



Operationalizing the NJCLD Definition of Learning Disabilities for Ongoing Assessment in Schools

*National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities**

In memory of Samuel A. Kirk, one of the fathers of special education to whom we all owe so much.

This paper has been approved by the following member organizations of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD): the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association; the Association on Higher Education and Disability; the Council for Learning Disabilities; the Division for Children's Communication Development; the Division for Learning Disabilities; the Learning Disabilities Association of America; the National Association of School Psychologists; the National Center for Learning Disabilities; and the Orton Dyslexia Society. The International Reading Association has not approved this paper.

The purposes of this paper are to highlight five constructs underlying the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) definition of learning disabilities and to recommend operational procedures for ongoing assessment and interventions for children in preschool through secondary school. This paper builds on previous statements and papers of the NJCLD. It is organized in two sections: The first presents the definition and the five constructs underlying it; the second describes operational procedures organized according to the five constructs basic to the definition.

NJCLD Definition and Its Five Constructs

The NJCLD Definition

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of

listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical skills.

These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not, by themselves, constitute a learning disability.

Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (NJCLD, 1990).

The Five Constructs

1. Learning disabilities are heterogeneous, both within and across individuals. Intra-individual differences involve varied profiles of learning strength and need and/or shifts across the life span within individuals. Interindividual differences involve different manifestations of learning disabilities for different individuals.
2. Learning disabilities result in significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and/or mathematical skills. Such difficulties are evident when an individual's appropriate levels of effort do not result in reasonable progress given the opportunity for effective educational instruction and with the recognition that all individuals learn at a different pace and with differing effort. Significant difficulty cannot be determined solely by a quantitative test score.
3. Learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual. They are presumed to be related to differences in

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central nervous system development. They do not disappear over time, but may range in expression and severity at different life stages.

4. Learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities that do not, by themselves, constitute a learning disability. For example, difficulty with self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interactions may occur for many reasons. Some social interaction problems result from learning disabilities; others do not. Individuals with other disabilities, such as sensory impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, mental retardation, and serious emotional disturbance, may also have learning disabilities, but such conditions do not cause or constitute learning disabilities.
5. Learning disabilities are not caused by extrinsic influences. Inconsistent or insufficient instruction or a lack of instructional experience cause learning difficulties, but not learning disabilities. However, individuals who have had inconsistent or insufficient instruction may also have learning disabilities. The challenge is to document that inadequate or insufficient instruction is not the primary cause of a learning disability. Individuals from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds may also have learning disabilities; therefore, assessments must be designed acknowledging this diversity in culture and language, and examiners who test children from each background must be sensitive to such factors and use practices that are individualized and appropriate for each child.

Four Steps of Ongoing Assessment

The NJCLD recommends a four-step procedure for operationalizing the definition to determine the presence of learning disabilities and to make decisions for eligibility for and provision of special education and related services.

STEP 1. Describe learning problems prior to referral for formal assessment.

Purpose. The purposes of Step 1 are to define problems raised by parents, teachers, or students themselves [Note: In this document, “parents” means parents, guardians, or others assuming a parental role.]; to consider the history of those concerns (NJCLD, 1985); to identify, evaluate, and modify extrinsic factors that may be contributing to the problems; and to begin interventions and accommodations with consultation from a problem-solving team that includes the student’s classroom teacher, other teachers and specialists, the parent, and the student when appropriate. The members of the problem-solving

team come together based on their collective knowledge of, and experience with, the student involved, and with the relevant instructional contexts.

Key questions. 1. What are the student’s learning strengths and problems?

2. How do the strengths and problems vary within the educational environment, both academic and nonacademic?

3. What interventions and accommodations, as well as modifications of typical teaching strategies, might help the student learn?

Process. When a student is having a problem that involves significant difficulty in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, a problem-solving process should begin. The process should enable the student, teachers, other professionals, and the parent to define the learning problem and variations within multiple contexts. This should be a collaborative, student-centered process that results in the implementation of interventions and accommodations designed to meet the student’s needs. The options should exist along a continuum of support for the student, teacher, and parent, ranging from minimal consultation and accommodations to extensive interventions. The responsibilities of the team are to:

1. Interview key participants about their perceptions of the problem (at least the student, parents, and teachers).

2. Gather and analyze information about the classroom and the student’s performance in the areas of concern identified by the participants, for example, by:

- (a) Observing and describing the classroom and the student’s performance using naturalistic and curriculum-based samples;
- (b) Reviewing school records and developmental and educational history;
- (c) Reviewing individual portfolios.

3. Consider alternative explanations for the student’s learning problems or learning differences, including:

- (a) Insufficient or inappropriate instruction;
- (b) Related factors that are important to consider, but do not by themselves constitute learning disabilities, including:
 - Self-regulatory behaviors (e.g., attention, motivation, impulsivity) do not by themselves constitute learning disabilities, but self-regulation of behaviors for performing language, academic, or educational tasks

may be an integral part of a learning disability);

- Social perception (e.g., inappropriate social judgments are not learning disabilities, but they may be the secondary consequences of the learning disabilities);
- Social interaction (e.g., problems relating to peers do not by themselves constitute learning disability, but in some cases may be secondary to learning disabilities).

(c) Other disabilities such as:

- Sensory impairments (requiring screening for hearing or visual deficits);
- Mental retardation or general cognitive disabilities;
- Serious emotional disturbance.

(d) Cultural and linguistic differences must not be misconstrued as learning problems or learning disabilities.

4. Brainstorm solutions (e.g., interventions, accommodations, diagnostic teaching, environmental modifications, immediate referral for evaluation).

5. Recommend and implement interventions and/or accommodations to meet the student's needs (e.g., if the team identifies a problem in phonemic awareness that might put the student at risk for future reading problems, intervention should be provided promptly instead of waiting for the student to fail).

6. Monitor the interventions and accommodations and make adjustments as needed.

7. Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and accommodations.

Decision-making alternatives.

1. If the problem-solving process is effective, provide ongoing educational interventions and accommodations and continue to modify them as necessary; do not, however, refer at this time for formal evaluation.

2. If the problem-solving process is not effective, consider whether appropriate or sufficient interventions and accommodations have been tried or, even if they have not, whether a disability is suspected that may require special education and related services; if so, proceed to referral for formal evaluation for special education and related services.

Summary. Step 1 is a problem solving and supportive process that provides an opportunity for analyzing the student's problems, for conducting informal contextually focused assessment, for probing what works and what does not, and for provid-

ing individualized interventions aimed at addressing the needs of the student. The purpose is to solve problems expediently, but if they cannot be solved with general resources, to move into the next step in a timely fashion, using the findings from Step 1 as an informational base.

STEP 2. Identify individuals as having learning disabilities.

Purpose. This step incorporates the information from Step 1 with results from additional informal and formal assessments to describe the characteristics of the learner and the pervasiveness and severity of the problems in order to diagnose learning disabilities through a comprehensive evaluation.

Key questions. 1. What is the nature of the learning problems and how pervasive and severe are they?

2. Is performance in the problem areas unexpectedly low compared with the student's performance in other areas?

3. Are the learning problems the result of learning disabilities (as opposed to some other explanation)?

Process. The evaluation is conducted by a multidisciplinary team of qualified professionals who collaborate to make a diagnosis based on consideration of strengths as well as weaknesses in the pertinent areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. The unexpectedly low performance should be in relation to the student's age, instructional history, cognitive abilities, and performance in other academic areas, based on multiple measures. Step 2 requires the following recommended activities:

1. Identify specific aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities that are interfering with learning progress given the student's educational opportunities.

(a) This comprehensive evaluation should include a variety of assessments and procedures such as:

- Review of data from case history, interviews, and direct observations;
- Standardized tests that are reliable, valid, and have current and age-appropriate normative data;
- Contextual-based assessment;
- Task and error pattern analysis;
- Diagnostic teaching;
- Other nonstandardized approaches.

(b) The comprehensive evaluation should include recognition that learning disabilities, like other disabilities, vary in their manifestations, such that:

- Learning disabilities involve varied patterns of strength and difficulty across and within the pertinent areas;
- Learning disabilities range in expression and severity, varying with the demands of life stage and different contexts, but all have significant life effects;
- Learning disabilities can appear differently in varied settings, including both academic and nonacademic settings.

(c) No single test, battery of tests, or list of symptoms is sufficient for the diagnosis of learning disabilities. Appropriate diagnosis depends on the skills, training, and qualifications of the examiners who use the tools and techniques in the evaluation process. The following are examples of patterns that are symptomatic of learning disabilities when they persist even with adequate learning opportunities and in contrast to areas of relative strength:

- Listening:
 - During early development, listening problems might appear as inattention to verbal messages, difficulty understanding familiar words, and sentence and discourse comprehension and retention difficulties;
 - During the later years, listening problems might appear as difficulty detecting, manipulating, and repeating (orally or in writing) whole words or parts of words, including phonemes; difficulty comprehending the language of others, particularly when complex syntax, abstract meanings, and focused attention are required, or when following directions or taking notes.
- Speaking:
 - During early development, speaking problems might appear as difficulty learning the linguistic rules for producing words, word endings, grammatical function words, and syntactic structures;
 - During later years, these problems may persist as difficulties of language formulation and organization; verbal fluency; word retrieval; selection of specific and appropriate vocabulary; judging the needs of listeners for information; judging the style of discourse that is appropriate for particular

speaking partners and situations; being appropriately assertive and responsive in varied conversations; sequencing sounds and syllables, particularly in words with multiple syllables and consonant clusters; and associating speech productions with sounds and symbols.

- Reading:
 - During the emergent literacy period, reading problems might appear as limited interest in, understanding of, or retelling of written texts;
 - During the early elementary years, reading problems might appear as difficulty acquiring decoding strategies, including meaning-based prediction, and using these strategies flexibly in interaction with comprehension;
 - During later elementary and secondary years, reading problems might appear as continued difficulty reading text aloud or silently; difficulty reading text fluently; or with limited understanding, particularly expository texts in content subjects, understanding written directions, or use of figurative language or the language of another time or dialect.
- Writing:
 - During the emergent literacy period, writing problems might appear as limited interest in and ability to manipulate the tools of writing and to form scribble or letter shapes that imitate adult forms;
 - During the early elementary years, writing problems might appear as difficulty learning to form and retrieve letters for representing sounds and words and difficulty learning to formulate words, phrases, and sentences in writing;
 - During later elementary and secondary years, writing problems might appear as limited vocabulary, persistent difficulty with conventions of writing (such as spelling and punctuation); with planning and organizing written texts for a particular audience and purpose; with strategies for organizing an approach to the writing process; and with strategies for reviewing and revising written products.
- Reasoning:
 - Across the age span, reasoning problems might appear as problems of executive functioning, verbal and nonverbal reasoning, and cognitive strategies; they include

difficulty detecting and/or understanding relationships between objects or their symbolic representations, holding them in working memory long enough to manipulate them, translating to other representations, detecting and reporting one or more interpretations, evaluating the interpretive choices to see if they make sense and are consistent with the data, and acting appropriately.

- Mathematical ability:
 - During early development, mathematical ability problems might appear as difficulty developing numerical concepts, learning rote counting, and acquiring concepts underlying numerical or verbal symbols that relate to quantitative reasoning;
 - During elementary and secondary school, difficulties might involve skills for retaining and reproducing an orderly sequence of mathematical operations; understanding mathematical concepts and relationships; retaining, recalling, and applying computational facts and procedures; grasping quantitative relationships explained in words; analyzing mathematical problems, devising and implementing an orderly approach to solving them, making estimates, performing computations, checking the results, and evaluating whether they make sense in the context of the problem;
 - During later stages, difficulties might be evident primarily as problems of abstract quantitative thinking.

2. Investigate processing differences in the specific area of concern. Indicators include cognitive and integrative problems, such as those described above, as well as difficulties involving perception, memory, focused attention, temporal sequencing, motor planning and coordination, flexibility in thinking, reasoning, and organization.

3. Consider all evidence, including qualitative data and intra-individual differences within the learner's strengths and weaknesses. Cognitive ability/achievement discrepancies should be used cautiously because a learning disability can exist when a numerical discrepancy does not. Such comparisons may assist in the diagnostic process. Careful diagnosticians examine all information and recognize developmental factors, including age and academic experience, in making a determination as to the value of such discrepancies.

4. Avoid overidentification by considering other specific factors that may contribute to the na-

ture and severity of learning disabilities, but do not by themselves constitute learning disabilities (see points under Step 1). Careful formulation and interpretation of diagnostic material is necessary to distinguish learning disabilities from other factors that are manifested by difficulties in learning. Extrinsic blocks to learning, such as inadequate instruction, should also be addressed. Adverse physical, emotional, social, and environmental conditions require a complex of school and community interventions to prevent underachievement. Ignoring such blocks to learning may result in unnecessary referrals for special education and related services.

5. Avoid overidentification by using procedures that are sensitive to the effects of sociocultural and language differences.

6. Avoid underidentification by considering whether learning disabilities are present in co-occurrence with other disabilities or extrinsic factors. That is, assessment should identify specific factors (such as intermittent or unilateral hearing loss or social-perception difficulties) that, although they are not directly responsible for a learning disability, may occur concomitantly.

- (a) Individuals with other disabilities may have concomitant learning disabilities;
- (b) Linguistic and cultural differences do not preclude the possibility of learning disabilities;
- (c) Inadequate instruction does not preclude the possibility of learning disabilities.

Decision-making alternatives.

1. If the evidence supports a diagnosis of learning disabilities, move to Step 3, where all assessment information will be considered in making an eligibility decision.

2. If the evidence does not support a diagnosis of learning disabilities, additional considerations might be:

- (a) Disability other than learning disabilities might best explain the student's learning problems. If so, appropriate diagnostic and intervention techniques should follow.
- (b) Disability may be identified and/or extrinsic factors may provide a better explanation of the learning problem; if so, additional consultation with the student and classroom teacher about appropriate educational strategies and accommodations should follow.

Summary. This is the diagnostic step for identifying a student as having learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are lifelong; therefore, this part of the process need occur only once in a person's life span,

although, in some cases, diagnostic study may be repeated. In contrast, determining the need for special education and related services or accommodations (Step 3) may occur at multiple points across the life span.

STEP 3. Determine eligibility for special education and related services.

Purpose. This step involves a collaborative process to determine the need for special education and related services. A student might have learning disabilities and yet still not need special education or related services at all points during the school-age years.

Key question. Given the student's learning disabilities and current performance in important academic and social contexts, does the student require special education and related services at this time?

Process. The initial discussion to determine eligibility should be based on assessment activities to:

1. Document the nature of the problem in learning contexts and in naturalistic social interactions involving listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities (may be based on information gathered in Step 1).
2. Interpret information from assessment activities in Step 2.
3. Judge mismatches between the student's abilities and important learning demands at a particular point in time.
4. Given the student's pattern of strengths and needs, recommend areas to be addressed in intervention planning.

Decision-making alternatives.

1. Decide that the student is eligible to receive special education and related services and proceed to Step 4.
2. Decide that the student does not currently need special education and related services, but could benefit from consultation services aimed at assisting the student within the general education classroom and curriculum, using information from Steps 1, 2, and 3.
3. Decide that the student does not currently need special education and related services under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but does require an individual plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
4. Decide that the student needs no special considerations at the present time.

Summary. Step 3 is to determine the need and eligibility for special education and related services. Determination of need should be followed by Step 4, in which an individualized plan is constructed to meet that need.

STEP 4. Bridge assessment to specialized instruction and accommodations

Purpose. Information gathered in all of the previous steps should be used in the collaborative process to design and implement an individualized education plan (IEP) or other individualized plan. Students with learning disabilities, their parents, and general education teachers are active partners in the collaborative decision-making team, along with special educators and professionals in related services who are knowledgeable about the student, the student's learning disabilities, and generalized and specialized curricular needs.

Key questions. 1. What special education and related services and accommodations should be provided?

2. Based on the entire assessment process, what goals should be targeted on the student's IEP?

3. Is this a time to prepare for special transition (such as preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, high school to postsecondary education or employment)?

Process. The plan should be based on information about the student's learning strengths, as well as learning disabilities, and on information about mismatches between the student's abilities and the expectations of the educational context. It should be relevant to meeting specific contextually based needs identified in Steps 1, 2, and 3. Once an IEP or other individualized program has been written, it should be flexible enough to respond to changes in the student's curriculum-based needs, but specific enough to have measurable outcomes. Such a process should involve equal and collaborative participation of members of the team, especially students with learning disabilities and their parents. Activities of the process include the following:

1. Describe the student's current strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles, using input from all participants, including the parent and student.
2. Analyze information obtained in Steps 1 through 3 to ensure that all areas of concern are addressed and to serve as the starting point to measure progress and to evaluate the effectiveness of the IEP. This discussion should focus on how the student's

learning disability affects the student within the educational environment including academic, vocational, and nonacademic areas. This may include discussions of the student's learning style and a description of those techniques and/or materials that have proven effective or ineffective.

3. Establish final outcomes of the student's program. Take time to articulate those behaviors and skills that one would expect from the student on exiting special education or school. This will assist the team in addressing transitional services the student may need and setting long-term goals for the student.

4. Establish annual goals in the student's IEP based on knowledge of where the student is now and hopes to be in the future. A goal should be written for each area of concern and the goals should be prioritized. Remember that, besides academic skills, goals can address skills that will help the student be independent in school/work habits, learning strategies, or organizational skills.

5. Establish objectives to assist the team to reach each identified goal. These are the intermediate steps between where the student is now and the annual goal. Each objective should have an evaluation procedure, criteria, and schedule for meeting the objective.

6. Use information from ongoing evaluation procedures to help the team evaluate the effectiveness of the IEP. These procedures can include portfolios, observations, student projects, and oral presentations. This information can be used in an IEP meeting, at least annually, to revise or rewrite a student's IEP.

Conduct reevaluation activities at 3-year intervals (or less) and at meaningful transition points that include preschool to elementary, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school and beyond high school. The reevaluation should focus on the student's progress and the ongoing need for special education and related services rather than on redundant identification of the individual as having learning disabilities, considering the following: (a) the effectiveness of special education and related services, accommodations, and environmental modifications; (b) the continuing need for those services; and (c) recommendations related to periods of transition.

At any point when a decision is made to discontinue special education and related services, a plan should be developed to keep necessary modifications, accommodations, and interventions in place. The determination of the continued need for special education and related services, accommodations, and environmental modifications (Step 3) should be based

on several factors, including both formal and informal assessments.

Decision-making alternatives.

1. Review and revise the educational program as needed, which may include minor or major program changes based on the evaluation of the student's progress and the effectiveness of the interventions used.

2. Determine that special education and related services are not currently needed, but plan for periodic review of the student's educational progress.

Summary. Step 4 involves developing a plan, implementing it, and judging the effectiveness of special education and related services so that modifications can be made as needed.

Summary

Ongoing assessment throughout the school years is critical to develop the educational potential of all children, especially those with learning disabilities. School personnel, parents, and students should proceed with as much information as possible, giving consideration to individual skills and academic needs. The five constructs of the NJCLD definition of learning disabilities can serve as a guide to this process.

References

- Note: The following references are all to reprints of NJCLD papers in *Collective perspectives on issues affecting learning disabilities: Position papers and statements* (1994). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed. The first date in parentheses refers to the original publication date. The page numbers refer to the 1994 publication.
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