

SLD TAP #6 – Conducting Comprehensive Evaluations for SLD Eligibility

Table 1. Washington’s Four Criteria for SLD Identification (adapted from Kovaleski et al., 2022).

<p>1 Inadequate Achievement</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"> • Oral expression • Listening comprehension • Written expression • Basic reading skills • Reading fluency skills • Reading comprehension • Mathematics calculation • Mathematics problem solving. 	+	<p>2 Insufficient Progress</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>3 Rule Out Alternative Primary Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A visual, hearing, or motor disability; • An intellectual disability; • Emotional/behavioral disability • Cultural factors; • Environmental or economic disadvantage; or • Limited English proficiency. 	+	<p>4 Rule out Lack of Appropriate instruction)</p> <p>Document:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction was delivered by qualified personnel; • High quality core curriculum • designed to meet the instructional needs of all students; and • Repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals were conducted.
Inclusionary		+ Observation		Exclusionary		
+ Student Needs Specially Designed Instruction						



The guidance for this document is from “Principles for SLD Eligibility: Practice and Policy Consideration for States and School Districts, A Comprehensive Evaluation for Special Education for a Child Suspected to Have a Specific Learning Disability” published in cooperation with Council of Administrators of Special Education, Council for Exceptional Children, Council for Learning Disabilities, Division for Learning Disabilities, National Association of Directors of Special Education, National Association of School Psychologists and National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Specific learning disabilities (SLDs), such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, are heterogenous disorders that impact skill acquisition and performance in reading, writing, and mathematics. SLDs may coexist with other conditions, including but not limited to communication disorders, disorders of attention, or giftedness¹. In order to evaluate a child’s eligibility for special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) requires that school districts “use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information, including information provided by the parent” to both assess “whether the child is a child with a disability” and “the educational needs of the child.”² School districts shall “use technically sound instruments” to assess children’s needs and must “not use any single measure or assessment as the sole criterion for determining whether a child is a child with a disability.”³

This technical assistance document covers the process of the comprehensive evaluation called for in IDEA. This provides guidance on the content of the comprehensive evaluation to meet legal and ethical guidelines.

Examples of evaluation documentation can be found in Appendix VI.

¹ Eligibility for Special Education Under a Specific Learning Disability Classification. (2019). Available at: <https://www.nclد.org/archives/reports-and-studies/sld-eligibility-under-idea-resources-to-improve-practice-policy>

² Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1414 (2004); Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities and Preschool Grants for Children with Disabilities

³ Ibid.

The Comprehensive Evaluation Process

According to WAC 392-172A-03020⁴:

In conducting the evaluation, the group of qualified professionals selected by the school district must:

(a) Use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the student, including information provided by the parent, that may assist in determining:

(i) Whether the student is eligible for special education services as defined in WAC [392-172A-01175](#); and

(ii) The content of the student's IEP, including information related to enabling the student to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum, or for a preschool child, to participate in appropriate activities;

Necessary Components⁵

Multidisciplinary teams should be involved in the evaluation. Teams of education professionals should provide a comprehensive perspective of a child's behavior and academic performance. Parents and, when appropriate, the child, are essential partners and should be part of these teams.

There should be a timely referral for an evaluation. A school team should consider a child for an evaluation when there is a suspicion of a disability, regardless of grade level, rather than wait until a child falls significantly behind academically or repeatedly demonstrates achievement below expectations. During the referral process, districts should be providing, documenting outcomes and adapting instructional interventions to support student growth within the core curriculum.

Evaluations should be comprehensive, tailored to the child's learning and behavior, and include valid and reliable measures. Teams of education professionals should collect information about the health, academic performance (including instructional response data), and behavior of each child while conducting an evaluation.

The specific types of valid and reliable measures used in the evaluation should be chosen based upon the specific referral questions the team is seeking to address for each individual child. **The specific referral question should not be, "Does the child/student need special**

⁴ Washington State Legislative Rules for the Provision of Special Education. Available at: <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=392-172A>

⁵ Ibid.

education?” A more precise referral question might be, “Is the child demonstrating an SLD based on their response to instruction in reading intervention?”

These teams of education professionals should determine what additional assessments, if any, are required to supplement the existing information about the child. Additionally, teams should consider the student’s native culture or language (and level of proficiency) to determine which assessments are appropriate and whether additional data might need to be collected. (Including data points outlined in SLD TAPs 1 -5)

Teams of education professionals should balance these multiple points of data, including information provided by the parents, to make an eligibility determination.

Consider behavior. SLDs can have a pronounced impact on a child’s behavior and confidence. Also, behavior can have a significant impact on academic performance. To fully assess the primary reason for the learning challenge, teams of education professionals should collect information about the child’s behavior and behavioral or emotional responses to teaching strategies in the core curriculum and targeted interventions as well as be in communication with families. Teams of education professionals should intensify intervention and gather data according to procedures outlined in TAPs 1-6. Educators should monitor student behavior and track progress based on consistent interventions. Please review SLD TAP # 5: Observing the Student Within Instruction and Intervention and SLD TAP #3: Ruling Out Alternative Primary Factors for more information on considering behavior as a primary cause of underachievement.

Consider external information provided by the parents. Teams of evaluators should consider the information and findings provided by the parents, including but not limited to outside evaluation, if available. If an outside evaluation uses an identification method that differs from the school district’s eligibility criteria—for instance, the external evaluation demonstrates a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement but the school district requires teams of education professionals to use instructional response data—teams of education professionals should conduct a comprehensive evaluation that meets the eligibility criteria set by the state or school district and use the external evaluation as additional data. Specifically, an outside evaluation cannot determine that a student meets the criteria for SLD without the school district team conducting a comprehensive evaluation that includes documentation of lack of response to increasing targeted interventions.

Carefully evaluate other possible primary causes of a learning challenge. As part of every evaluation for special education, teams of education professionals with parental input must rule out other factors—or exclusionary criteria—before determining that a child is eligible. Regardless of the disability category, teams of education professionals must rule out a lack of adequate instruction and a lack of English language proficiency. For evaluations of children suspected to have an SLD, teams of education professionals must also rule out other primary

factors, including intellectual disability, social emotional behavioral disabilities and economic factors⁶. (SLD TAP 3: Ruling Out Alternative Primary Factors)

Teams of education professionals should collect data that can help evaluate the existence and influence of these exclusionary criteria on a child's academic performance and consult recent research to explore the intersection between some of these factors and SLDs⁷. (See SLD TAPs 1 - 5)

Consider possible bias when selecting assessments and interpreting data. Evaluators best serve the needs of children when they collect data and administer assessments while continually scanning for bias that may disadvantage children from certain linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Rely on data based decision making and professional judgment and including input from families. SLDs are heterogeneous and influence children's learning and behavior differently. While valid and reliable measures are critical to providing teams of education professionals with valuable data to determine eligibility for special education, one score or calculation should not supersede evidence-based judgment of education professionals and parental input.

The following process was adapted from the Specific Learning Disability Guidelines, Colorado Department of Education, July 2023⁸.

The multidisciplinary team collaboratively designs a comprehensive evaluation plan that drives the full and individualized evaluation, informs eligibility decisions, and the creation of an appropriate instructional program, if necessary. Information collected during the RtI process prior to referral is part of the evaluation data and does not replace a full and individual evaluation. The Body of Evidence collected during the evaluation time frame, including RtI and other data collected prior to referral or as part of the evaluation process, is considered by the Multidisciplinary Team in determining whether the child has a disability as defined in the Washington Administrative Codes and is eligible for special education and related services.

As part of the decision-making process to refer a student for special education evaluation, the multidisciplinary team, including the parent, gathers all data relevant to the area of suspected disability and collaboratively reviews existing educational evidence, assessment results, and

⁶ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (2004); Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities and Preschool Grants for Children With Disabilities

⁷ Whittaker, M., & Ortiz, S. (2019). What a specific learning disability is not: Examining exclusionary factors [White paper]. Available at: <https://www.ncl.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/What-a-Specific-Learning-Disability-Is-Not-Examining-Exclusionary-Factors.pdf>

⁸ Specific Learning Disability Guideline, Colorado Department of Education. Available at: https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/guidelines_sld_draft_2019-02-25.

other relevant data on the child. Evaluation tools that might be considered in a full and individual evaluation include the following:

- Record review (including attendance, discipline, curriculum, prior referral for special education assessment, and other reports).
- Records of classroom instructional task completion and resulting products or work samples.
- Current classroom-based, local, and state assessments.
- Screening or interim assessments.
- Data regarding use of accommodations or interventions.
- If the student is an English Learner, data includes history of ESL services, prior years language proficiency assessments, and language status
- Criterion Referenced measures that compare student's performance to goals of curriculum.
- Progress monitoring assessment data.
- Classroom-based observation in areas of specific skill deficit (that may include academic, developmental, communicative, social/emotional, and functional skills checklists).
- Social, emotional, behavioral, executive functioning and/or attention data
- Diagnostic assessments.
- Standardized norm-referenced assessment.
- Evaluations and other information provided by the parents of the child (e.g., parent interview, medical or clinical evaluations, health or developmental history, incidents that may have resulted in brain/head injury, etc.).
- Other relevant quantitative or qualitative information from the child's teachers and support staff.
- Available data/information related to any of the individually relevant "exclusionary factors" outlined in eligibility criteria for SLD, or other areas of suspected disability (e.g., data to document appropriate instruction in reading and math, use of nonbiased assessment, language status/ English language proficiency level, sociocultural diversity, or presence of another disability) for the purpose of determining if any of other factors might be the "primary" cause of the student's learning difficulties.

Determining Eligibility

When making the determination for special education eligibility for an SLD, the multidisciplinary team must review the effectiveness of the instruction, the diagnostic information and the level of support needed by the student with a possible SLD. The following questions guide the team to the final decision regarding eligibility. The multidisciplinary team must consider the evidence provided in these questions for the final decision regarding the evidence of an SLD.

Effectiveness of Instruction (See SLD TAP #4)

- Does evidence exist that Tier I Instruction was effective with the majority (75-80%) of students who share this student's demographic characteristics?
- If evidence does not exist that most students are responding adequately to universal instruction, how does the student's performance compare to the majority? (For example, in a Title 1 school, if most students are performing below expectation, is the student's performance on par with the majority or does data reflect considerable difference?)
- Does evidence exist that this student's achievement and/or social/emotional or behavioral functioning differs significantly from that of other students with similar demographic characteristics (i.e., the stage of English Language Development)?
- Has the student been involved in (appropriately accessed) culturally relevant, evidence-based instruction in general education? If not, what are the reasons?
- Have parents been included in conversations about the student's performance? Were parents provided strategies to support learning (in the area(s) of need) at home?

Diagnostic Information

- Have diagnostic assessments, information from the DBI process and/or CBMs as defined in SLD TAP 1 and 2 been administered for the purpose of informing the selection and implementation of appropriate instruction/intervention, particularly if the student was not responding adequately to early intervention attempts? If so, what were the results?
- Have the interventions implemented been proven to be effective through strong scientific research/evidence-based interventions for students with similar demographic characteristics (e.g. number of years in school, level of language acquisition or number of years receiving in ELD services)?
- Was the selection of Tier II intervention based on data, and is the intervention evidence based? What is the evidence?
- In Tier II intervention, have most students responded positively to evidence-based instruction? How does the student's performance compare to students receiving the same Tier II intervention?
- What evidence do you have that the adult providing the Tier II intervention(s) was appropriately trained in how to implement the scientifically research-based intervention with fidelity?
- Have the interventions been carried out with fidelity (i.e., carried out as prescribed with sufficient intensity), for an adequate length of time, with integrity (implementing the program as designed? (Consider checklists.)
- Have adjustments to the interventions been made and documented in response to ongoing progress monitoring data? (Were changes made to the intensity, duration or frequency of the interventions, or were additional interventions implemented in response to student performance data?)

Evidence of Continued Need (beyond Tier II) Determined Through Data Analysis

- Is there evidence of severe and persistent underachievement when compared to students with similar sociocultural characteristics, even after targeted and intensive intervention?
- To what degree is the student benefitting from the interventions as evidenced in progress monitoring data?
- To what degree have interventions been adapted and individualized to meet the specific learning needs of the child? What is working for the child?
- Is the difference between actual and expected performance in comparison to grade level peers closing (consider conducting a gap analysis applied over time to measure the student's rate of improvement, see SLD TAP #2 for methods for a gap analysis)?
- Is there evidence of a need for ongoing supports and services to gain reasonable benefit from general education that cannot be maintained through general education alone?

Conclusion

The results of the careful study of the questions above and with the support of guidance provided through the SLD guide and the accompanying SLD TAPs 1 - 5, multidisciplinary teams will be able to determine the identification of an SLD for a student, the adverse impact of the SLD and the specific specially designed instruction needed to continue to support the student's success in school. 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 with an observation of a student within the general education and intervention instructional setting

Documentation Options - see Appendix IV.