

Learning Disabilities and Achieving High Quality Education Standards

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) affirms the goals of the Common Core State Standards, on which many state standards are based, to provide high quality education for all students, including students with learning disabilities (LD).¹ It is important for students with LD to achieve high quality education standards (HQES) and they are capable of doing so. Concerted efforts on the part of educators—supports, strategies, professional development—are required for students with LD to meet rigorous education standards.

HQES articulate rigorous content and require students to use higher-order skills to think more deeply and progress within a more complex and challenging curriculum. In keeping with broader trends in special education, all students, including students with LD, are expected to meet HQES. LD affect about half of all students with disabilities in the United States and make learning academic content and skills difficult and frustrating. Without specialized individualized instruction, students with LD often struggle to meet grade-level standards. These students require support beyond high-quality instruction in general education classrooms (K–12) if they are to make expected academic progress and be career ready. With appropriate supports and individualized instruction, as well as strong collaboration among education professionals, comes a genuine opportunity for students with LD to master HQES and enhance their college and career readiness.

¹ *Learning disabilities (LD)* 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 abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the lifespan. 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 (for example, sensory impairment, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural or linguistic differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (NJCLD, 1990; updated 2016; available from www.ldonline.org/about/partners/njclld#definition).

Serious and extended attention to a number of critical areas is necessary if students with LD are to achieve HQES:

1. Provide ongoing high-quality professional development.

The NJCLD calls for effective preparation and school-wide support for teachers and other professionals to ensure the best possible outcomes for students with LD. Preparation begins at the pre-professional level. Professional development that aligns with the emergence of interprofessional models of education and practice is an important component. Keys to success include:

- administrative support, which is essential for professional development and collaboration;
- explicit, sustained training on the collaborative process that is well planned and capitalizes on the varied expertise of the team members;
- meaningful, ongoing, and productive collaboration among all stakeholders responsible for the education of students with LD (e.g., families, general education and special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, counselors, administrators);
- training that helps team members to implement a process that ensures deep understanding of HQES and universal design for learning (UDL);
- clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for all team members;
- integration and use of data from all team members to develop specific plans of instruction;
- protected, regular time/opportunities for the team to plan together for successful instruction and student support;
- consistent and frequent communication among the team members regarding instruction and student growth;
- knowledge of effective group dynamics and collaborative negotiating skills;
- high-quality mentoring/coaching by effective, experienced, educational professionals;
- professional development for all new professionals' orientation/induction plans that prepare them to fully engage in collaborative practices to address HQES for students with LD.

2. Align curriculum and instructional strategies to meet the needs of students with LD.

Educators need more guidance on how to teach and assess skills in order to prepare students to meet challenging standards. They should also be empowered to be innovative and flexible as they develop and implement curricula to align with HQES. Educators are obligated to integrate strategies for teaching, intervening, and supporting the students with LD in ways that will ensure students have the language, literacy, numeracy, social-emotional, behavioral, and communication skills necessary to be successful in college and careers. Keys to success include the following activities:

- Integrating HQES within a framework like Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) will ensure that students with LD have research- and evidence-based systems of instruction to assist them in achieving success. Using performance data and monitoring learning rates, educators can make important instructional decisions based on students' individualized needs.
- Appropriate instructional strategies should be developed to address the needs of students with LD. These strategies must include content-specific language and literacy skills required for the achievement of HQES in Math, Social Studies, History, English, Science, and technical subjects.
- Appropriate curriculum and instructional design and alignment should be provided.
- Teachers, speech-language pathologists, and other professionals must be assured of effective preparation and school-wide support.

3. Use valid and appropriate assessments that reveal students' strengths, needs, and achievement levels.

Statewide assessments must be designed and delivered with consideration for the specific needs and strengths of students with LD, including accommodations and modifications reflected on their individualized education programs (IEPs) and 504 plans. Assessments must be culturally and linguistically responsive and age appropriate. Keys to success include assessments that:

- reflect the rigor and increasing complexity of HQES for all students, including those with LD;
- identify the deficit foundational skills necessary to achieve HQES;
- determine areas in need of intervention, informing more effective and specialized instruction;

- inform parents of how their child's LD will be accommodated on assessments.

4. Develop a comprehensive understanding of the “whole child,” in order to successfully achieve HQES.

Stakeholders must intentionally and effectively communicate interprofessionally to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the whole child with LD. Keys to success include:

- comprehensive communication of behavioral, social, emotional, cultural, linguistic, and self-regulatory characteristics and manifestations of the student with LD, which is foundational to facilitating success with HQES;
- comprehensive knowledge of variables that impact student response to instruction—students with LD may approach tasks differently and need to be taught critical thinking and problem-solving skills;
- development of a deep understanding of the individual characteristics of the student and how those characteristics impact day-to-day performance;
- design of instruction with continual consideration/focus on these characteristics, how they are manifested, and what the student response is to instruction based on that knowledge;
- comprehensive awareness of the increase in complexity and depth of demands on students in order to meet HQES;
- identification and implementation of interventions that result in significant academic and behavioral success;
- provision of intentional instruction in self-advocacy throughout the student’s educational experience;
- understanding that the performance of students with LD will become more predictable when appropriate supports and services are in place;
- reinforcement and celebration of small measures of success to help develop student self-esteem and academic risk taking;
- validation of efforts required by the students to be successful.

5. Use transition planning to prepare students for success in college or a career.

HQES may identify academic and life skills for students as they move beyond Grade 12. For students with LD, the transition process is an important tool in the implementation of these readiness skills. Development in academics, social behaviors, communication strategies, and technical skills can be integrated into

the transition process in the form of goals, objectives, and functional performances. Keys to support a solid and viable transition plan are:

- identify the language, communication, academic, literacy, behavioral, social-emotional, and functional skills needed to successfully transition to college, career, or workplace;
- align student transition goals with HQES;
- engage the student in the transition process early in the educational experience;
- begin as early as grade school;
- include all students with LD in IEP, 504, and individual transition plan meetings and goal setting;
- teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills;
- identify and explicitly teach academic and employment behaviors and skills, including communication, self and time management, expectations, and work values and norms;
- apply the principles of UDL to the transition process—provide for multiple formats, multiple means of engagement, and multiple measurements;
- ensure students have technological skills—which may include assistive technology—needed for the transition;
- provide for a collaborative environment for all team members;
- integrate community services and resources with the instruction of transition knowledge, behaviors, and skills;
- monitor and assess status throughout the process.

Conclusion

The NJCLD advocates for implementation of HQES for all students, including students with LD.

Educators providing instruction and/or intervention to students with LD need a deeper knowledge of learning processes, broader set of instructional strategies, and comprehensive understanding about specific students' learning needs across learning and social environments. The necessary ingredients that contribute to successful outcomes for students with LD in meeting HQES include

1. high-quality, collaborative, professional development
2. appropriate curriculum and instructional design
3. appropriate assessments that reveal students' strengths, needs, and achievement levels
4. a comprehensive understanding of the whole child

5. comprehensive and effective transition planning

Although research is still in its infancy regarding the implementation of high quality state standards and their impact on student achievement, educators should continue to use emerging findings to fully prepare students to be college and career ready.

This is an official document of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD). The following are the member organizations of the NJCLD: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Association of Educational Therapists, Association on Higher Education and Disability, Council for Learning Disabilities, Division for Communicative Disabilities and Deafness, Division for Learning Disabilities, International Dyslexia Association, International Literacy Association, Learning Disabilities Association of America, National Association of School Psychologists, and National Center for Learning Disabilities.

The mission of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) is to provide multi-organizational leadership and resources to optimize outcomes for individual with learning disabilities.

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