

Comprehensive Assessment and Evaluation of Students With Learning Disabilities Executive Summary

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities June 2010

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD)* strongly supports comprehensive assessment and evaluation of students with learning disabilities (LD) by a multidisciplinary team that includes both professionals and parents¹ to identify LD and determine eligibility for LD services. Comprehensive assessment of individual students requires the use of multiple data sources. Reliance on any single criterion is not comprehensive, nor is a group assessment, such as universal screening or statewide academic assessment tests, sufficient.

This paper updates two previous NJCLD papers that provided a solid basis for understanding the issues of LD assessment, evaluation, identification, and eligibility. It is intended to inform administrators, educators, parents, and others concerned about current practice because the process is key to effective identification and education of students with LD and, thus, effective instruction.

Differentiating Assessment and Evaluation

Although professionals broaden *assessment* to include both assessment and evaluation, these processes are differentiated to underscore the sequence, procedures, and decisions involved in a comprehensive process. *Assessment* refers to data collection from multiple sources (e.g., individual, group, standardized, informal, formative, and summative). *Evaluation* follows assessment and integrates all data to produce a student profile to inform decisions about identification, eligibility, services, and instruction.

Two Decades of Change in Legislation, Research, and Education

Changes in legislation, research, and education have brought new attention and requirements to many aspects of assessment and evaluation of all students, including students with learning disabilities.

Legislation

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as No Child Left Behind in 2001 required participation of students with LD in the general curriculum and aligned it with state assessments to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all students, including a disability subgroup of students with LD. ESEA also calls for the use of research-based instruction and accommodations for teaching and testing. IDEA 2004 changed the LD identification criteria; added that data from how a “child responds to scientific, research-based interventions” (RTI) can be part of evaluation procedures, as an alternative to a severe discrepancy; and required a “summary of performance” (SOP) to guide transition planning.

¹ *Parent* is a broad term used to refer to any adult member of the student's extended family, as well as adults with foster or custodial responsibilities.

Research

The study of components of assessment and evaluation have targeted struggling students, including those with LD. Ongoing research has focused on the discrepancy model, early reading skills, and problem solving, or RTI, while emerging research in literacy, reading components, mathematics skills, noncognitive factors, brain function, genetics, and accountability measures also continue to shape assessment and evaluation practices.

Education

The increased number of students receiving LD services from 1995 to 2004, coupled with concern about overidentification and overrepresentation in special education programs, have led to less-biased assessment, as well as increased awareness of the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity. Other educational changes impacting assessment and evaluation include a focus on IEP academic goals, participation in general education, the need to link data to instruction, evidence-based teaching that is valid and reliable, and greater responsiveness to individual differences. The use of assistive technology, software, universal design for learning, and the SOP are also impacting assessment and evaluation practices.

Guiding Principles for Comprehensive Assessment and Evaluation

NJCLD views adherence to seven guiding principles as vital to a comprehensive assessment and evaluation for students with LD, which are briefly summarized as follows:

1. Consistent understanding of LD, intra-individual differences, variation in severity, and need for accommodations and specialized instruction.
2. No single data source is sufficient to identify LD, including data from any one source, such as an ability–achievement discrepancy score.
3. Professionals from various disciplines with expertise in LD evaluation and identification must conduct the comprehensive assessment and evaluation for students suspected of having LD.
4. Teams, including parents, must be directed by a designated team member, consider all aspects of learning and behavior, and then develop goals that inform instruction.
5. Comprehensive assessment and practices must enable teams to differentiate LD from other learning and behavior problems or underachievement that accompany, but are not synonymous with, LD.
6. Teams need the information, opportunity, and time to integrate assessment findings for identification, eligibility, services, and instruction.
7. Teams must ensure that administrators and families recognize the benefit of an accurate diagnosis to inform instruction, rather than choosing one that might be perceived as more desirable.

Response to Intervention

The shift to an RTI approach is still in progress across the country. How it is used to determine whether a student has LD and/or alter interventions when student responses are inadequate remain emerging areas of practice. A key feature of an RTI process is the use of continuous progress monitoring through frequent, brief, individual assessments mainly of early reading, mathematics, or behavior that include criteria for adequate progress (NJCLD, 2005). Such assessment tasks are intended to guide when a smaller group, greater intensity, a different method, or a comprehensive assessment is needed. Although RTI data can be useful for

identification, eligibility, and program planning, the analysis of comments and changes that accompany the IDEA 2004 regulations specifies that RTI data cannot be the sole determinant of LD and do not replace a comprehensive evaluation.

The Comprehensive Assessment and Evaluation Process

Instruments and Procedures

Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data must provide accurate and useful information about an individual student's status and be derived from a variety of assessment measures, including RTI data, if available. A comprehensive assessment and evaluation should ensure that (a) standardized assessments are current, reliable, and valid, as well as culturally, linguistically, developmentally, and age appropriate; (b) administration, scoring, and reporting procedures are followed, with results expressed as standard scores that maximize comparability; (c) multiple measures, including standardized and nonstandardized data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, error patterns, and continuous progress monitoring) are used; (d) functioning and/or ability levels across domains (e.g., motor, sensory, cognitive, communication, behavior, perception, memory, attention, reasoning, and organization) are examined; (e) all components of the SLD definition are considered, including inclusionary and exclusionary factors, the eight areas of SLD, and patterns of intra-individual differences; and (f) standardized and informal data are discussed, integrated, and balanced to describe current academic and functional levels and guide identification, eligibility, services, and instruction.

Diagnosis: Determining Whether a Student Has LD

A comprehensive assessment determines eligibility for special education and identifies strengths and needs. Because LD is manifested differently in each student and can be hidden or subtle, the team must consider that LD can vary (a) among individuals and within the individual, (b) on a mild to severe continuum, (c) in different settings, and (d) on different tasks.

Distinguishing Between LD and Other Conditions

Differential diagnosis is necessary to distinguish among disorders, syndromes, and factors that can interfere with academic performance or affect the student's instruction. Teams need to consider whether the following are present: (a) exclusionary factors; (b) cultural and linguistic influences; (c) poor self-regulatory behaviors; (d) diagnosis of another disability; (e) underachievement; (f) intra-individual differences in skill or performance; (g) continued learning problems after high-quality, research-based instruction; and (h) unexpectedly high or low scores on intelligence or achievement tests.

Eligibility: Determining Whether a Student Needs Special Education and Related Services

The assessment and evaluation process is an integral part of the team's decision about who may have LD. Eligibility criteria guide the team in preparing a written evaluation report to summarize data and address identification, eligibility, instruction, and transition services, as appropriate. The team is expected to identify a student without regard to the prospects of obtaining the needed services and, therefore, the eligibility decision should not be based on the (a) availability of appropriate placement or services, (b) lack of funds or resources, or (c) desire to generate special education funds.

Diagnostic Summary and Eligibility Decision

Data from the comprehensive assessment and evaluation are key elements in the eligibility decision about a student identified as having LD. The alternatives include the following (a) If a student is found eligible for and in need of special education and services, an IEP is developed; (b) if a student is found not eligible for special education or services, suggestions should go to the general education teacher and 504 eligibility should be explored; or (c) If a student is found not to need special considerations, the parents and teacher are informed and recommendations made.

Multidisciplinary Team Documentation

IDEA 2004 requires a written report as part of the assessment and evaluation process that summarizes and integrates the perspectives of all team members. At the IEP meeting the team determines eligibility using the IDEA and state criteria. Strengths and needs are identified, academic and behavioral goals are developed, and services are determined from a continuum of options. For young children, data from classroom instruction, as well as developmental, cognitive, behavioral, and similar areas, are important. For older students, organizational, self-advocacy, and intrapersonal areas should be considered.

Linking Evaluation With Instruction and Transition

Options and interventions emerge through team discussion of the assessment data as each professional contributes discipline-specific expertise to assist in developing student goals and plans to guide both instruction and transition. Team members, including parents, should suggest student strengths and needs, accommodations, assistive technology, and related service supports, as well as instructional, classroom management, motivational strategies, and transition supports.

Recommendations

To assure the continued advancement of professional practice in comprehensive assessment and evaluation of students with, or suspected of having, learning disabilities, the NJCLD strongly supports and advocates for 21 specific recommendations in the following four areas:

(1) research, (2) professional development, (3) families and advocates, and (4) administration/leadership.

**This is an official document of the NJCLD. To download the full report and its recommendations and read more about the work of the 12 organizations that compose the NJCLD, please visit www.ldonline.org/njclld.*