide survey completed during the winter of 1998. These guidelines are the resulting revisions recommended by the SLD Task Force.

The SLD Task Force carefully reviewed the information in *Guide XI – Identification and Assessment of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* (1984). This guidance was presented to administrators and personnel in North Dakota schools as a resource for identification and assessment processes. As noted in the Acknowledgements in *Guide XI*, the time period of 1984 included “these years of such rapid development in a field which persistently raised a host of unanswered questions.” *Guide XI* includes detailed information regarding purposes of identification, eligibility, definition of specific learning disabilities, and criteria for determining that a specific learning disability exists. In addition, procedures are described including the prereferral step, the evaluation process, and the written report.

The SLD Task Force concluded that *Guide XI – Identification and Assessment of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* (1984) continues to be an accurate, applicable and extremely valuable resource to personnel working in the field of special education today. Even though significant refinement and increased understanding continues to be developed in this “field which persistently raises a host of unanswered questions,” the information in *Guide XI* is still a useful resource and may be utilized by educators.

On June 4, 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was amended through Public Law (P.L.) 105-17. Although there are many changes reflected in IDEA 97, statute and regulations regarding additional procedures for evaluating children with specific learning disabilities remained the same as those required in 1984. With regard to evaluation, IDEA 97 emphasizes using existing assessment data, information concerning behavior, and information on how the child can be involved in the general curriculum. Further, there is an emphasis on the importance of input from the child’s parents during the evaluation process and in determining eligibility for special education services.

This document, *Guidelines: Identification and Evaluation of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities*, is intended to be a concise description of the *additional* requirements and procedures that must be followed when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability and requires specially designed instruction due to the specific learning disability. The document is limited to the area of specific learning disabilities and should be considered an addition to the solid foundation of evaluation processes described in North Dakota Department of Public Instruction *Guidelines: Evaluation Process* (8/1/99).

**Eligibility**

To be eligible for services in a special education program for students with specific learning disabilities, a student must be determined to have an identified learning disability and a team procedure must establish that the student requires specially designed instruction due to the specific learning disability.

**Definition of Specific Learning Disabilities**

The federal definition of specific learning disabilities as written in the 1997 reauthorization of Public Law 105-17, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) follows :

The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

**Sec. 300.7****Child with a disability.**

(10) Specific learning disability is defined as follows:

(i) General. The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) Disorders not included. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

**Criteria for Determining that a Specific Learning Disability Exists**

A multidisciplinary team may decide that a specific learning disability exists based on the criteria established in IDEA for determining the existence of a Specific Learning Disability, and the North Dakota criteria stated below:

1. The student does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability level in one or more of the areas listed below, when provided with learning experiences appropriate to the student's age and ability levels.
2. A severe discrepancy exists between achievement and intellectual or cognitive ability in one or more of the following areas:
  - oral expression
  - listening comprehension
  - written expression
  - basic reading skill
  - reading comprehension
  - mathematics calculation
  - mathematics reasoning.

3. The student may *not* be identified as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of:
- a visual, hearing,
  - or motor disability;
  - mental retardation;
  - emotional disturbance;
  - environmental,
  - cultural or
  - economic disadvantage.

## **Building Level Support Team Process**

### **What is a Building Level Support Team?**

The student does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability level in one or more of the areas listed when provided with learning experiences appropriate to the student's age and ability level. (Emphasis added.)

The Building Level Support Team (BLST) is a general education support system for assisting teachers and principals to create educational adaptations in the classroom for all students experiencing difficulty in school. Teams are designed to provide prompt, relevant and accessible support to teachers. This collegial system is operated by the teachers within a school who have the mission of providing collaborative assistance to anyone in the school needing support for resolving a problem. Building Level Support Teams are based on the belief that teachers working together in a problem-solving process can resolve more problems than each can alone.

The team and the teacher who is requesting assistance jointly engage in a structured process of conceptualizing the problem to be solved, identifying specific goals to be achieved, brainstorming intervention strategies, and developing an intervention plan. When appropriate, the team may help a teacher initiate the referral process for special education evaluation or other support services.

The Building Level Support Team should become involved when it is first recognized that a student is not achieving satisfactorily in the classroom, or when atypical behavior or learning patterns make the attainment of skills extremely difficult for the student. BLST is appropriate for all students who demonstrate difficulty in classroom achievement or behavior and *is not limited to students who are suspected of having a disability*. For this reason the term "prereferral" which is frequently applied to such a process, is not used here. Prereferral terminology implies a routine step in preparation for referral. That is not the intent of BLST. The intent is to assist classroom teachers in responding to the most obvious needs of *all* students whose apparent school difficulties require additional planning and/or interventions to personalize and individualize both the environment and instruction.



**What are the Purposes of BLST?**

Building Level Support Teams provide educators with the opportunity to collaborate in a structured problem-solving process where they generate practical and effective adaptations or interventions to support and assist teachers and administrators. BLSTs have five major purposes:

1. To resolve students' behavioral and academic problems by generating practical classroom intervention strategies and developing teacher expertise in making accommodations for at-risk students;
2. To provide preventive early intervention for students who appear at-risk for school failure;
3. To address classroom or building level concerns such as dealing with school wide discipline issues, planning for an entire classroom, making curricular adjustments, responding to the needs of bilingual students, generating ideas for working with parents, scheduling conflicts, or improving poor attendance;
4. To provide additional support to general and special education teachers with students who are being integrated into the general education classroom; and
5. To document efforts that provide alternative classroom interventions before students are referred for a special education evaluation or other support services.

**Who is responsible to carry out BLST procedures?**

BLST is a general education process and therefore consists of classroom teachers and administrators. Special educators, related services providers, and others might be asked to provide consultation. For further BLST procedures see *Building Level Support Teams* (January 2000) prepared by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction.

**How does BLST relate to the identification of students with specific learning disabilities?**

When BLST intervention is unsuccessful, the documented activities of the teacher and team provide a record of the classroom interventions attempted. State and federal rules and regulations require such documentation before a student can be referred for an individualized evaluation. Therefore, the BLST process provides teachers with immediate assistance and support and creates the documentation required when a student is referred for evaluation.

If the student is suspected of having a specific learning disability, the first assignment of the evaluation team will be to establish whether or not BLST interventions have been adequately carried out and documented. In other words, it will be determined whether adequate personalizing of the environment and individualizing of instruction have been provided to satisfy the first criterion for establishing that a learning disability exists (that the student does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability level when provided with appropriate learning experiences). To accomplish this, general education and special education must share expertise and responsibility.

**When is it necessary to initiate a special education evaluation simultaneously with BLST?**

In some situations, such as a student with a *severe* learning or behavior problem; a student moving into the school district; or a sudden change in the student's behavior; referral to a multidisciplinary special education team should *not* be delayed.

Although immediate referral is appropriate for such students, BLST activities should occur simultaneously with the referral procedures. Providing support for the classroom teacher while referral procedures are in progress, will result in immediate gains for the student while additional data are being gathered by the multidisciplinary team. Initiating classroom strategies to address the student's obvious needs may provide especially useful observational information to the multidisciplinary team in the formulation and completion of the Assessment Plan.

**Referral to Special Education**

After the completion of BLST interventions, and if serious concerns still exist, a multidisciplinary evaluation team will be established to begin development of the Assessment Plan. The multidisciplinary team follows the evaluation process established by state guidelines and implemented by the school district. All due process procedures, must be followed when students are referred for special education services. See *Procedural Safeguards - Prior Written Notice and Parental Consent Procedures* (8/1/99), *Procedural Safeguards In Special Education for Children and Parents* (8/1/99), and a *Parent Guide to Special Education* (8/1/99) for use in providing parents with a full explanation of procedural safeguards.

**Steps in Evaluation**

The Department of Public Instruction *Guidelines: Evaluation Process* (8/1/99) details federal regulations that apply to all aspects of the evaluation process. See also Appendix D, SLD Evaluation Process Checklist, in this document which includes additional required procedures for evaluating children with specific learning disabilities.

For the initial evaluation of a student with a specific learning disability, all of the following steps must be completed, but not necessarily in the sequence presented here.

1. Determine achievement level using formal and/or informal measures. Note that this step may be completed using informal measures only.
2. Determine ability level using a valid and reliable standardized measure of intellectual or cognitive ability administered by trained personnel *or* in the case of students whose ethnic group is not represented in the normed sample of the standardized test, using an appropriate alternate method.
3. Validate the impact on the child's progress in the general curriculum by conducting a minimum of one classroom observation. Three observations are recommended to verify patterns of learning and behavior.

4. Determine the discrepancy between ability and achievement.
5. Determine the primary disability.

All of the steps must be completed as outlined in each student's Assessment Plan before it can be determined whether the student meets the criteria of a severe discrepancy between achievement and ability as stated in the federal regulations:

*The student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual or cognitive ability in one or more of the following areas:*

- *Oral expression*
- *Listening comprehension*
- *Written expression*
- *Basic reading skill*
- *Reading comprehension*
- *Mathematics calculation*
- *Mathematics reasoning*

#### Sec. 300.540

##### **Additional team members.**

The determination of whether a child suspected of having a specific learning disability is a child with a disability as defined in Sec. 300.7, must be made by the child's parents and a team of qualified professionals which must include--

- (a)(1) The child's regular teacher; or
  - (2) If the child does not have a regular teacher, a regular classroom teacher qualified to teach a child of his or her age; or
  - (3) For a child of less than school age, an individual qualified by the SEA to teach a child of his or her age; and
  - (b) At least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children, such as a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, or remedial reading teacher.
- (Authority: Sec. 5(b), Pub. L. 94-142)

#### Sec. 300.541

##### **Criteria for determining the existence of a specific learning disability.**

- (a) A team may determine that a child has a specific learning disability if--
  - (1) The child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability levels in one or more of the areas listed in paragraph (a)(2) of this section, if provided with learning experiences appropriate for the child's age and ability levels; and
  - (2) The team finds that a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas:
    - (i) Oral expression.
    - (ii) Listening comprehension.
    - (iii) Written expression.
    - (iv) Basic reading skill.
    - (v) Reading comprehension.
    - (vi) Mathematics calculation.
    - (vii) Mathematics reasoning.
- (b) The team may not identify a child as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of-
  - (1) A visual, hearing, or motor impairment;
  - (2) Mental retardation;
  - (3) Emotional disturbance; or
  - (4) Environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

(Authority: Sec. 5(b), Pub. L. 94-142)

## **Determining Achievement Level**

The purpose of this evaluation step is to determine the level of academic skills that the student has attained. It is a necessary step for two purposes: 1) determining eligibility for placement, and 2) planning a program of services. To determine eligibility for special education, the multidisciplinary team must establish that a severe discrepancy exists between a student's ability and achievement levels. To plan appropriate services for any student whose performance is determined to fall below the expected level, IEP team must establish as specifically as possible the level of that student's skill development. This information is the basis for the present levels of educational performance in the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The analysis of the student's achievement level and classroom performance will determine whether the student requires specially designed instruction. Careful study of the variations in a student's achievement can make the difference between an appropriate and therefore successful program, or an inappropriate and unsuccessful school experience.

### **Types of Evaluation Information Needed to Determine Achievement Level**

The Assessment Plan will define areas of information needed to determine the achievement level. Reviewing the current achievement level information will identify the additional information for which evaluation is required and avoid unnecessary procedures.

*Attainment* is what an individual has learned, regardless of where it has been learned.

*Achievement* is what has been learned as a result of instruction in the schools. Any test of factual information measures attainment; however, a test of factual information is an achievement test only if it measures what has been directly taught. Only achievement tests can be used to monitor pupil progress. (*Salvia and Ysseldyke, 1991*)

Multiple sources are needed to determine the student's level of achievement. Some examples are listed below. The multidisciplinary team will decide which sources of information are needed for a specific student.

#### 1. Classroom performance

Information regarding the student's classroom performance can be obtained through several informal measures, such as those listed below. See Appendix C for further information.

- Observation
- Work sample analysis
- Task analysis
- Inventories
- Criterion-referenced tests
- Diagnostic probes
- Diagnostic teaching
- Checklists
- Rating scales
- Questionnaires
- Error analysis (for example, miscue analysis in reading)
- Cloze procedure for reading comprehension
- Informal Reading Inventories

2. If a specific learning disability is suspected, a minimum of one classroom observation is a required part of the evaluation process.

## Sec. 300-542

**Observation.**

(a) At least one team member other than the child's regular teacher shall observe the child's academic performance in the regular classroom setting.

(b) In the case of a child of less than school age or out of school, a team member shall observe the child in an environment appropriate for a child of that age.

(Authority: Sec. 5(b), Pub. L. 94-142)

### 3. Information from teachers, parents, and others

IDEA 97 emphasizes the importance of participation by general education teachers and parents in the evaluation process. Information from parents, teachers, and others can be obtained through written or oral interviews, in addition to the information available in the documents presented as part of the referral from the BLST.

Examples of information parents may be asked to provide are listed below.

- How well the student understands and follows directions in doing home chores, running errands, or conveying telephone messages
- Under what conditions the student appears to be most or least attentive
- Academic skills the student performs independently such as reading the directions for assembling a toy or playing a game, earning and handling money, writing letters, computer skills, completing projects that extend over a period of time
- Social and behavioral skills
- Any relevant medical or psychological information
- Culture, ethnic and family background
- Economic and environmental issues that may be impacting school performance

Examples of information teachers may contribute are listed below.

- The student's participation in class discussion
- The student's ability to attend to task
- The student's academic, social, and behavioral strengths
- The student's preferred learning styles
- Work initiation and completion
- Other factors that may be inhibiting or enhancing academic performance
- Academic, social and behavioral concerns
- The student's interests

Standardized achievement testing should be regarded as a type of screening rather than an actual indication of a student's achievement level.

#### 4. Standardized achievement tests

The instructional needs of a student cannot be determined by standardized tests alone. Also, it cannot be assumed that the skills assessed will necessarily be the same as the skills the student is expected to gain from the classroom curriculum. Standardized test results must be used in combination with informal information gathered from other sources. Although it is generally understood that scores on achievement tests cannot be viewed as an actual level of achievement, such scores are often quoted as though as if they are. Instead, such information should be used only in combination with other sources of information in determining an estimated range of skill achievement. The best use of standardized test results is in suggesting areas for further observation and study.

If there are substantial cultural differences in a student's language or exposure to concepts included in the test, the team cannot conclude that the test scores represent the individual's achievement. In this situation, the standardized achievement test lacks validity for such individuals and should not be used, or used only with extreme caution. This situation must be noted in the Integrated Written Assessment Report.

#### ***Interpreting Achievement Information***

The evaluation process is meant to be an analysis of each student's unique learning level. The following practices must be observed when interpreting achievement information.

1. State the student's achievement level as a range (e.g., average, above/below average) rather than a specific score, grade level, or percentile. The estimated range of achievement can then be compared with the estimated range of ability.
2. Although not all of the information sources outlined earlier in this section will need to be used for each student, it is important that all of the significant information be gathered, documented, and carefully considered. It is the multidisciplinary team's responsibility to weigh the significance of information obtained through any of the sources.

#### ***Determination of Ability Level***

Central to the concept of specific learning disabilities is the theory that individuals are prevented by those disabilities from acquiring skills they otherwise are able to learn.

### Administration of Standardized Tests

*Ability* is the quality of being able to do something; physical, mental, financial, or legal power to perform; a natural or acquired skill or talent. (American Heritage Dictionary, 1985)

*Reliability* is the extent to which it is possible to generalize from an observation of a specific behavior observed at a specific time by a specific person to observations conducted on similar behavior, at different times, or by different observers. *Validity* is the extent to which a test measures what its authors or users claim it measures. Specifically, test validity concerns the appropriateness of the inferences that can be made on the basis of test results. (Salvia and Ysseldyke, 1991)

Reliable, valid, intellectual or cognitive ability tests (e.g., Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children – Revised (WISC-R), and Stanford-Binet) can be administered and interpreted only by qualified personnel who have been appropriately trained. Standardized tests must be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used and must be administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel in accordance with any instructions provided by the producers of the test.

Cognitive ability tests used to estimate ability may be verbal and/or performance tests. Verbal abilities are more typically highly correlated with language learning, therefore it is especially important to remember that a verbal test score may be affected by a specific learning disability. The verbal test scores of a student with specific learning disabilities that affect oral language are not an accurate indicator of the student's general learning ability. Use of verbal test scores in such instances might eliminate from learning disabilities services those students most in need. For example, if a student with deficient oral language requiring extensive programming in language and conceptual areas is not identified as having a learning disability, that student would not receive this type of service emphasis and would therefore be deprived of an appropriate education.

When either the verbal or performance score is substantially lower than the other, the low score will exert a masking effect upon the full scale or composite score. The test administrator may recommend, therefore, that the higher score be used in the calculation of severe discrepancy. This higher score will be the frame of reference when the team determines whether a specific learning disability exists.

Other standardized tests of ability (e.g., cognitive section of the Woodcock-Johnson) administered by qualified personnel may be used when there is limited or no access to a school psychologist. It is critical that personnel be trained in both administration and interpretation of the specific instrument used.

#### Sec. 500.532

**Evaluation Procedures.** Each public agency shall ensure, at a minimum, that the following requirements are met:

(e) Tests are selected and administered so as best to ensure that if a test is administered to a child with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, the test results accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factors the test purports to measure, rather than reflecting the child's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills (unless those skills are the factors that the test purports to measure).

### ***Influences of Social or Cultural Background***

It cannot be concluded that test scores represent the individual's learning ability if the child's culture, language, or environmental exposures are substantially different from that inherent in the test instrument. The intellectual or cognitive ability test lacks validity for such individuals. (Further information regarding culture, environment, or economic disadvantage is found in Appendix A.)

#### **Sec. 300.532 (a) (2)**

**Evaluation Procedures.** Each public agency shall ensure, at a minimum, that the following requirements are met:

(2) Materials and procedures used to assess a child with limited English proficiency are selected and administered to ensure that they measure the extent to which the child has a disability and needs special education, rather than measuring the child's English language skills.

Extreme caution should be used when the student's ethnic group is not adequately represented in the norm sample. Information about the norm sample can be found in the test manual. Tribal and regional differences must be considered in determining whether the norm sample is representative when used for Native American students. For example, Turtle Mt. Chippewa norms would not necessarily be applicable to the Mandan-Arikara-Hidatsa people.

When the student's ethnic group is not adequately represented in the norm sample, alternative testing methods, such as those below, should be used.

- Curriculum Based Assessment/Measurement
- Criterion Referenced Test
- Informal Inventories
- Observations
- Checklists
- Portfolios/work samples
- Ecological assessment

### ***Drawing a Conclusion About a Student's Ability Level***

An estimate of ability level cannot be based solely on test results. Teacher report, observations of classroom performance by someone other than the student's teacher, and the parents' observations all contribute information to be considered in determining ability level.

Many education professionals are accustomed to relying on standardized intellectual or cognitive ability tests when determining an individual's ability level. The need for extreme caution in the interpretation of test findings is re-emphasized here. An estimated *range of ability level* (e.g., average, above average), rather than using one score, should be determined after considering all sources of information.

It is possible that the more severe and pervasive the disability, the greater the effect may be on the student's ability test scores, and the more critical it becomes to rely on information other than test scores in determining ability level. Students suspected of having a specific learning disability must be observed in a variety of situations to seek out specific ways in which true ability can be demonstrated.



## **Determination of Severe Discrepancy**

To identify a student as having a specific learning disability a multidisciplinary team must determine that the student is not functioning commensurate with age and ability, and *that a severe discrepancy exists between achievement and ability.*

In determining whether the discrepancy between ability and achievement in a given academic area is severe, the team should consider the impact the discrepancy in that area has on the student's total functioning. When information from all sources is analyzed (e.g., teacher and parent observations) patterns of functioning, areas of need across settings and student compensation strategies, may emerge. This type of responsive analysis, i.e., analyzing the way the student responds to the demands of his/her environment, and identifying changes required for the student to succeed, will help the team arrive at:

- The impact the discrepancy has on the student's total functioning, and
- Whether the discrepancy is correctable without special education.

## **Comparing Estimated Achievement with Estimated Cognitive Ability**

When cognitive ability and achievement results are determined to be valid, reliable, and an accurate and comprehensive representation of the student's overall functioning, a comparison of the range of cognitive ability with the range of achievement is appropriate. Based on all of the assessment results, the multidisciplinary team determines whether a severe discrepancy exists between ability and achievement. In making this determination, the following questions should be addressed.

1. Is there a significant gap between the student's performance on the measure of intellectual or cognitive ability and the measures of achievement? Note that the professional judgement of the team will be used to determine whether the discrepancy is significant. This determination should occur when assessment results are shared and the Integrated Written Assessment Report is prepared.
2. Is there a significant gap between the student's performance on achievement measures in comparison to the average performance of the student's classroom peers? Note that this determination can only be made using measures based on the student's classroom curriculum.
3. If formal means are used to measure achievement, do informal results confirm or contradict the formal results? Note that informal/curriculum-based results should support formal results before a conclusion can be drawn about the student's performance in the area of achievement. If results of informal measures do not support formal results, the team should consider whether additional informal information should be gathered. When the team has all the information needed, professional judgement should be used to integrate and reconcile conflicting information and make a determination regarding the existence of a severe discrepancy.

*Professional judgment* is decision-making based on the common body of knowledge expected from the education, training, and experience related to a profession.

## Determining the Primary Disability

### The Exclusionary Clause

An exclusionary clause in the regulations to determine that a student has a specific learning disability states that the deficit must not be primarily the result of mental retardation, sensory deficit, severe emotional disturbance or cultural, environmental or economic disadvantage. The clause is not an absolute exclusion. Learning disabilities often occur along with other disabilities or environmental conditions. The National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities, in 1983, amended by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities in 1988, clarified this concept by emphasizing that learning disabilities can occur with other disabilities or depriving conditions. To determine a diagnosis of specific learning disabilities when another disability is present, the student must show difficulties over and above those that the other disability could have caused.

#### Sec. 300.541

#### Criteria for determining the existence of a specific learning disability.

(b) The team may not identify a child as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of--

- (1) A visual, hearing, or motor impairment;
- (2) Mental retardation;
- (3) Emotional disturbance; or
- (4) Environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

(Authority: Sec. 5(b), Pub. L. 94-142)

If the student has a disability in addition to a specific learning disability, the multidisciplinary team must document which has been established as the primary disability. The primary disability is the one that the team determines has the greatest impact on the student's classroom performance. Every suspected disability must be explored so that all of a student's unique needs are adequately analyzed and documented, and receive attention in the IEP planning process.

The team must state in the Integrated Written Assessment Report:

1. whether the student has mental retardation, sensory or motor impairment, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage and, if so;
2. whether that condition is the primary cause of the severe discrepancy.

In addition to a severe discrepancy in one or more of the achievement areas, a specific learning disability is further defined by significant difficulties in one or more of the basic psychological processes essential to learning (e.g., attention, memory, language, and concept development). Difficulties in these processes that are intrinsic to the individual, coexist with severe discrepancy and the data from assessing these processes provide valuable prescriptive information for intervention, but should not necessarily be viewed as the sole, specific cause of a specific learning disability. It is important when considering these processes to identify strengths as well as needs to (1) further document the presence of intraindividual differences, (2) assist in establishing overall ability level, and (3) assist in intervention development.

## Preparing the Integrated Written Assessment Report

The multidisciplinary team will write a report that integrates findings from all sources. The Integrated Written Assessment Report (IWAR) must be written in a manner that is understandable to parents and other professionals; it should not reiterate test scores that are not meaningful to parents or others. The school must provide a copy of the IWAR and the documentation of determination of eligibility to the parents.

Additional requirements that must be included in the IWAR are part of the process when evaluating children with specific learning disabilities. Each of these components must be included in the written report. These requirements are also included in Appendix C. SLD Evaluation Process Checklist.

The IWAR for a child with a specific learning disability must include:

- A statement of *whether the child has a specific learning disability*;
- A description of the *basis for the determination* that the child has a specific learning disability;
- A statement about any *relevant behavior* noted during the *observation* and the relationship of that behavior to the child's academic functioning;
- A description of any educationally relevant *medical information*;
- A statement of whether there is a *severe discrepancy* between ability and achievement that is *not correctable* without special education and related services; and
- A statement of team determination concerning the effects of *environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage*.

### Sec. 300-543

#### Written report.

(a) For a child suspected of having a specific learning disability, the documentation of the team's determination of eligibility, as required by Sec. 300.534(a)(2), must include a statement of-

- (1) Whether the child has a specific learning disability;
- (2) The basis for making the determination;
- (3) The relevant behavior noted during the observation of the child;
- (4) The relationship of that behavior to the child's academic functioning;
- (5) The educationally relevant medical findings, if any;
- (6) Whether there is a severe discrepancy between achievement and ability that is not correctable without special education and related services; and
- (7) The determination of the team concerning the effects of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

(b) Each team member shall certify in writing whether the report reflects his or her conclusion. If it does not reflect his or her conclusion, the team member must submit a separate statement presenting his or her conclusions.

(Authority: Sec. 5(b), Pub. L. 94-142)

**Appendix**

- A. OSEP Response to Letter of Inquiry
- B. Assessment and Decision Making
- C. SLD Evaluation Process Checklist
- D. Best Practices:
  - Written Report
  - Choice of Test Scores
  - Kinds of Informal Assessments

**NOTE!**

**These letters have been retyped for ease of reading. The original letters included the signatures of both parties.**

February 23, 1995  
FY95-0393

Dr. Thomas Hehir, Director  
Office of Special Education Programs  
United States Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave. SW  
Washington DC 20202

RE: Letter of Inquiry  
Evaluation and Culture

Dear Dr. Hehir:

The purpose of this letter is to request clarification regarding 34 CFR 300.541(b)(4) which state:

- (b) The team may not identify a child as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of
1. A visual, hearing, or motor impairment;
  2. Mental retardation;
  3. Emotional disturbance; or
  4. Environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

In providing technical assistance to the Bureau of Indian Affairs the issues of environment, culture and economic disadvantages are always significant factors when evaluating a student for possible eligibility under special education or Section 504. Today, American Indian children are placed in classes for the cognitively delayed and learning disabled in greater proportions than Asian American, Hispanic, and Anglo children (O'Connell, 1987; Office of Technology Assessment, 1990). Environmental factors unique to Indian communities, physical problems common to Indian children, language differences and deficits, sociopolitical determinants, cultural differences, and social/personal domains may all influence the assessment process and outcome. (Dana, 1984; Conner and Ibrahim, 1989; McShane, 1980).

The following is an excerpt from a letter provided by a school psychologist at the Turtle Mountain Agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in North Dakota. This is typical of the discussions and concerns regarding evaluation on reservations throughout our service area:

"In eligibility decisions, the Multidisciplinary Team must consider whether the reasons for referral or placement of a student, i.e., low achievement, misbehavior, or academic delay, are the result of economic or environmental disadvantage or cultural or linguistic differences and determine if one or more of these conditions are causing the student to achieve lower, misbehave more, or have an academic delay.

There is no guidance given and little is written about the word culture and what was meant by this word when the regulations were written. Each person assumes that others know what it is, and they rule it out as a reason for the disability routinely. In fact, in the form we now use from BIA Multidisciplinary Team Summary Report there is one check off for all three of these considerations-environmental, cultural, and

economic disadvantage as if they were one concept. One side criticism is that culture should not be considered a disadvantage.

I've looked up just two definitions of culture to determine what this concept means and its relation to eligibility decisions.

Linton, 1945:

- The configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose components and elements are shared by members of a particular society.

Stephen Sanderson (1995) stated there is no universal agreement as to the meaning of this concept and defines culture in this way:

- Total life ways characteristic of the members of society, including tools, knowledge and patterned ways of thinking and acting, that are learned and shared and are not the direct product of biological inheritance.

He goes on to state that there are four primary characteristics of culture:

1. rests in symbols
2. is learned—does not depend on biological inheritance for transmission
3. is a system that is shared by members of society; and is representative of the members of a society considered collectively
4. is integrated—the component aspects fit together in such a way that they are consistent with one another.

Ethnicity has also been used in conjunction with culture. This has also been defined. Ethnicity is a term that seems to be used to mean a group that is distinct from others based on cultural factors, rather than biological, as in racial differences.”

Clarification to the questions listed below would assist in making proper decisions on eligibility to special education.

1. How does a Multidisciplinary Team really determine if culture, environment or economic disadvantage is the prime factor for the student's problems or if she/he is disabled and eligible for special education services?
2. Is it necessary to use standardized tests and determine severe discrepancy for American Indian students, since most do not include this group in the norming process and are invalid because of cultural issues?
3. How do we sort out the role of environment, language and culture in assessing student's performance on a standardized test?

The issues of culture, economic disadvantage and environment has been difficult for teams determining eligibility. The over-representation of minority students in special education is probably partially related to the evaluations inability to rule out these factors as causes for school problems.

Clarification of these questions and any other guidance will be extremely appreciated.

Sincerely,

John Copenhaver

JC/af

C: Paul Dauphinais

Mr. John Copenhaver  
Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center  
Utah State University  
1780 North Research Parkway, Suite 112  
Logan, Utah 84322-9620

Dear Mr. Copenhaver:

This is in response to your letters to the office of Special Education Programs dated February 23, 1995 and January 3, 1996. Please excuse the delay in issuing our response.

The focus of your inquiry is the regulation at 34 CFR §300.541(b)(4), which states:

(b) The team may not identify a child as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of:

4. Environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

According to your letter, staff of the Bureau of Indian Affairs have experienced difficulties in applying this regulation to determine whether a student has a specific learning disability (SLD). Therefore, your letter asks the following questions:

1. How does a Multidisciplinary Team really determine if culture, environment or economic disadvantage is the prime factor for the student's problems or if she/he is disabled and eligible for special education services?

Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Part B) specifies that each student's evaluation must be made by a multidisciplinary team or group of persons, including at least one teacher or other specialist with knowledge in the area of suspected disability. 34 CFR §300.532(e). If a child is suspected of having a learning disability, the additional team members specified at 34 CFR §300.540 also must be included on this multidisciplinary team. The team must include in its evaluation report a determination of the effects of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. 34 CFR §300.543(b)(7). In all instances, we believe that Part B contemplates that individual evaluation determinations must be made for each student. See 34 CFR §300.531 and §300.500(c).

We have found no explicit discussion of the issues raised by your inquiry in prior policy guidance. However, you may find instructive the following excerpt from the preamble to the final regulations on Procedures for Evaluating Specific Learning Disabilities, published in the Federal Register in 1977. In response to public comments seeking an explanation regarding the "procedural approach" taken in those regulations, the following response was provided by the former U.S. Office of Education:

**Response.** Those with specific learning disabilities may demonstrate their handicap through a variety of symptoms such as hyperactivity, distractibility, attention problems, concept association problems, etc. The end result of the effects of these symptoms is a severe discrepancy between achievement and ability. If there is no severe discrepancy between how much should have been learned and what has been learned, there would not be a disability in learning. However, other handicapping and sociological conditions may result in a discrepancy between ability and achievement. There are those for whom these conditions are the primary factors affecting achievement. In such cases, the severe discrepancy may be primarily the result of these factors and not of a severe learning problem. For the purpose of these regulations, when a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement exists which cannot be explained by the presence of other known factors that lead to such a discrepancy, the cause is believed to be a specific learning disability.

It was on this basic concept that these regulations were developed.

42 Fed. Reg. 65081, 65085 (Dec. 29, 1977) (emphasis added).

This explanation suggests that while environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage could be relevant to the team in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, they cannot be the primary factors underlying the team's determination. However, the ultimate determination of the effects of environmental, cultural, and economic disadvantage on a student's learning problems are left to each student's evaluation team.

2. Is it necessary to use standardized tests and determine severe discrepancy for American Indian students, since most do not include this group in the norming process and are invalid because of cultural issues?
3. How do we sort out the role of environment, language and culture in assessing student's performance on a standardized test?

Because these questions are related, we have combined our response. As with your previous question, OSEP has not addressed these specific questions in prior policy guidance. Part B permits evaluations of students to be accomplished by means of testing or other evaluation materials. Section 300.532 of the Part B regulations specifies that, at a minimum, testing or other evaluation materials:

- (1) Are provided and administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so;
- (2) Have been validated for the specific purpose for which they are used; and
- (3) Are administered by trained personnel in conformance with the instructions provided by their producer.

34 CFR §300.532(a)(1)-(3).

In addition, 34 CFR §300.530 requires that "[t]esting and evaluation materials and procedures used for the purposes of evaluation and placement...be selected and administered so as not to be racially or culturally discriminatory."

Whether evaluations are to be accomplished by means of testing or other evaluation materials is a matter left to the discretion of the student's multidisciplinary team, provided that the particular test or evaluation material satisfies the requirements at 34 CFR §§300.530, 300.532, and any other applicable State or local requirements. OSEP does not interpret 34 CFR §300.532(a)(2) to mean that tests or other evaluation materials must be validated for use for particular populations of students, but only for the specific purpose for which they are being used—i.e., measuring intelligence.

While you are familiar with a number of resources in this area, we thought you might find helpful the discussion of the effect of culture in the assessment of the presence of a disability in children contained in publications of the National Information Center on Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY). In the event that you have not reviewed these publications previously, we have enclosed copies of two pertinent NICHCY publications for your information.

We hope that this explanation and the enclosed information are helpful to you. Thank you for taking the time to write and sharing these challenging issues with us.

Sincerely,

Thomas Hehir  
Director  
Office of Special Education Programs

Enclosure



**NICHCY News Digest**  
**Volume 4, Number 1, 1994**  
***Assessing Children for the Presence of a Disability***  
**by Betsey B. Waterman, Ph.D.**  
**State University of New York at Oswego**

**Section Four:**  
**Assessing Students Who Are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse**

It is a well-known fact that the demographics of American schools are changing. Many students come from ethnic, racial, or linguistic backgrounds that are different from the dominant culture, and this number is steadily increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Much concern has been expressed in recent years about the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs, particularly in programs for students with mild disabilities, and a great deal of research has been conducted to identify the reasons why. Many factors appear to contribute, including considerable bias against children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, particularly those who are poor (Harry, 1992). The style and emphasis of the school may also be very different from those found in the cultures of students who are racially or linguistically diverse. Because culture and language affect learning and behavior (Franklin, 1992), the school system may misinterpret what students know, how they behave, or how they learn. Students may appear less competent than they are, leading educators to inappropriately refer them for assessment. Once referred, inappropriate methods may then be used to assess the students, leading to inappropriate conclusions and placement into special education.

There is also a great deal of research and numerous court decisions (e.g., Larry P. v. Riles, 1979; Guadalupe v. Tempe Elementary District, 1972) to support the fact that standardized tests (particularly intelligence and achievement tests) are often culturally and linguistically biased against students from backgrounds different from the majority culture. On many tests, being able to answer questions correctly too often depends upon having specific culturally-based information or knowledge. If students have not been exposed to that information through their culture, or have not had the experiences that lead to gaining specific knowledge, then they will not be able to answer certain questions at all or will answer them in a way that is considered "incorrect" within the majority culture. This can lead to inappropriate conclusions about students' ability to function within the school setting.

Therefore, when students come from a nondominant culture or speak a language other than English, care must be taken in how they are evaluated. "All professionals involved in the assessment process need to be aware that their beliefs and perceptions may not match those of the population they serve" (Hoy & Gregg, 1994, p. 65). Because most cognitive, language, and academic measures are developed using standards of the majority English-speaking culture, their use with students who are not from that culture may be inappropriate. It is, therefore, imperative that the evaluation team collect the majority of their information about the student in other ways, such as through interviews, observations, and approaches such as dynamic assessment, which has shown promise for use with minority students (Lidz, 1987). "Professionals must attend carefully to the overall picture of a child's background and performance" states Harry (1992), and adds that "assessment cannot be complete without an understanding of whether prior instruction has been adequate and appropriate" (p. 87).

To this end, Ortiz (1986) recommends that such students first undergo the prereferral process mentioned earlier. Many schools are moving toward requiring a prereferral process before any individualized evaluation is done. The purpose of the prereferral process is "to determine if appropriate and sufficient approaches have been attempted" (Wallace, Larsen, & Elksnin, 1992, p. 467). This allows the school to adjust instruction or make other classroom modifications and see if these changes address the problem being noted. The prereferral process includes:

- direct observation of the student in the regular classroom;
- analyzing how the student behaves and interacts verbally in different settings; and
- reviewing the methods of instruction that are used in the regular classroom.

It is also important to interview people who are familiar with the student, for these individuals can provide a wealth of information about his or her intents, adaptive behavior, how he or she processes information and approaches learning, language ability, and (in the case of students who are not native speakers of English) language dominance. Interviewers should be aware, however, that the differing culture and/or language of those being interviewed can seriously affect the nature and interpretation of information gathered. Some understanding of how individuals within that culture view disability, the educational system, and authority figures will be helpful in designing, conducting, and interpreting a culturally sensitive interview. [See Harry, 1992, for an interesting discussion of the traditional worldviews of the African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian cultures; she defines a group's "worldview" as its members "underlying beliefs about humanity's purpose and place in the universe, beliefs that affect codes of personal and interpersonal behavior as well as attitudes to the health, life, and death of human beings (p. 25).] It may be particularly useful to gather information from the home environment, which will help the assessment team develop an understanding of the student within his or her own culture. To facilitate this, parents need to communicate openly with the school and share their insight into their child's behaviors, attitudes, successes and needs, and, when appropriate, information about the minority culture.

Before conducting any formal testing of a student who is a non-native speaker of English, it is vital to determine the student's preferred language and to conduct a comprehensive language assessment in both English and the native language. Examiners need to be aware that it is highly inappropriate to evaluate students in English when that is not their dominant language (unless the purpose of the testing is to assess the student's English language proficiency). Translating tests from English is not an acceptable practice either; the IDEA states that tests and other evaluation materials must be provided and administered in the child's primary language or mode of communication unless it is clearly not feasible to do so [34 CFR Section 300.532(a)(1)]. If possible, the evaluator in any testing situation or interview should be familiar to the child and speak the child's language.

When tests or evaluation materials are not available in the student's native language, examiners may find it necessary to use English-language instruments. Because this is a practice fraught with the possibility of misinterpretation, examiners need to be cautious in how they administer the test and interpret results. Alterations may need to be made to the standardized procedures used to administer tests; these can include paraphrasing instructions, providing a demonstration of how test tasks are to be performed, reading test items to the student rather than having him or her read them, allowing the student to respond verbally rather than in writing, or allowing the student to use a dictionary (Wallace, Larsen, & Elksnin, 1992, p. 471). However, if any such alterations are made, it is important to recognize that standardization has been broken, limiting the usefulness and applicability of test norms. Results should be cautiously interpreted, and all alterations made to the testing procedures should be fully detailed in the report describing the student's test performance. As mentioned earlier, it is also essential that other assessment approaches be an integral part of collecting information about the student.

A full discussion of the recommended procedures for evaluating students from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds is beyond the scope of this News Digest, yet it is a topic of great importance. We have listed many books and articles on the subject in the bibliographies on assessment we offer separately for families and for schools.

## Assessment and Decision Making

“In spite of the deficiencies of prevailing practices, each day professionals are called upon to access and make decisions about individuals with learning problems. Unfortunately, for now they must do so using a relatively weak knowledge base.”

Adelman and Taylor, 1993, p. 95

The assessment of learning problems is not without its limitations. The technical characteristics of many of the tools and procedures used to assess learning problems have been challenged as inadequate, inappropriate or both. And, while concern continues to persist that decision making about learning problems is too subjective, research has shown that even when relatively objective assessment data are available the decisions often are subjective and not supported by the objective data.

Prevailing practices in assessing students with learning problems also have come under fire for focusing too much on the individual and neglecting the environment. Accordingly, assessment that focuses on describing the deficits within the individual and overlooks the possible mismatch between the learner and environmental variables has been criticized. Similarly, concerns have been raised about assessment practices that seem to be deficit focused rather than solution driven.

### ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

Despite the litany of technical problems with available assessment tools and procedures and the various criticisms and shortcoming of decision making about students experiencing learning problems, educators are still faced with the challenge of assessing needs and planning interventions for these students. With this challenge in mind, the following minimal standards are provided to guide the selection of assessment tools and decision making throughout the identification process.

- (1) The purpose for assessment needs to be clearly articulated and understood by all individuals involved.
- (2) The type of data collected must match the purpose of assessment.
- (3) The amount of data collected must be sufficient to answer assessment questions in a reasonable and responsible manner.
- (4) The quality of the data must be considered in the decision making process.
- (5) Assessment needs to be multifaceted and include:
  - multiple data sources (e.g., teachers, parent, students, other service providers familiar with the student)
  - multiple types of data (e.g., qualitative and quantitative)
  - multiple types of tools and procedures
  - multiple environments (e.g., various classrooms, home, school, community)
- (6) Assessment needs to consider performance across time, not just data from a single point in time. Assessment should be viewed as an information gathering process that occurs across time rather than an isolated, time-bound event.
- (7) Assessment tools and procedures need to meet generally accepted standards of technical adequacy of reliability and validity for decision making about individuals.
- (8) Assessment tools and procedures need to be culturally, racially, and linguistically unbiased.

- (9) The assessment process should provide prescriptive information regarding interventions and include documentation of an individual's strengths as well as weaknesses.
- (10) Decision making about an individual should be based upon professional judgment that considers both quantitative and qualitative data about an individual's performance.
- (11) The assessment process involves the systematic collection of meaningful, relevant information about an individual's learning problem.
- (12) Assessment is a solution-focused process with the purpose of searching for answers to well-defined questions and not solely determining a condition or classification.
- (13) The limitations of assessment tools and procedures, and the tentative nature of conclusions based on data from these tools and procedures need to be clearly stated and understood by all individuals involved in the assessment and decision-making process.
- (14) The criteria for deficits or discrepancies vary depending on the assessment procedures and the specific questions being addressed. Different assessment methods are different units of measurement; thus the standard for a significant deficit of severe discrepancy varies across procedures.

(Adapted from LD Assessment and Decision Making, Iowa Department of Education, March 1999)





## SLD EVALUATION PROCESS CHECKLIST

School/Case Manager: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

### FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR INITIAL EVALUATION AND REEVALUATION

This checklist is intended to be a helpful reminder of additional requirements when evaluating a child suspected of having a specific learning disability or reevaluating a child with an identified specific learning disability. Multidisciplinary team members must also follow evaluation procedures described in North Dakota Department of Public Instruction *Guidelines: Evaluation Process (8/1/99)*.

#### Additional Procedures for Evaluating Children with Specific Learning Disabilities (300.540-300.543)

1. Additional team members must include (300.540)
- \_\_\_ a. the child's regular teacher, or
  - \_\_\_ b. a regular classroom teacher qualified to teach a child of his or her age, or
  - \_\_\_ c. for a child less than school age, an individual qualified to teach a child of his or her age
- AND**
- \_\_\_ d. at least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children
2. Observation (300.542)
- \_\_\_ a. at least one team member other than the child's regular teacher must observe the child's academic performance in the regular classroom setting; or
  - \_\_\_ b. in the case of a child less than school age or out of school, a team member must observe the child in an environment appropriate for a child of that age.
3. For a child suspected of having a specific learning disability, the documentation of the team's determination of eligibility will include (300.543):
- \_\_\_ a. whether the child has a specific learning disability;
  - \_\_\_ b. the basis for making the determination;
  - \_\_\_ c. the relevant behavior noted during the observation of the child;
  - \_\_\_ d. the relationship of that behavior to the child's academic functioning;
  - \_\_\_ e. the educationally relevant medical findings, if any;
  - \_\_\_ f. whether there is severe discrepancy between achievement and ability that is not correctable without special education and related services; and
  - \_\_\_ g. the determination of the team concerning the effects of environment, cultural or economic disadvantage.
  - \_\_\_ h. each team member will certify in writing whether the report reflects his/her conclusion, if it does not reflect his or her conclusion, the team member must submit a separate statement presenting his or her conclusions.

## Best Practices

Compiled by Dr. Lynne Chalmers, Professor/Coordinator of Special Education  
University of North Dakota, EHD/Special Education Department

### WRITTEN REPORT

(1) Individual written reports are not required by the state, but may be required by individual special education units. The information from all evaluators is integrated by the team. The team then decides whether the student has a learning disability.

In analyzing and interpreting formal and informal data to share with the team, LD teachers may find the following process helpful:

1. Make 2 kinds of comparisons:
  - A. Interindividual – compare formal and informal performance results with other students
  - B. Intraindividual – compare the various formal and informal performances of the individual student
2. For formal tests, discuss performance in ranges and DO NOT report scores
  - A. Above average – more than 2 Standard Deviations (SD) above the mean
  - B. High average – 1 to 2 SDs above the mean
  - C. Average – 1 SD above and below the mean
  - D. Low average – 1 to 2 SDs below the mean
  - E. Below average – more than 2 SDs below the mean
3. Include qualitative information you may have gathered from doing item analysis and other informal assessments
4. Discuss ways in which performance in one area may be affecting performance in another area.
5. Discuss the student's academic and social performance in the classroom
  - A. Can the student read and understand the classroom textbooks?
  - B. Are there social skills deficits apparent in the classroom?
  - C. Is the student able to listen effectively, participate in classroom discussions, follow directions, etc.?
6. Tie all formal and informal results together looking for
  - A. Themes
  - B. Patterns
  - C. Discrepancies

### Choice of Test Scores: Why Age/Grade/Scores/Equivalents Should Not Be Used

Age and grade scores only **appear** to provide precise and understandable information about a student's performance level. If a student earns a grade score of 5.4, this means that he has earned a raw score equivalent to that of fifth grade students in the norm group and not that the student is performing at a fifth grade level. Nor do they indicate which test questions were answered incorrectly. Two students can earn the same age or grade scores on a test, but not answer any of the same questions correctly. Also, remember that from grade 2.3 to 2.4 is not the same jump in progress as is the move from grade 9.3 to 9.4, since grade scores (and age scores) are not interval scores. One



month in second grade does not equal one month in grade nine. As an example, if a fourth grade student earns a math score 6.9 on a test, it does not mean that he has mastered the math processes taught in the sixth grade. He undoubtedly obtained the score largely by superior performance in fourth grade math. It certainly could not be concluded that he has the prerequisite skills for seventh grade math (Anastasi, 1988).

## KINDS OF INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

### I. Direct and Unobtrusive Procedures

#### A. Observation

1. Anecdotal (continuous or narrative recording): the teacher observes and records all the behaviors a student exhibits during some set time period.
2. Sequence Analysis/ABC Analysis (antecedent, behavior, consequences): in addition to doing continuous recording, the teacher records events or actions that precede and follow each behavior to provide information about how events in the environment may influence a student's behavior.
3. Functional Behavior Assessment (why did the student do what he did?):  
a description of the undesirable behavior
  - a. a prediction of the times and situations when this behavior will and will not occur across daily routines
  - b. a description of the maintaining reinforcers that the behavior produces for the student
4. Specific Behavior Observation:
  - a. event recording—frequency of behavior is documented (every time the behavior occurs)
  - b. time sampling—student is observed at the end of a set interval (3 minutes or longer) and behavior is recorded as occurring or not occurring
  - c. interval recording—student is observed for an entire interval of time (usually 3-5 seconds) and behavior is recorded as occurring or not occurring. [for observing several students or behaviors at one time, for frequent behaviors such as talking with peers]
  - d. duration recording—observing length of time behavior occurs by recording the time a behavior begins and time the behavior ends
  - e. latency recording—time it takes to begin a behavior after stimulus has occurred (for example, the time it takes a student to begin working after being told to get to work)

#### B. Work Sample Analysis—actual examples of the student's work are used

1. Response Analysis: considers both the correct and incorrect responses of a student
2. Error Analysis: looks at only the errors a student makes and the error patterns

### II. Curriculum-based Measures

#### A. Inventories—screening devices that assess selected portions of the curriculum

1. Teacher-made and designed
2. Published
  - a. Reading IRI's (informal reading inventories)

- B. Diagnostic Probes and Teaching—the systematic manipulation of instructional conditions to determine the most appropriate strategy for teaching a particular skill to a student
    - 1. Cloze and maze procedures for reading comprehension
    - 2. Timings (one minute probes of specific skills)
    - 3. Textbook checks (can the student read the text?)
      - a. fluency (speed and accuracy)
      - b. comprehension questions
        - (1) literal/factual
        - (2) inferential
        - (3) sequential
- III. Procedures Using Informants (teachers, parents, students, etc.)
- A. Checklists and Rating Scales—structured assessments that post specific questions in written form for informants to respond to orally or in writing
  - B. Questionnaires and Interviews—also used to elicit information from informants, but may have more open-ended questions (often used with students as the informants)
    - 1. clinical interview—interview questions are designed to identify strategies the student uses when performing a task

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