Strategies to Identify and Support English Learners With Learning Disabilities

Key Challenge: Identifying English Learners With Disabilities

While some guidance exists, there are no definitive processes for identifying English learner (EL) students with learning disabilities and determining the best academic supports for them. Educators may struggle to determine whether a student's academic difficulties stem from a language acquisition need, a learning disability, or some other factor(s).

Barriers to inconsistent identification of EL students with learning disabilities include:

◊ Lack of multi-tiered early intervention strategies

◊ Poorly designed and implemented referral processes

◊ Lack of options, beyond referral to special education services, for providing assistance to struggling students

As a result, EL students are both under- and over-identified for special education services.

What's at Stake

EL students with learning disabilities who are not accurately identified may miss out on important special education services. And EL students who are misidentified as having a learning disability receive special education services that they do not require.

When students end up in classrooms or programs mismatched to their needs, it hampers their educational opportunities and achievement.

Audience for this Brief

◊ Policymakers developing systems for accurately identifying which EL students are eligible for special education services

◊ District leaders developing procedures to ensure appropriate evaluations and referrals for EL students with a suspected disability

◊ Teacher educators and educators working with EL students before and after the identification of a learning disability

What We Know: Strategies for Educators

Research suggests some strategies to help educators differentiate between EL students who have difficulty acquiring language skills and those who have learning disabilities.

Questions to Ask

To accurately identify and support EL students with suspected learning disabilities, educators can start by asking:

◊ Is the student receiving instruction of sufficient quality to enable him or her to make the accepted levels of academic progress?

◊ How does the student's progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English as a second language compare with the expected rate of progress for his or her age and level of English proficiency?

◊ To what extent are behaviors that might otherwise indicate a learning disability be considered typical for the child's cultural background or part of the process of adjusting to life in the United States?

◊ How might extrinsic factors — that is, factors beyond classroom instruction and learning such as health, family circumstances, environmental factors, education history, and exposure to trauma — impact the student's academic progress?

Key Data to Inform Decisionmaking

To make appropriate referral to special education evaluation, a multi-disciplinary team (including the general education teacher, EL specialist, special education teacher, and district administrator) should review multiple sources of information, including:

◊ The cumulative file, including report cards, attendance history, behavior history, primary language proficiency, and progress in English language proficiency

◊ Extrinsic factors beyond classroom instruction and learning that may impact learning

◊ Documentation of interventions provided

◊ Assessments of academic achievement, health, and areas related to the suspected disability

◊ Instructional practices in the school environment

◊ Observations in more than one setting

◊ Family interviews

What We Know: Strategies for Leaders

Research suggests various ways that state and district leaders can create consistent processes and policies to help educators accurately identify EL students with disabilities, including:

◊ Develop clear policy guidelines for pre-referral, referral, and assessment

◊ Implement pre-referral strategies through tiered systems of support

◊ Examine multiple sources of data when considering appropriate referral

◊ Involve parents and families as integral sources of information

◊ Provide professional development for those involved in pre-referral interventions, assessments, and referral processes

◊ Institutionalize collaboration to include general education teachers, EL specialists, special education teachers, and administrators

◊ Develop processes for ongoing review of academic, behavioral, and language-proficiency progress

Review of State Practices

Drawn from a review of state education agency websites, five common themes suggest ways to identify and assist EL students with suspected learning disabilities:

◊ Assess EL students' language and disability needs using a multi-tiered system of supports.

◊ Have a clear policy statement that additional considerations will be used in determining the need for special education services for EL students.

◊ Provide appropriate test accommodations for EL students.

◊ Employ EL reclassification criteria specific to EL students with disabilities.

◊ Provide publicly available guidance to aid educators in identifying and supporting EL students with learning disabilities (see State and District Guidance Manuals).

Fifteen states and districts have developed guidance manuals to date. The following table ("Comparison of Features from 15 Guidance Manuals") provides a comparison of their features.

Comparison of Features from 15 Guidance Manuals on Supporting English Learner Students with Suspected Learning Disabilities

Identification	AZ	AR	CA	CT	IL	MA	MI	MN	MO	OK	OR	SDUSD	SELPA	VT	VA
Family engagement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Role of culture / acculturation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Second language acquisition and progress		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Multi-disciplinary team composition and roles	✓		✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sample tiered pre-referral intervention	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sample forms and protocols for teachers to use to gather information and guide referrals		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		

Assessment	AZ	AR	CA	CT	IL	MA	MI	MN	MO	OK	OR	SDUSD	SELPA	VT	VA
Guidance on assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Use of translators / interpreters	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Accommodations	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓					✓
Checklists (IEP referral process, classroom observation, etc.)		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		

Instruction and ongoing monitoring	AZ	AR	CA	CT	IL	MA	MI	MN	MO	OK	OR	SDUSD	SELPA	VT	VA
Instructional strategies	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Exit from special education	✓		✓												
Reclassification from EL status			✓						✓				✓		✓
Plan for continuous evaluation		✓	✓		✓			✓				✓	✓		
Illustrative student scenarios		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓						✓		

Other	AZ	AR	CA	CT	IL	MA	MI	MN	MO	OK	OR	SDUSD	SELPA	VT	VA
Laws and regulations	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
FAQs			✓	✓			✓		✓				✓	✓	✓

Manual features	AZ	AR	CA	CT	IL	MA	MI	MN	MO	OK	OR	SDUSD	SELPA	VT	VA
Year published	2019	2003	2019	2011	2002	2019	2017	2019	2019	2007	2015	2012	2017	2010	2019
Total pages	25	95	464	38	67	16	93	(in process)	41	25	154	73	154	53	35

State and District Guidance Manuals

Fifteen states and districts have extensive manuals to aid educators in accurately identifying and supporting EL students with learning disabilities:

◊ Arizona: *Identifying and supporting English learners with disabilities*
https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=5c3e4c841dcb2511a0871254

◊ Arkansas: *Arkansas state guidelines on nondiscriminatory assessment and addressing educational needs of English language learners with disabilities*
https://arksped.k12.ar.us/documents/stateprogramdevelopment/elldocument.pdf

◊ California: *California practitioners' guide for educating English learners with disabilities*
https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/documents/ab2785guide.pdf

◊ Connecticut: *English language learners and special education: A resource handbook*
https://ctserc.org/documents/resources/CT-ELL-and-Special-Education.pdf

◊ Illinois: *Serving English language learners with disabilities: A resource manual for Illinois educators*
https://www.isbe.net/Documents/bilingual_manual2002.pdf

◊ Massachusetts: *Guidance for supporting English learners with disabilities*
http://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/disability.html

◊ Michigan: *Guidance handbook for educators of English learners with suspected disabilities*
https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ELs_with_Suspected_Disabilities_Guidance_Handbook_-_2017_558692_7.pdf

◊ Minnesota: *The English learner companion to promoting fair special education evaluations*
https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/sped/div/el/ and
http://www.asec.net/Archives/Manuals/ELL%20companion%20Manual%20020212%5B1%5D.pdf

◊ Missouri: *Identifying, supporting and reclassifying English learners with disabilities*
https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/cur-eld-elsped-guidance-0918.pdf

◊ Oklahoma: *Identifying and assessing English language learners with disabilities*
http://sde.ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/SpecEd-IdentifyingELL.pdf

◊ Oregon: *Special education assessment process for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students: Guidance and resources, 2015 update*
http://5c2cabd466efc6790a0a-6728e7c952118b70f16620a9fc754159.r37.cf1.rackcdn.com/cms/Special_Education_Assessment_Process_for_Culturally_and_Liguistically_Diverse_%28CLD%29_Students_with_logos_and_links_1489.pdf

◊ San Diego Unified School District (CA): *CEP-EL: A comprehensive evaluation process for English learners: A process manual*
https://www.sandiegounified.org/sites/default/files_link/district/files/dept/special_education/ParentServices/CEP-EL%20Manual.pdf

◊ Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Administrators of California Association: *Meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) with disabilities resource book*
https://www.vcselpa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=KoRx7C95_nI%3D&portalid=0

◊ Vermont: *English language learners in Vermont: Distinguishing language difference from disability*
http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-federal-programs-distinguishing-language-difference-from-disability.pdf

◊ Virginia: *Handbook for educators of students who are English language learners with suspected disabilities*
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/resources/handbook_educators.pdf

Noteworthy Resources for Policymakers, Administrators, and Practitioners

In addition to the state and district guidance manuals listed in this brief, below are some resources that were developed to assist policymakers, administrators, and practitioners take more strategic action on behalf of EL students with disabilities.

English Learners with Disabilities: Shining a Light on Dual-Identified Students

- Audience: Policymakers, administrators, and practitioners
- Resource type: Federal policy primer

https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/english-learners-disabilities-shining-light-dual-identified-students/

This brief from New America provides an overview of the separate but intersecting federal policies that govern the identification of and services provided to EL students and students with disabilities.

Supporting English Learners and ELs with Disabilities

- Audience: Teachers and coaches
- Resource type: Videos and related resources

http://www.doe.mass.edu/ell/disability.html

In this collection of resources — produced by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education — educators, practitioners, and school leaders demonstrate how they are working to meet the needs of EL students with disabilities. Hear their stories and download key resources for the classroom, school, and district on the following topics:

- Using a tiered system for support
- Providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction
- Language acquisition/classroom resources
- Evaluating EL students for special education services
- EL specialists and the IEP process
- Collaborating for student support

English Learner Disability Resources
- Audience: Administrators and practitioners
- Resource type: Webinar and resources related to interpreters

https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/sped/div/el/

The Minnesota Department of Education developed resources such as guidance on holding IEP meetings with EL families and interpreters, a code of ethics and standards of practice for educational interpreters, glossaries of special education terms in other languages, and more. The department also produced a webinar featuring best practices in interpretation, tips for choosing and working with interpreters, and culturally specific strategies for interacting with and interpreting for Spanish, Hmong, and Somali speakers: https://mndepted-source.mediasite.com/mediasite/Play/fd9696f3763347c4a23150477907704d1d?autoStart=false

For more information

Elizabeth Burr
eburr@WestEd.org

Note: This brief is based on the following 2015 review of the research literature and state practice: Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2015086.pdf. It has been updated with new information on guidance manuals.