Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in Plain Language

Academic Areas of Concern

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) have severe trouble learning or demonstrating skills in one or more of these academic areas:

- oral expression
- listening comprehension
- written expression
- basic reading skill
- reading fluency
- reading comprehension
- mathematics calculation ~~and~~
- mathematics problem solving

Students with SLD often do well in some school subjects but have extreme difficulty with skills like decoding (sounding out) words, calculating math facts, or writing down their thoughts. Even with adequate instruction and intensive intervention, a student with SLD has low classroom achievement when compared to students without disabilities in the same grade. Specific information about how the student has responded to instruction and intensive intervention is used to decide if a student is SLD or if the student is not achieving for other reasons.

Referral for Special Education

When someone thinks a student might have any disability and need~~s~~ special education, a referral for a special education evaluation is made to the school. The referral must be in writing and say why the person making the referral thinks the student has a disability. A group of people, called an IEP team, which includes the student's parents, does an evaluation and decides if the student meets state and federal criteria.

Three Criteria to Meet

The three criteria (requirements) below must be considered by the IEP team and **all 3** of them must be met in order to decide the student has SLD.

1. Inadequate Classroom Achievement - This means a student's academic skills in one or more academic areas of concern are well outside the expected range for students without disabilities of the same age. The student cannot do the same academic work as the other students even with extra help or extra time. The student's classroom achievement in one or more academic area of concern is measured using a standardized achievement test **after** intensive intervention has been provided. When the student's score on the achievement test is at or below a level specified in law, this requirement of inadequate achievement is met.

2. Insufficient Progress - This means the student cannot meet age or grade level learning expectations in a reasonable period of time even after intensive intervention. Intervention means special instruction for a certain length of time in addition to the regular classroom instruction. Before making a decision about the student's progress, the student must receive at least two scientific, research or evidence based interventions (SRBIs) in each academic area of concern. Information is collected about how the student is responding to intervention using tools called probes. The information collected is called progress monitoring (PM) data. The PM data is analyzed to find the student's rate of progress during intervention. The student's rate of progress is compared to what is expected for students without disabilities in the same grade. The IEP team looks at the data and uses rules specified in the law to decide if this requirement of insufficient progress is met.

3. No Exclusionary Factors - If the student's inadequate classroom achievement or insufficient progress are primarily due to other reasons, the student does not qualify as a student with a specific learning disability. These other reasons include: learning problems due to environmental or economic disadvantage, cultural factors, lack of appropriate instruction in any of the achievement areas of SLD such as reading or math, limited English proficiency, or other impairments the student may have. The IEP team looks to see if any of these factors exist. If none of them are the main reason for the student's learning problems, then this requirement is met.

Need for Special Education

Before a student can receive special education services and be considered a child with a disability, the IEP team must agree the student has an impairment, such as SLD, **and** also must agree that the student needs special education. If the IEP team agrees the student can succeed in the general education classroom with high quality general education instruction, short term interventions and reasonable classroom accommodations, then the student does not qualify as a child with a disability.

Eight Achievement Areas of Specific Learning Disability Concern

A student may have a specific learning disability because of inadequate achievement and insufficient progress in one or more of eight areas of achievement, which are listed in federal regulations and state rule. When applying the eligibility criteria, IEP teams consider one or more of these areas of achievement concern. The area(s) of concern are identified by the IEP team during the review of existing data. The following is a brief description of the eight areas of achievement:

Oral expression is the ability to convey wants, needs, thoughts, and ideas in a meaningful way using appropriate syntactic, pragmatic, semantic, and phonological language structures. It relates to a student's ability to express ideas, explain thinking, retell stories, categorize, and compare and contrast concepts or ideas, make references and problem solve verbally.

Listening comprehension refers to the understanding of the implications and explicit meanings of words and sentences of spoken language. This includes following directions, comprehending questions, and listening and comprehending in order to learn (auditory attention, auditory memory, and auditory perception). Listening comprehension also includes the ability to make connections to previous learning.

Written expression is the communication of ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Required skills include using oral language, thought, grammar, text fluency, sentence construction and planning to produce a written product. Spelling difficulties alone cannot be considered to represent a specific learning disability in written expression.

Basic reading skill include phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, phonics, and word analysis. Essential skills include identification of individual sounds and the ability to manipulate them; identification of printed letters and sounds associated with letters; and decoding of written language.

Reading fluency skills refers to the ability to read words accurately, using age appropriate chunking strategies and a repertoire of sight words, and with appropriate rate, phrasing and expression (prosody). Reading fluency facilitates reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand and make meaning of written text and includes a multifaceted set of skills. Reading comprehension is influenced by oral language development including new vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, working memory, application of comprehension monitoring strategies and understanding of text structure including titles, paragraphing, illustrations and other details. Reading comprehension is significantly affected by basic reading skills.

Mathematics calculation is the knowledge and retrieval of mathematical facts and the application of procedural knowledge in computation.

Mathematics problem solving is the ability to use decision-making skills to apply mathematical concepts and understandings to real world situations. It is the functional combination of computation knowledge and application knowledge, and involves the use of mathematical computation skills and fluency, language, reasoning, reading, and visual-spatial skills in solving problems. Essentially, it is applying mathematical knowledge at the conceptual level.

Sources:

Colorado Department of Education. 10/7/08. Guidelines for Identifying Students with Specific Learning Disabilities. Pgs. 67-104.

Minnesota Department of Education. Determining the Eligibility of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities: A Technical Manual. Pgs. 7-4 and 7-5.
http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SpecEdClass/DisabCateg/SpecLearnDisab/