

# SLD TAP #5 – Observation of Students Suspected of Having a SLD

The state of Washington’s special education regulations were expanded to provide additional options for determining SLD eligibility in 2007, including those that provide for the use of, “a process based upon a student’s response to scientific, research-based interventions ([WAC 392-172A-03060](#)).” This fact sheet addresses [WAC 392-172A-03075](#), Observation of students suspected of having a specific learning disability.

**Figure 1. Washington’s Five Criteria for SLD Identification (adapted from Kovaleski et al., 2023).**

<p><b>1 Inadequate Achievement</b></p> <p>Failure to achieve adequately for the child’s age or to meet state-approved grade level standard in one or more of the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral expression</li> <li>• Listening comprehension</li> <li>• Written expression</li> <li>• Basic reading skills</li> <li>• Reading fluency skills</li> <li>• Reading comprehension</li> <li>• Mathematics calculation</li> <li>• Mathematics problem solving</li> </ul>	+	<p><b>2 Insufficient Progress</b></p> <p>The student does not make sufficient progress to meet age or state grade level standards in one or more of the areas identified in column (1) when using a process based on the student’s response to scientific, research-based intervention.</p>	+	<p><b>3 Rule Out Alternative Primary Factors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A visual, hearing, or motor disability;</li> <li>• An intellectual disability;</li> <li>• Emotional/behavioral disability</li> <li>• Cultural factors;</li> <li>• Environmental or economic disadvantage; or</li> <li>• Limited English proficiency.</li> </ul>	+	<p><b>4 Rule out Lack of Appropriate Instruction</b></p> <p>Document:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruction was delivered by qualified personnel;</li> <li>• High quality core curriculum;</li> <li>• designed to meet the instructional needs of all students; and</li> <li>• Repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals were conducted.</li> </ul>
Inclusionary						Exclusionary
+ Observation						
<b>5. Student Requires Special Education</b>						



## Observation Requirements

WAC [392-172A-03075](#) provides district obligation for observing students suspected of having a learning disability. WAC 392-172A-03075 lists two primary components of observation:

- “(1) School districts must ensure that a student who is suspected of having a specific learning disability is observed in the student's learning environment, including the general education classroom setting, to document the student's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty.
- (2) The evaluation group must:
  - (a) Use information from an observation in routine classroom instruction and monitoring of the student's performance that was done before the student was referred for an evaluation; or
  - (b) Have at least one member of the evaluation group conduct an observation of the student's academic performance in the general education classroom after the student has been referred for an evaluation and parental consent is obtained...”

Planning for and use of observation data for decision-making should be a planned process, beginning with gaining and understanding of the design and implementation of universal instruction prior to observations within the classroom environment. Understanding instructional design, delivery, and fidelity is imperative to developing context for the observation.

Observations of the student in general education and intervention serve to answer the question about student response to instruction within the educational environment providing information to inform future instruction. Furthermore, student specific observations across general education and intervention settings can support decision making about the intensity, frequency, and duration of instruction unique to the student, and whether or not the instruction needs to be addressed through specially designed instruction or adapted content in the general education environment.

## Recommendations for Observations Completed After a Referral for Evaluation and Parental Consent

The observation requirement, conducted after an individual student is referred (i.e. an evaluation is determined necessary, and parental consent is obtained), is strictly focused on the learner and involves collecting learner-targeted observation data specific to the area(s) of concern. This observation must document areas of strength as well as area(s) of need and is intended to address specific referral questions. **It should assist in informing decisions relative to instructional design and delivery specific to the learner and must be conducted by a qualified professional who is not the teacher of the child.**

The RIOT/ICEL framework is the recommended framework for teams to operate. The systematic observation data brought forward should assist in the documentation to ensure student skill and performance deficits are indeed due to a SLD, and not due to lack of appropriate instruction.

The added descriptor of “systematic” to the observation requirement is intended to move teams/individuals from anecdotal or narrative summaries of what they observe to a more structured and quantifiable approach to collecting & reporting observation data. A summary of the observation requirements and examples of observation types that may be used within an instructional model of evaluation and identification for SLD is provided in the following table:

<b>Fidelity of Instruction and Intervention Observation Data:</b> (often provided as ‘existing data’)		
<b>Observation Focus:</b>	<b>Observation Setting:</b>	<b>Example Types:</b>
Instruction/ Curriculum/ Environment	Core Instruction (Delivery/Response)	- Classroom Walkthroughs - Structured Observation Checklist
Instruction/ Curriculum/ Environment	Intervention (Delivery/Response)	<i>Program/Practice Specific</i> - Structured Observation Checklist
<b>Learner Specific Observation Data:</b> (often gathered during the evaluation process)		
<b>Observation Focus:</b>	<b>Observation Setting:</b>	<b>Example Types:</b>
Learner	Routine classroom instruction	- Event Recording Tools - Duration & Latency Recording Tools - Time Sampling Interval Recording Tools

From NCDPI Exceptional Children Division (2021). [SLD Policy Fact Sheet #6 – Observation Requirements](#)

A variety of tools exist to support observation of the instructional, curricular, and educational environment of the student. The ICEL/RIOT table provides a tool to structure information gathering for district staff and guides the observer to gather information in the areas of Instruction, Curriculum, Environment, and Learner, through data collection methods of Review, Interview, Observe, Test

(<https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/using-matrix-guide-intensification>)

The observation may assist the Special Education Evaluation team in answering the following questions:

1. How does the student respond to instructional, intervention and environmental variables?
2. Are curriculum materials and instructional practices research-based?
3. Are curriculum materials and instructional practices implemented with fidelity?
4. What is the impact of instruction on student outcomes (refer to SLD TAP #4 for guidance on high-quality universal instruction)?
5. Is the classroom environment organized to support engagement, differentiation, and student behavior?

Observations can be conducted by multiple professionals on the Evaluation Team, but should ultimately be conducted by professionals who have knowledge of school district procedures, information about district curriculum and instruction, and an understanding of universal instruction and tiered intervention, and classroom management. Additionally, for multilingual students, the observation should be conducted by a professional who is knowledgeable about instruction for multilingual students as well as any cultural and or linguistics characteristics of the individual child. The observation should not be conducted by the primary professional who is delivering instruction. The observation can be conducted by one professional, or multiple professionals, and information from the observation(s) should be brought to the evaluation team for review and consideration of its impact on student achievement. *Furthermore, observation can be conducted prior to the evaluation (during intervention) or during the evaluation. Observations should be conducted in the general education setting as well as in the intervention setting.*

Direct observation of student behavior and response to instruction provides an opportunity to quantify the quality and effectiveness of instruction and help to determine if the student's difficulties are a function of how a student is taught, rather than a lack of skills due to disability (Kovalevski et al, p. 161). During a direct observation, key behaviors to gather information about include:

- Student active engagement in instruction (opportunities to respond to questions, tasks, active engagement).
- Off-task behaviors, or behaviors incompatible with learning (physical or motor activities not aligned to instruction, passive learning, engaging in other work activities, off-topic verbalization, disengagement).

Methods for direct student observation can include:

**Narrative Observations** document the process of instruction and student response to instruction. This type of observation typically describes events occurring in the classroom, without providing analysis or understanding of the relationship between variables and can be subjective in nature. As such, this method of observation is not recommended as the primary source for understanding the instructional/environmental impact on student outcomes.

## **A Modified Narrative Observation or Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence (ABC)**

observation is an objective method for analyzing the events transpiring between the student and environment/instruction. In the ABC recording, the observer records a behavior and events that precede and follow a behavior. Over time, this allows for observing identified patterns in the student behavioral response and drawing correlations between the behavior, antecedents, and consequences.

Another method for observation is systematic **direct observation**. The systematic observation can be utilized to gather information on:

- The frequency or event of a behavior; the number of times a behavior occurs.
- The rate of a behavior: the number of times a behavior occurs within a given time period.
- The duration of a behavior: the amount of time a behavior occurs from start to finish.
- The latency of time it takes for a student to respond to a prompt.
- Inter-response time: the amount of time between two interconnected behaviors.

Methods of systematic observation include:

- Whole Interval Recording: Does the behavior occur during the entire time designated for observation?
- Partial Interval Recording: Does the behavior occur at pre-specified intervals across the observation period? How does the rate of behavior observed compare to that of peers?
- Momentary Time Sampling: Does the target behavior occur in a snapshot time period designated. For instance, if you are observing at 10-second intervals, what behavior is present or absent at the 10-second mark, no sooner or later.

The number of lessons covered per week can also be reviewed to determine the rate of mastering new information, as well as mastery of content learned. Collectively, this information can support how the student is progressing in the general education curriculum, as well as variables or factors contributing to the learning. Please see TAP #2 for additional information.

## **Tools**

School District administration will want to identify and agree on observation tools to be utilized across the district, to promote consistency in information gathered to inform decision making. Agreements between and within schools about observation protocol and tools will add to consistency and equitable decision making.

The following list of resources may be helpful to The District Team in identifying common practices and data tools:

- AIR, Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Self-Assessment of Classroom Management Practices: <https://mtss4success.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/classroom-management-assessment.pdf>
- PBIS.org Classroom Management: Self-Assessment Revised: <https://www.pbis.org/resource/positive-behavior-support-classroom-management-self-assessment>

- Classroom Management Observation Tool (CMOT): <https://nepbis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CMOT-9.27.19.pdf>
- iBEST, Opportunities to Respond: <https://www.education.uw.edu/ibest/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Opportunities-to-Respond.pdf>
- [OSPI English Language Arts Standards](#)
- National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII), Monitoring Student Progress for Behavioral Interventions (DBI Professional Learning Series Module 3): <https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/monitoring-student-progress-behavioral-interventions-dbi-training-series-module-3>
- Handout 2: Target Behavior Questionnaire: [https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/Handout 2 Target Behavior Questionnaire%20.pdf](https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/Handout%202%20Target%20Behavior%20Questionnaire%20.pdf)
- Handout 3: ABC Checklist: [https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/Handout 3 ABC Checklist%20.pdf](https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/Handout%203%20ABC%20Checklist%20.pdf)
- Handout 4: Anecdotal (ABC) Recording Form: [https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/HO-4-AnecdotalRecordingForm\\_508.pdf](https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/HO-4-AnecdotalRecordingForm_508.pdf)
- Handout 6: Direct Behavior Rating Individualization Form: [https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/HO-6-DirectBehavRateIndivForm\\_508.pdf](https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/HO-6-DirectBehavRateIndivForm_508.pdf)
- The Behavior Observation of Students in Schools (BOSS) is a measure designed specifically for direct observation of academic skills. Specifically, the measure includes two categories of engagement and three categories of nonengagement. The measure provides opportunities for peer comparisons and includes coding of type of instruction occurring in the classroom. The BOSS is available in multiple forms. The manual is available within the Shapiro and Clemens (2023) *Academic Skills Problems Workbook, Fifth Edition* (see references below).

An example of an observation protocol could include the following steps:

- The evaluation team reviews previously gathered data and determines next steps for observation information to gather.
- Review district standards for instruction, design of lesson materials, and fidelity of instruction delivery.
- Review classroom and intervention records of student academic progress including running records, lessons gained, formative assessments, social emotional learning surveys, and other relevant classroom collected data on the student response to instruction.
- Classroom observation to gather information about implementation of the general curriculum with a school- or team-developed fidelity tool.
- Classroom and intervention observation of student engagement (on-task vs. off task) as well as student behavior in response to the environment and instructional transaction (data can include ABC or systematic observation).

- The observer gathers information to report back to the evaluation team to discuss student performance within and across environments, as it is related to student instructional needs.

## Conclusion

Observation of Students Suspected of Having a Specific Learning Disability addressed how to observe a student within the general education and intervention instructional setting. Observation is a requirement to determine the interaction between the student and the instructional environment. This requirement must be completed with the inclusionary (Inadequate Achievement, SLD TAP #1 and Insufficient Progress, SLD TAP #2) and exclusionary factors (Ruling out Alternative Primary Factors SLD TAP #3 and Lack of Appropriate Instruction, SLD TAP #4), and within the context of a comprehensive evaluation.

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## References

Kovaleski, J.F., VanDerHeyden, A.M., Runge, T.J., Zirkel, P.A., & Shapiro, E.S. (2023). *The Rtl approach to evaluating learning disabilities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Guilford Press.

Shapiro, E.S., and Clemens, N.H. (2023) *Academic skills problems (5th ed.): Workbook*. Guilford Press.

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