Chapter 7 - Specific Learning Disabilities

Definition under IDEA of Specific Learning Disabilities

"(i) General. The term 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 to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

"(ii) Disorders not included. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. ([34 C.F.R. 300.7(c)(10)]

Important Point: The definition of “a specific learning disability” under IDEA 2004 remains unchanged from IDEA of 1997. However, under the new provisions under IDEA 2004:

a local educational agency is not required to take into consideration whether a student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation or mathematical reasoning. In determining whether a student has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if a student responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures (U.S.C. sec 614(b)(2)(3)).

Overview of Specific Learning Disabilities

In general, learning disabilities refers to a neurobiological disorder related to differences in how one’s brain works and is structured. Further, learning disability is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills (Lerner). The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math (Pierangelo and Giuliani; Heward; National Dissemination Center for Students with Disabilities).

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) discusses five constructs underlying the definition of learning disabilities. They are:

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 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, intellectual disability, 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 students from each background must be sensitive to such factors and use practices that are individualized and appropriate for each student.

Prevalence of Specific Learning Disabilities

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Specific Learning Disabilities represent approximately 36.0 percent of all students having a classification in special education.

Characteristics of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

There is no one sign that shows a person has a learning disability. Experts look for a noticeable difference between how well a student does in school and how well he or she could do, given his or her intelligence or ability. There are also certain clues that may mean a student has a learning disability. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. A student probably won't show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a student shows a number of these problems, then parent/guardians and the teacher should consider the possibility that the student has a learning disability.
When a student has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often
- may not understand what he or she reads
- may have real trouble with spelling
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly
- may struggle to express ideas in writing
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm
- may have trouble following directions
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar
- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third)
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there
- If a student has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parent/guardians may want to investigate more. The same is true if the student is struggling to do any one of these skills. The student may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

Procedures and Assessment Measures used to diagnose Specific Learning Disabilities

If a student is suspected of having a specific learning disability, the following evaluation should be considered:

- An observation by a team member other than the student’s general education teacher of the student’s academic performance in a general classroom setting; or in the case of a student less than school age or out of school, an observation by a team member conducted in an age-appropriate environment
- A developmental history, if needed
- An assessment of intellectual ability
- Other assessments of the characteristics of learning disabilities if the student exhibits impairments in any one or more of the following areas: cognition, fine motor, perceptual motor, communication, social or emotional, and perception or memory. These assessments shall be completed by specialists knowledgeable in the specific characteristics being assessed
A review of cumulative records, previous individualized education programs or individualized family service plans and teacher collected work samples

If deemed necessary, a medical statement or health assessment statement indicating whether there are any physical factors that may be affecting the student’s educational performance

Assessments to determine the impact of the suspected disability

On the student’s educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21
On the student’s developmental progress when the student is age three through the age of eligibility for kindergarten

Additional evaluations or assessments that are necessary to identify the student’s educational needs.

At least one observation is required as part of the evaluation for determining a Specific Learning Disability. Minimal observation requirements include:

- At least one team member other than the student's general education teacher shall observe the student's academic performance in the general classroom setting. In the case of a student less than school age or out of school, a team member shall observe the student in an environment appropriate for a student of that age.
- The relevant behavior noted during the observation of the student; and, the relationship of that behavior to the student’s academic functioning

I. Documentation that the student's learning problems are not primarily due to:

- lack of appropriate instruction in reading and math
- limited English proficiency
- visual, hearing, or motor impairment
- Intellectual Disability
- Emotional Disturbance
- environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage
- motivational factors
- situational traumas

Eligibility for a Diagnosis of a Specific Learning Disability

In general, States use two different methods to determine whether a student meets the eligibility criteria as a student with a specific Learning Disability under IDEA. We present a synopsis of these two options for an IEP Committee to consider.
OPTION 1

In order to identify and be determined as eligible for special education services as a student with a Specific Learning Disability, the IEP Committee shall document that the following standards have been met. Based on the results of the assessment:

1. The student demonstrates a continued lack of progress when provided with appropriate instruction in the suspected area of disability.
2. Documented evidence exists which indicates that effective general education interventions and strategies have been attempted over a reasonable period of time.
3. The determining factor for identification of a learning disability is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading and math.
4. Evidence exists that the student does not achieve commensurate with his/her age and ability in one or more of the following areas: listening comprehension, oral expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculation, and/or mathematics reasoning.
5. There is a severe discrepancy between educational performance and predicted achievement that is based on the best measure of cognitive ability (This is an OPTIONAL CONSIDERATION under IDEA 2004). 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.
6. There is evidence of a cognitive processing disorder that adversely affects the student's academic achievement. A cognitive processing disorder is defined as a deficit in the manner in which a student receives, stores, transforms, retrieves, and expresses information. Documented evidence exists that demonstrates or expresses the manifestation of the processing disorder in the identified achievement deficit.
7. Evidence exists that the student's learning problems are not due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor impairments; Intellectual Disability; Emotional Disturbance; environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage; limited English proficiency; motivational factors; or situational traumas.
8. There is evidence that characteristics as defined above are present and that the severity of the student's Specific Learning Disability adversely affects his/her progress in the general education curriculum, demonstrating the need for special education and related services, and that students who perform in classroom academics in a manner commensurate with expected academic standards at the student's grade level cannot be considered as having a Specific Learning Disability, even though they may show deficits on achievement tests in one or more of the seven academic areas.
OPTION 2

The team shall determine that a pupil has a specific learning disability and is in need of special education and related services when the pupil meets the criteria described in items A through C. Information about each item must be sought from the parent/guardian and included as part of the assessment data. The assessment data must confirm that the disabling effects of the pupil's disability occur in a variety of settings.

A. The pupil must demonstrate severe underachievement in response to usual classroom instruction. The performance measures used to verify this finding must be both representative of the pupil's curriculum and useful for developing instructional goals and objectives. The following assessment procedures are required at a minimum to verify this finding:

   (1) Evidence of low achievement from sources such as cumulative record reviews, classwork samples, anecdotal teacher records, formal and informal tests, curriculum based assessment results; and

   (2) at least one team member other than the pupil's general education teacher shall observe the pupil's academic performance in the general classroom setting. In the case of a student served through an Early childhood Special Education program or who is out of school, a team member shall observe the student in an environment appropriate for a student of that age.

B. The pupil must demonstrate a severe discrepancy between general intellectual ability and achievement in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or mathematical reasoning. The demonstration of a severe discrepancy shall not be based solely on the use of standardized tests. The team shall consider these standardized test results as only one component of the eligibility criteria.

   (1) The instruments used to assess the pupil's general intellectual ability and achievement must be individually administered and interpreted by an appropriately licensed person using standardized procedures.

   (2) For initial placement, the severe discrepancy must be equal to or greater than 1.75 standard deviations below the mean of the distribution of difference scores for the general population of individuals at the pupil's chronological age level.

C. The team must agree that it has sufficient assessment data that verify the following conclusions:

   (1) The pupil has an information processing condition that is manifested by such behaviors as: inadequate or lack of organizational skills (such as in following directions, written and oral; spatial arrangements; correct use of developmental order in relating events; transfer of information onto paper), memory (visual and auditory), expression
(verbal and nonverbal), and motor control for written tasks such as pencil and paper assignments, drawing, and copying;

(2) the disabling effects of the pupil's information processing condition occur in a variety of settings; and

(3) the pupil's underachievement is not primarily the result of: vision, hearing, or motor impairment; mental impairment; emotional or behavioral disorders; or environmental, cultural, economic influences; or a history of an inconsistent education program.

Final Thoughts

Ongoing assessment throughout the school years is critical to develop the educational potential of all students, especially those with learning disabilities. School personnel, parent/guardians, and students should proceed with as much information as possible, giving consideration to individual skills and academic needs.

The recent explosion in brain research is beginning to impact teaching practice and address the differences in brain anatomy and chemistry in students with SLD. Some current findings include insights on causation, hemispheric functioning, writing dysfunctions, dyslexia, and laterality. Overall, there is now scientific support for some LD characteristics that were previously identified mainly through observation and testing. Other information found in these studies suggests that LD teachers need to change some teaching practices based on brain research. As time goes on, there will be advances in identifying even more patterns of thinking in students with LD.

Given the enormous variability in the population of students with learning disabilities, the proliferation of tests on the market, and the problems cited above that are inherent in applying the definition, it has been extremely difficult to identify specific assessment instruments that consistently and appropriately identify these students. The problem of distinguishing students with LD from students without LD has become even more compounded by recent research that suggests that poor readers without disabilities and students who have been identified with mild learning disabilities may not differ significantly in the areas of information processing, genetic, or neurophysiological characteristics.