Process for the Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities: Technical Assistance Paper

Macomb Intermediate School District

Revised: July 28, 2011

MISSION
Macomb Intermediate School District:
Service, Support and Leadership

VISION
We are the Macomb Intermediate School District.

We provide quality service to special education and general education students, instructional and technical support to school staff, and cutting-edge educational leadership in Macomb County.

We are committed to all the students of Macomb County. To serve them well, we are resolute in involving parents, school personnel, and the community at large, including business, government, and civic organizations as active partners in planning, delivering and evaluating our services.

We work directly with individuals with disabilities who reside in Macomb County School Districts. We serve students of all ages, from newborns to adults, meeting their unique learning needs and supporting their families all along the way.

Within the twenty-one local districts and public charter schools, we focus our efforts on building capacity with school staff. Through quality training and instructional support, we increase their knowledge, skills and abilities, so all students receive a rigorous and effective educational experience.

We promote all aspects of the educational process through our development and support of technology. We provide training in the use of essential technology tools that enhance curricular, instructional and administrative services in our schools and, as a result, opportunities are expanded for all.

We work collaboratively with colleges and universities and are leaders in state and national programs. We anticipate needs and opportunities, all with the single purpose of identifying, developing and implementing programs and practices that, through education, improve the quality of life in Macomb County.

It is the policy of the MISD that no person, on the basis of race, creed, color, religion, national origin or ancestry, age, sex, height, weight, marital status, or disability shall be discriminated against, excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or otherwise subjected to discrimination in any program or activity for which it is responsible.

Introduction

The goal of this document from Macomb ISD is to provide technical assistance and guidelines to the constituent districts in Macomb County for determining the existence of a specific learning disability.

A specific learning disability (SLD) 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 the 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. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment, autism spectrum disorder, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Note: The above types of learning disabilities are examples of disabilities that may fall within the category of SLD if all of the eligibility criteria are met. Dyslexia is another term for reading disability, dysgraphia is another term for written language disability, and dyscalculia is another term for math disability. Eligibility for special education has always been twofold in that:

1) The existence of a disability must be evident.
2) The student's need for resources available through special education must be evident.

Not all students who are diagnosed with a disability meet SLD eligibility criteria, or require the resources provided through special education services in order to progress adequately and meet grade level expectations. (Adapted from Florida Department of Education)

In communications with parents and students, schools should explain the relationship between a particular type of disability and the school's focus on determining and providing for the specific academic instruction and intervention needs. It should be made clear that the category referred to as "SLD" encompasses many types of disabilities, including but not limited to dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. Schools should also consider independent diagnoses of dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. These are important to the school in considering all factors relevant to the student's educational needs and validate that such diagnoses are helpful for access to research, advocacy, and support networks. Regardless of the specific type of disability, the student should receive instructional supports and interventions specific to his or her needs. (Adapted from Florida Department of Education)

Background (From Michigan Department of Education, May 2010)

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001 changed the landscape of education in the United States. The ESEA of 2001 established a heightened emphasis on the immediate and continuous improvement of our educational systems and focused improvement efforts on state and local accountability, student outcomes, parent involvement, data-driven planning and systems, and the

use of scientific, research-based methods and interventions. The reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 introduced a new and deliberate effort to connect federal special education legislation with federal general education legislation, the ESEA. This deliberate effort has resulted in an IDEA that embraces the use of data-driven decision-making and new educational methods based on scientific research. The use of data-driven decision-making processes includes the IDEA requirements for determining a student's eligibility for special education programs and services.

In Michigan, prior to the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, the identification of a student suspected to have a Specific Learning Disability was based on a single, specific method as defined in the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE). That method was the severe discrepancy model. The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA expressly prohibits all states from requiring the use of the severe discrepancy model. As a result, the MARSE were revised in 2006. The MARSE for determining SLD eligibility provides schools with choices. Those choices include the use of methods for determining SLD eligibility based on the use of scientific, research-based interventions (RtI) and patterns of strengths and weaknesses (PSW).

The Macomb County model for the identification of Specific Learning Disabilities emphasizes that a comprehensive evaluation is a process of data collection that includes multiple methods of assessing student performance with input from parents, teachers, school psychologists, teacher consultants, speech language pathologists and other pertinent staff. The purpose of the evaluation is to gather comprehensive information possible to make valid and appropriate recommendations as to the student's eligibility for special education and, *more importantly*, educationally relevant recommendations for instructional strategies, interventions, supports and services to close the student's achievement gap.

> **MISD strongly discourages the use of the ability/achievement severe discrepancy model and encourages districts to adopt a model using Response to Intervention (RtI), Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) or both as <u>part</u> of a comprehensive (full and individual) evaluation.**

A comprehensive evaluation for SLD does not rely on a single measure or assessment. The comprehensive evaluation involves using a variety of assessment tools and strategies, assessing the student in all areas related to the suspected disability, and identifying the student's individual educational needs. In some cases psycho-educational testing may be a helpful part of the comprehensive evaluation process; however, it is important to note that psycho-educational testing alone does not constitute a comprehensive evaluation. School-based teams, including parents, must determine what type of information is needed to inform the problem-solving effort and what type of assessments would provide that information on a student-by-student basis.

The two basic and fundamental requirements of a comprehensive evaluation are:

1) To determine whether the student is a student with a disability that adversely affects the student's educational performance.
2) To determine the educational needs of the student.

An evaluation is incomplete if it only establishes the existence of a disability without determining the special education needs of the student.

Regardless of the process(es) (RtI and/or PSW) used to determine SLD eligibility, schools must follow all of the regulatory requirements in the IDEA policies and procedures for special education.

The following criteria apply to all methods used to determine SLD eligibility:

- o A student <u>must not</u> be determined to be a student with a disability if the determinant factor for that determination is:
  - o Lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction (as defined in section 1208(3) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) [including explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency and oral reading skills, and reading comprehension strategies],
  - o Lack of appropriate instruction in math, or
  - o Limited English proficiency.

A comprehensive (full and individual) initial evaluation is a process conducted by the Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MET). Evaluation means procedures used in accordance with 34 CFR §§ 300.301 through 300.311 to determine whether a student has a Specific Learning Disability and the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the student needs. Evaluation includes the review of information from parents, existing data, and the results of assessment procedures used.

A <u>comprehensive (full and individual) initial evaluation</u> for a Specific Learning Disability must have:

- o Reason for referral
- o Relevant background information/case history
- o Observation of the student in the learning environment of suspected disability and during assessments
- o Parent input
- o Teacher input
- o Educationally-relevant medical information (as appropriate)
- o Summary of relevant state and district assessments (if available)
- o Summary of student progress monitoring toward achieving academic standards that has been provided to the student's parents at regular intervals **AND/OR** a summary of relevant additional assessments as determined by MET (e.g. cognitive and/or achievement norm-referenced standardized assessments as appropriate) to determine a pattern of strengths and weaknesses
- o Assurance that the student's underachievement is not due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math
- o Assurance that the student was provided appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by highly qualified personnel
- o Assurance that the findings of the evaluation are not primarily the result of: a vision, hearing, motor, emotional, cognitive impairment; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; limited English proficiency; or autism spectrum disorder

o   Assurance that the disability adversely affects the student's educational performance and requires special education

The "Review of Existing Evaluation Data (REED) and Development of an Evaluation Plan" document (published by the OSE-EIS) provides guidance and a general framework for the development of both initial evaluations and eligibility redetermination. This document can be used with the response to scientific, researched-based interventions and/or the pattern of strengths and weaknesses to develop and implement the evaluation plan for a student suspected to have a SLD.

The remainder of this document will follow the outline of the MISD MET form for SLD on TIENet, the county wide web based Special Education Student Management System to help evaluation teams complete comprehensive evaluations for students suspected of having a Specific Learning Disability.

Reason for Referral

Evaluation teams need to establish the reason for a referral. This may be established as a result of a review of the student's educational record. Past and present teacher input regarding the student's academic performance, motivation, persistence, and academic strengths and weaknesses is also a source of information for this section of the evaluation. Input should be obtained across academic disciplines when there are multiple teachers. Teacher input should be analyzed for consistency or discrepancy across grades and/or academic areas.

Relevant Background Information/Case History

A thorough review of relevant student background and history provides valuable insight into the underlying factors contributing to limited student performance. A comprehensive review and assessment of relevant background and history also assists with establishing instructional need and ruling out exclusionary factors.

Relevant background and educational history can be established by teacher consultation and a comprehensive review of all available and accessible educational records. Issues and critical questions to consider as part of the eligibility determination process include the following:

- Student disciplinary records: Does the student have a significant disciplinary record? If so, is there a pattern of behaviors or environments in which they occur? Do the behaviors occur when presented in relation to specific academic areas or tasks demands?

- Past and present report card grades: Do the student's report card grades suggest an instructional need in the academic referral area? Do the student's grades provide evidence of a possible pattern of academic strengths and weaknesses? Do the grades substantiate a persistent area or areas of concern?

- Educational exposure: Does the student record reflect consistent attendance and enrollment? Have there been excessive moves that may have caused curriculum gaps in exposure? Did the student attend preschool or receive any early childhood services (a consideration for early elementary referrals)?

- Appropriate instruction: Has the student had access to appropriate, explicit instruction in necessary reading areas, such as: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and/or comprehension, based on student need? Has the student had appropriate instruction in math, based on student need? Has the student had appropriate instruction in writing, based on student need?

  o There are tools and evaluative methods that can better assist the MET team in determining whether or not a student has had access to appropriate instruction. These include, but are not limited to: the Instructional Planning Form (available on-line through various search engines), other surveys [see works by Howell and Nolet for examples relating to RIOT methods (review, interview, observe, and test) in the area of instruction], observations of instruction, teacher interview, etc.

Below is a sample evaluation form to assist in determining if instruction is explicitly taught and curriculum is systematic (Adapted from Arrasmith, 2003).

Characteristic	Evaluation Question	Well Met	Somewhat Met	Not Met
Clear Instructional Targets	Are the purpose and outcomes of instruction clearly evident in the lesson plans?	☐	☐	☐
Clear Purpose for Learning	Does the student understand the purpose for learning the skills and strategies taught?	☐	☐	☐
Clear and Understandable Directions and Explanations	Are directions clear, straightforward, unequivocal without vagueness, need for implication, or ambiguity?	☐	☐	☐
Adequate Modeling	Are the skills and strategies included in instruction clearly demonstrated for the student?	☐	☐	☐
Guided Practice and Corrective Feedback	Does the student have sufficient opportunities to practice new skills and strategies with corrective instruction offered as necessary?	☐	☐	☐
Instructionally Embedded Assessments	Are instructionally-embedded assessments used to monitor the student's mastery of skills and strategies and to pace the student's learning?	☐	☐	☐
Summative Assessments	Are summative assessments used to monitor the student's retention and reinforcement of skills and strategies following instruction?	☐	☐	☐

Characteristic	Evaluation Question	Well Met	Somewhat Met	Not Met
Instructional Scope	Does the curriculum include all key instructional content necessary to achieve the goals of instruction?	☐	☐	☐
Instructional Sequence	Is the curriculum sequenced in a logical order that builds skills from prior skills and extends skills in order to move the student to independent mastery?	☐	☐	☐
Consistent Instructional Format	Are the instructional strategies consistent from lesson to lesson?	☐	☐	☐
Addresses Multimodality Instruction	Are a variety of instructional methods used to provide the student with auditory, visual, and hands-on learning activities?	☐	☐	☐

- Intervention and Supplemental Support Services: Has the student received any supplemental academic services such as Title 1 or other researched-based interventions? Is there documentation of the frequency, intensity, duration and response to these services? Does the documentation of progress monitoring substantiate the student's response to intervention? Were the aforementioned services provided with fidelity?

- Language exposure: Is English the primary familial language? If not, is there documentation of the student's English language exposure? Have English Language Learner (ELL) services been provided?

Observation (during assessments and in environment of suspected disability area)

During any assessments of the student, behaviors that are relevant to learning styles, frustration, temperament, problem-solving skills, etc., should be noted as part of the record.

In regard to observations in the learning environment, an observation conducted during an early intervening period may be used and must be properly documented by the evaluation team. If, however, an observation has not been conducted prior to the referral and request for evaluation, or additional observation data is needed, at least one member of the evaluation team must conduct and properly document the observation(s).

An observation:
- o Must address academic performance and behavior in the specific area(s) of concern
- o Must be conducted in the child's learning environment as determined by the evaluation team
- o Must be conducted in the general education setting, unless the child is less than school age or does not participate in general education

The observations must be scheduled at a time when the child is engaged in the specific area of concern identified in the evaluation plan. Existing observations (if available) must have been conducted while the child was engaged in the specific area of need identified in the evaluation plan.

The federal and state regulations do not prescribe the type of observation to be conducted; the following methods may be appropriate:

- o Behavioral observation procedures that result in quantifiable results (e.g., event recording, time sampling, interval recording)
- o Methods that relate the student's classroom behavior to instructional conditions
- o Informal or anecdotal recordings that address referral questions, instructional practice, and instructional fidelity

These observations may also help to document that appropriate instruction was provided and will assist in recommending instructional changes. Observations across instructional settings (e.g., different classes) are especially valuable, as are observations by different team members.

Information from Parent(s)

Parent input can be obtained by the following:

- o Home visit
- o Email correspondence
- o Phone correspondence
- o Rating Scales/History Questionnaire
- o Meeting with the parent at school
- o Parent-Teacher conference
- o RtI meeting/Child Study Team meeting

Types of information obtained can be:

- o School history
- o Medical history
- o Prior evaluations
- o Familial information
- o General behavioral information

Educationally-Relevant Medical Information

Has the student passed school-based hearing and vision screenings? Is there documentation of any medical conditions that may impact student learning? Are the student's relevant medical conditions under the care of a physician or clinical provider? Has a release of information been obtained to communicate with outside providers?

Relevant State and District Assessments (if available)

Progress in learning state standards is a fundamental consideration for instructional planning and for understanding educational performance levels. The team must consider the level of proficiency with state standards, as measured by state assessments and/or district benchmarking assessments. Dates, descriptions (names) of, and scores derived from these assessments may be reported.

Summary of Student Progress Monitoring Data Toward Achieving Standards

Prior to (and during) the evaluation, documentation of the student's progress toward achieving standards must be evident. Progress must be evaluated and data gathered, repeatedly, at reasonable intervals. Moreover, this information must have been shared with parents throughout data collection.

Data representing repeated measures of student progress are analyzed to determine the possibility of a specific learning disability. Repeated progress measures may include, but are not limited to: universal screening instruments and progress monitoring tools (e.g. DIBELS, AIMSweb, STAR, SRI, etc.), district assessments, other assessments comparing students to same-age or same-grade peers, or comparing to age and grade benchmarks, etc. Regardless if the MET team utilizes an RtI approach or not, data collection and sharing of progress data with the student's parents is imperative.

Districts have flexibility with respect to assessment instruments. A variety of tools can be used such as formal, standardized measures, curriculum-based measurements, and other assessment tools that measure the student's level of performance on state standards.

Rate of progress can only be established by ongoing progress-monitoring tools that assess the student's response to intervention. These measures must be reliable and valid, used with fidelity, be efficient, repeatable and sensitive to growth. It is also recommended that these measures be graphically represented for decision making. In addition to those mentioned above, a number of comprehensive progress-monitoring systems are commercially available. The National Center on Student Progress Monitoring provides a technical review of progress-monitoring tools at http://www.studentprogress.org/chart/chart.asp. Additionally, the National Center on Response to Intervention at http://www.rti4success.org/ has released a Progress Monitoring Tools Chart.

The specific types of instruction, intervention, and assessment are unique to each school setting, which requires unique metrics appropriate to that setting. However, decision rules must be applied consistently as part of the problem-solving process. Decision rules describe levels of student response and decisions regarding next steps that can be made in accordance with those levels. The three levels of student response may be identified as positive, questionable, and poor.

Positive response to intervention is evidenced when the rate of student learning is such that the gap between expected student performance and current student performance is closing and the point at which the student's performance will "come in range" of target can be extrapolated.

Questionable response is indicated when the gap stops widening but eventual closure is not predicted.

Poor response to intervention occurs when there is little to no change in rate of student growth after implementation of instruction/intervention.

In regard to fidelity of intervention, if interventions are effective in addressing the targeted behavior or skill measurable by positive student response, then evidence exists demonstrating that the instruction was well-delivered. Documentation that the same instruction and interventions are effective for large numbers of other students in the same setting helps establish that instruction and interventions are being well-delivered, especially if they are effective with students from similar demographic backgrounds.

Well-delivered instruction and interventions have documentation of implementation fidelity, to include:

- The level of support/training provided to the implementer

- The frequency and intensity of intervention

- Evidence that the intervention followed protocol and was delivered for a sufficient period of time to generate sufficient data to determine a student's response to the intervention (i.e., degree of effectiveness in addressing the problem)

Implementation fidelity refers to quality of the instruction. Fidelity is evident through documentation of the specific instructional interventions used, the support provided to the individual(s) implementing interventions, adherence to the critical elements of the intervention design and delivery methods, the duration and frequency of intervention implementation (e.g., number of weeks, minutes per week, sessions per week), and the student-centered data collected. Verification should occur through multiple approaches that include direct observations of core instruction, intervention implementation, and fidelity of intervention. *(Adapted from Florida Department of Education)*

In establishing the student's "need" for special education and specific learning needs, it is essential to determine the intervention(s) to which the student responds, as well as the degree of their response. This determination should also include careful consideration of the extent the student's ability to maintain that response is dependent on receiving the interventions. For cases in which the student's response is considered *only minimal (poor or questionable),* the team may decide that the student needs resources available through special education because it appears that he or she will require intensive services on an on-going basis. The decision to provide special education services may also be made in situations in which the student's response is considered *positive*. The team may determine that in order maintain the degree of positive response, interventions need to be continued at an intensive level that is best provided through the provision of special education and related services. For all students who are determined to be in need of special education services, it is expected that the problem-solving process will continue at an intensive level for the purpose of identifying the intervention(s) that will close the gap.

Response to intervention does not replace the requirement to rule out other factors that may contribute to learning difficulties. However, in many cases, the data gathered during the RtI process may be sufficient to rule out environmental, cultural, or economic factors and limited English proficiency if

there is documentation that the majority of students from similar demographics, to the extent possible, are meeting expectations. A student should not be considered disabled unless there is evidence of sufficient opportunities to learn and instruction/interventions are effective for their peer group. An RtI approach provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of core instruction, as well as small group and individual interventions.

Note: If a parent requests "an evaluation" during the RtI process, the intervention process should continue concurrently with the evaluation as outlined above. If, at the end of the evaluation timeline, the group of qualified professionals does not have enough evidence to determine eligibility, the group can propose an extension of the evaluation timeline or conclude that the eligibility decision must be made with the currently available information. The school's responsibility is to meet the student's instructional/intervention needs as informed by the student's on-going response to what is being implemented and adjusted accordingly. Thus, the response to intervention cycle continues with or without an eligibility determination.

Exclusionary Factors

As part of the process for documenting that the SLD eligibility criteria have been met, the MET must determine that its findings are not primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment, autism spectrum disorder, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. It is the responsibility of the MET to identify the data sources necessary to rule these factors out as a primary cause of learning difficulties. This can be accomplished through a variety of methods, including review of records, observations, classroom performance, RtI/progress-monitoring data and rating scales. In some cases, individualized administered standardized assessments may be necessary if there is insufficient information to rule out a particular factor. Individual standardized assessment may be indicated if there are questions about sensory deficits, intellectual disabilities, or emotional/behavioral disabilities.

English Language Learners

An RtI approach to SLD identification holds promise as a more culturally fair practice for English language learners by focusing on evaluating the effectiveness of core instruction for English language learners as a group, prior to examining deficits in the level of performance of an individual English language learner. An English language learner would not be considered disabled unless there is empirical evidence that the core instruction and supplemental interventions are effective for other English language learners with similar exposure to English. Additionally, the student's rate of progress and level of performance should be discrepant from both grade-level expectations and English language learners' peer performance.

Since English language learners are subject to the same academic performance expectations as other students, their performance should be measured with the same progress-monitoring tools. It is important to select monitoring tools that are sensitive to academic growth in English language learners. *Learning Disability Quarterly* published a special issue on English language learners and RtI in the Summer 2007 (Vol. 30), which addresses many of the instructional and research issues surrounding implementation of RtI with students who are English language learners.

Summary of relevant additional assessments as determined by MET

The comprehensive evaluation may also include data from the process of determining a pattern of strengths and weaknesses. The pattern of strengths and weaknesses may be identified in terms of the student's performance, achievement or both, relative to the student's age, State-approved grade-level standards and benchmarks, and/or intellectual development. Using a variety of appropriate assessments, teams must determine that the pattern of strengths and weaknesses is relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability.

The PSW Framework

The process of determining a pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) is designed to address both the learning environment and individual learner characteristics. To address the instructional environment, the PSW model should ideally be utilized within a multi-tiered, problem-solving framework. It is necessary to first determine that the student was provided high-quality, appropriate instruction and interventions in general education, as well as to monitor the progress of the student's response to the instruction and interventions. The emphasis on individual learner characteristics is based on the recognition that student characteristics may impact the rate of learning by affecting the way learning materials and information are processed. More specifically, PSW models are designed to provide more information about individual student characteristics as they relate to the demands of the learning environment. Information regarding individual learner traits is meant to be used in tandem with information from the evaluation of the learning environment. In this way, PSW models are designed to assist with understanding why the student has not responded to research-based interventions and with identifying intervention(s) that are a good match for a student's academic needs. (*Adapted from California Department of Education*)

Data Collection

Determination of a PSW requires the team to collect and compare data from multiple sources. PSW models allow for flexibility in selecting assessment tools that will provide the most appropriate information to address the specific concern(s) for a given student. Sources of data include norm-referenced tests of achievement and cognitive abilities/executive functioning, CBMs, criterion-referenced assessments, state- and district- established measures of grade level expectations (e.g., MEAP, MLPP, math and writing benchmark tests, etc.), grades, teacher reports, observations of the student in the learning environment, and observational rating scales (e.g., behavior checklists and rating scales). For each student, specific tests and assessment tools should be selected on an individualized basis depending on the nature of the presenting academic concerns.

Models of PSW

Federal and state regulations do not specify the type of PSW model that should be employed and districts have flexibility in selecting which PSW model to use. The three research-based models of PSW are listed below. Teams are encouraged to investigate/evaluate the models and use the one(s) that best suit their situation.

Research-based models of PSW:
1. Aptitude-Achievement Consistency model (Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2007).
2. Concordance-Discordance model (Hale & Fiorello, 2004).
3. Consistency-Discrepancy model (Naglieri, 1999).

While there are differences among the models, there are certain principles that are consistent across the PSW models. These principles include that the role of IQ, as it is has been traditionally conceptualized and utilized in SLD determinations (i.e., Full-scale IQ), is significantly de-emphasized in favor of assessment and consideration of individual cognitive processing and executive functioning abilities and their relationship to academic skill development and performance. Also consistent among the PSW models is the expectation that students with a specific learning disability will typically display a pattern of academic and cognitive/executive functioning skills that includes area(s) of isolated weakness, as well as areas of strength (i.e., average to above average performance). Additionally, weaknesses in cognitive processing/executive functioning should be related to the identified area of academic concern. Cognitive processing/executive functioning skills that are not related to the identified area of academic concern would be expected to typically be within the average range or above. Teams must also differentiate between normative and relative/personal strengths and weaknesses. (*Adapted from Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses in Specific Learning Disabilities: What's It All About? Oregon School Psychologists Association, 2009*)

Required Considerations Within a PSW Model

In determining whether to provide Special Education services, the team must demonstrate the following:
1. Exclusionary factors have been ruled out as primary contributors to the student's learning difficulties.
2. Instructional variables have been examined and addressed, including:
    a. The provision of appropriate general education instruction that is related to state approved grade-level content expectation;
    b. The student's lack of response to differentiated instruction and appropriately matched research-based intervention that were delivered with fidelity and progress monitored over a reasonable period of time;
    c. The intensity of the interventions required to show progress.
3. The student displays a pattern of strengths and weaknesses, including evidence of an academic skill deficit and insufficient progress, and weakness in cognitive processing /executive functioning skills that are determined to be relevant to the identification of an SLD. Weaknesses may be identified relative to the following areas:
    a. Weakness in performance relative to age;
    b. Weakness in achievement relative to age;
    c. Weakness in performance relative to State-approved grade-level standards;
    d. Weakness in achievement relative to State-approved grade-level standards;
    e. Weakness in performance relative to intellectual development;
    f. Weakness in achievement relative to intellectual development.

Key Definitions and Sources of Data

Terms and Definition	Sources of data relative to age	Sources of data relative to grade-level standards/expectations
Performance: Actual functioning in the classroom setting	Report card grades Teacher observations and reports In-class tests Student work samples Additional classroom observations	Standards based report cards or Portfolio assessments In class tests Student work samples Additional classroom observations
Achievement: Functioning on non-classroom based assessments	Individually administered, norm-referenced achievement tests	CBMs (e.g., DIBELS, AIMSweb) Criterion-referenced measures State and district level assessments (e.g., MEAP,MLPP, district benchmark assessments)
Intellectual Development The student's cognitive processing and executive functioning skills	Norm-referenced measures of cognitive processing and executive functioning skills, surveys, rating scales, and observations.	Student work samples, teacher reports/observations, CBMs, etc. should be used to support data and hypotheses from testing

Adapted from *Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses in Specific Learning Disabilities: What's It All About?* (Oregon School Psychologists Association: Hansen. J., Sharman, L., Esparza-Brown, J., April, 2009).

Important Considerations

Team must establish guidelines and decision rules regarding what constitutes a strength and weakness within a student's assessment profile. While suggested guidelines are presented within this document (see below), it is important to note they are not intended to be regarded as absolute cut-points. Teams are cautioned to consider that these are complex decisions that should be based on the convergence of multiple sources of data that are considered valid and reliable. Professional judgment remains a critical component in the decision-making process. Professional judgment is important for interpreting all assessment data within the context of current research-based knowledge of SLDs, and for contributing to appropriate decisions that are made in the best interest of the student's learning needs.

Additionally, when determining the need for special education services, certain situations require careful consideration of specific circumstances and interpretation of the identified pattern of strengths and weaknesses. For example, a student may display a PSW that includes cognitive processing and academic weaknesses. However, if the documented academic weaknesses occur primarily in performance and not in achievement, the team should consider other means of intervening or the potential for eligibility under a different eligibility category.

Determining Strengths and Weaknesses

Included in this document is a Worksheet for Charting Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses that teams may use for documenting and determining a student's PSW. The following are suggested guidelines for determining an academic skill deficit and a PSW when using the worksheet:

1. To be considered an area of academic weakness, a student shall have a least **four** weak boxes in a single academic area checked. In addition, for initial evaluations, at least one weakness must occur on an individually administered, norm-referenced academic achievement test. The use of CBMs is also highly suggested for both initial and reevaluations.

2. To be considered an area of academic strength, at least **three** strength boxes should be checked within a single academic area.

3. Areas of psychological processing strength and weakness should be written in on the appropriate column on the worksheet. Determination of strengths and weaknesses in these areas is typically based on the recommendations of the PSW model that a school chooses to use. Determination can also be based on the guidelines included in the manuals of the measures that are used.

IEP teams must determine if the pattern of strengths and weaknesses warrants Special Education services based on current research-based knowledge of SLDs and in light of all other information and observations gathered as part of the comprehensive evaluation.

Additional suggested guidelines for determining strengths and weaknesses and for identifying an academic skill deficit are included in the charts that follow.

Suggested Guidelines for Determining Strengths and Weaknesses

Assessment Type	Strength	Weakness
Progress monitoring	Meeting / exceeding aimline	Falling below aimline for at least 4 consecutive weeks on most recent tests.
CBM (Benchmark) screening	At 'benchmark' level or above grade-level median score if using local norms.	Considered 'at-risk' level or below 10 percentile if using local norms.
Criterion-referenced assessment	Percentile rank ≥ 30	Percentile rank ≤ 9
MEAP	Level 1 or Level 2	Level 3 or Level 4
Norm-referenced tests (Achievement, Cognitive Assessments)	**see guidance charts that follow	**see guidance charts that follow
Curriculum assessments	Scores ≥ 80%	Scores ≤ 70%
Grades	A / B or 'meets / exceeds' expectations	D / E or 'does not meet' expectations
Teacher report	Based upon professional judgment of teacher in comparing student to others in classroom.	Based upon professional judgment of teacher in comparing student to others in classroom.
Observations – Academic	Student demonstrates average understanding of academic content in comparison to other students in classroom.	Student demonstrates that s/he does not understand the academic content.
Observations/Interviews/Scales - Functional	Student demonstrates typical functional skills in comparison to other students the same age or in the same grade. Percentile rank on scale ≥ 30.	Most of the student's functional skills appear to be well below average in comparison to other students the same age or in the same grade. Percentile rank on scale ≤ 9.

Suggested Parameters for Using Standard Scores/Percentile Ranks to Establish an Academic Skill Deficit

Valid standard scores that are either average to above average or very low can provide strong evidence for or against the presence of a normative Academic Skill Deficit. However, in cases where "borderline" scores are obtained, no clear evidence either for or against a normative deficit is provided. In such cases, rather than use a cut score to determine if a student has a normative deficit, the team should increase their consideration of other sources of data, and base their determination on the preponderance of that evidence.

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Standard Score/Percentile Rank	Classification	Considerations for Interpretation
Greater or equal to the 9th percentile (standard score of 80 or above)	Not Likely Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range are not significantly below average. Teams should consider other possible reasons for poor performance, other than an Academic Skill Deficit
4th to the 9th percentile (standard scores between 74 and 79)	Possibly Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range may be considered significantly below average. When scores fall within this range, teams should increase their consideration of other sources of data to support or refute the presence of an Academic Skill Deficit (e.g. teacher reports, grades, curriculum-based measurements, criterion-reference measures, state assessments, response to intervention, cognitive assessments, classroom observations, past achievement testing, other environmental factors). Decisions should then be based on the preponderance of that evidence, rather than the exact position of a score within this range.
4th percentile or less (standard scores of 73 or below)	Likely Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range are significantly below average. Barring contradictory data from other sources, these scores should generally be considered indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit.

Suggested Parameters for Establishing an Academic Skill Deficit
Using RPI Scores

The Woodcock-Johnson III (WJ III®) (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001a) tests provide a unique score that indicates the quality of a student's performance: the relative proficiency index (RPI). The RPI is a measure of a student's degree of proficiency in a skill or ability when compared to average age or grade peers. It is a norm-derived, criterion-referenced score that describes the probability of a student's success on a task similar to that used in the assessment. The RPI also provides an indication of the levels at which the student will perceive similar tasks to be easy, mildly challenging, or very difficult, assisting school teams in making educational planning recommendations regarding instructional levels. This in contrast to standard scores or percentile ranks which merely indicate the position in which a student's score falls within the distribution of scores obtained by age or grade peers in the normative sample. It is important to note also that because of the way the RPI score is derived, RPI scores do not correspond directly to standard scores. The RPI is represented as a fraction, with the person's expected degree of success as the numerator and the 90% criterion as the denominator. For example, an RPI of 60/90 suggests that the person would be about 60% successful on a task that average peers would perform with 90% success.

RPI	Possibility of an Academic Skill Deficit	Implications and Considerations
100/90 – 82/90	Not Likely Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range suggest proficiency and performance that is average to advanced, relative to same age peers. Academic skill development is considered to be age-appropriate or above. When scores fall within this range, teams should consider that the student will likely find age-level tasks manageable to easy. Teams should consider other possible reasons for poor performance, other than an Academic Skill Deficit.
67/90 – 82/90	Possibly Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range suggest proficiency and performance that is limited to average, relative to same age peers. Academic skill development is considered mildly delayed to age-appropriate. When scores fall within this range, teams should consider that the student will likely find age-level tasks difficult to manageable. **When scores fall within this range, teams should increase their consideration of other sources of data to support or refute the presence of an Academic Skill Deficit (e.g., teacher reports, grades, curriculum-based measurements, criterion-reference measures, state assessments, response to intervention, cognitive assessments, classroom observations, past achievement testing, other environmental factors).**
24/90 – 67/90	Likely to Very Likely Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range suggest proficiency and performance that is limited, relative to same age peers. Academic skill development is considered mildly delayed. When scores fall within this range, teams should consider that the student will likely find age-level tasks difficult to very difficult. Barring contradictory data from other sources, these scores should generally be considered indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit.
0/90 – 24/90	Very likely Indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit	Scores in this range suggest proficiency and performance that is very limited to negligible, relative to same age peers. Academic skill development is considered moderately to severely delayed. When scores fall within this range, teams should consider that the student will likely find age-level tasks extremely difficult to impossible. Barring contradictory data from other sources, these scores should generally be considered indicative of an Academic Skill Deficit.

Worksheet for Charting Strengths and Weaknesses

In the boxes below, indicate: S = Strength W = Weakness N = Neither	Academic Achievement with respect to grade-level expectations		Academic Achievement with respect to age-level expectations	Classroom performance with respect to grade-level expectations				Age-Appropriate functional/ intellectual skills	Basic Psychological Processes
Areas of Academic Achievement	Progress Monitoring, CBM, or criterion-referenced measures	MEAP	Norm-referenced achievement test(s)	Curriculum assessments	Grades	Teacher Reports	Classroom Observations	Observations, interviews, cognitive assessments, rating scales	Observations, interviews, cognitive assessments, rating scales
Basic Reading	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S list skill(s) here	S list process(es) here
Reading Fluency	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N		
Reading Comprehension	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N		
Math Calculation	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	N	N
Math Problem Solving	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	W list skill(s) here	W list process(es) here
Written Expression	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N		
Oral Expression	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N		
Listening Comprehension	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N	S W N		

Areas of strength (at least 3 'S' checks for each area): _____

Areas of weakness (at least 4 'W' checks for each area, including at least one individually administered academic achievement test: _____

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