

## Colorado Society of School Psychologists

### Position Paper: The Identification of Specific Learning Disability in School-age Populations

- A Specific Learning Disability “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 an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (34 C.F.R. § 300.7(c) (10). (as cited in NRCLD, 2005).
- Criteria to identify children with this handicapping condition need to be defensible, reliable, and valid for ages 6-18. The process for identifying children with specific learning disabilities should be clear, operational, and understood by all stakeholders in order to be implemented consistently and with fidelity.
- Although the Response to Intervention Model represents a promising approach for the prevention of and early intervention for children who are at risk for developing specific learning disabilities (Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006), there are conflicting viewpoints as to whether it represents a reliable and valid means for identifying specific learning disabilities (NJCLD, 2005; NRCLD, 2005)
- Ruling out alternative causes for low achievement and failure to respond to intervention, including speech, language or hearing disorders; impaired vision; emotional disability; or mental retardation will necessarily require the use of a variety of means of evaluation of children suspected of specific learning disabilities, as will the need to identify other disabilities that are known to frequently co-exist with specific learning disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). Data generated by an RTI model will be a necessary but insufficient component in the comprehensive evaluation of these school-aged children.
- The professional development needs across special and regular education personnel will be immense and will require a number of years of training before systemic approaches are applied consistently, using a reliable and valid approach, and that reflects fidelity.

Given these considerations, we concur with the recommendations set forth by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities that a Response-to-Intervention model should be used as one important element of the SLD identification process, but is not sufficient, on its own, as a method for identifying SLD in children across various ages and grade levels.

Therefore, CSSP proposes:

- That the results of an Response-to-Intervention process be used as only *one* of the indicators when determining whether a child has a Specific Learning Disability.
- That all research available that helps define and operationalize appropriate assessment of specific learning disabilities be considered when developing state and district policies. For example, there is a growing body of literature within the fields of neuropsychology that suggests that certain cognitive processes (e.g., phonological processing, processing speed) are important predictors of later reading ability (Semrud-Clikeman, 2003).
- Implement problem solving processes within school-based teams that promote the consideration of a broad range of data for determining the presence of a Specific Learning Disability. This data must include a comprehensive assessment using multiple methods. NJLCD (2005) recommends assessment across the seven domains that constitute the definition of Specific Learning Disability by law (i.e., listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical calculation).

- Consistent with NASP (2002) recommendations, use cognitive measures judiciously to identify a pattern of strengths and weaknesses on specific objectives (e.g., phonological processing, verbal short-term memory) and other areas known to be related to reading or other academic areas (as appropriate to the presenting concerns of the referred student).
- Develop a process for systematically collecting data across districts to determine the effectiveness of the Response-to-Intervention model for prevention, early intervention, and determination of Specific Learning Disabilities at different grade levels and in different subject areas such as science and mathematics.
- In recognition that it is difficult to determine the difference between children who are slow learners and those who have Specific Learning Disabilities and that there is a high degree of overlap in the skills and instruction provided to children who have mild handicapping conditions, we agree with the position of NASP (2002) regarding the adoption of a non-categorical model for identification, at least through age 10, in order to provide time for interventions and appropriate evaluations prior to making a determination of a Specific Learning Disability.

#### References

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