



## Identifying and Meeting the Needs of English Learner Students with Disabilities

### Introduction

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Schools, districts, and states frequently struggle with determining whether English learner students who are struggling academically are having difficulty acquiring English language proficiency or have learning disabilities that may require special education services in addition to their English language development services. As a result, students may be misidentified and end up receiving instruction and interventions that are not appropriately matched to their needs. Research provides useful information that can guide educator decision-making, help establish processes to accurately identify students, and determine appropriate services to meet the needs of English learner students identified with learning disabilities. This infographic provides questions and evidence-based practices from research that will help your team develop effective procedures for identifying, assessing, and supporting English learner students who may have learning disabilities.



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### What questions should be asked before an English learner student experiencing academic difficulties is referred for a special education evaluation?

1. Is the instruction the student is receiving of high quality such that they should be able to make the same academic progress as non-English learner peers?
2. How does the student's progress in developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English compare with what is expected of other students of the same age and initial level of English proficiency?
3. Are the behaviors that are believed to indicate a learning disability normal for the child's cultural background or part of the process of their adjustment to the U.S. culture?
4. What other factors might be impacting the student's academic progress? Factors to consider include the student's socioeconomic status, previous experiences with school/limited or interrupted school experiences, fluency in their first language, and attitude toward school and/or learning English.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice* (REL 2015-086). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.



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### What are some factors that lead to the misidentification of special education needs for English learner students?

1. Classroom teachers have a limited understanding as to why English learner students are not making adequate academic progress.<sup>1</sup>
2. Referral processes are poorly designed or implemented.<sup>1</sup>
3. Evaluation team members have limited knowledge of second language development and disabilities.<sup>2</sup>
4. Instructional practices are not of high quality.<sup>2</sup>
5. Intervention strategies used with English learner students who are struggling academically are weak or not appropriate for English learner students.<sup>2</sup>
6. Assessment tools are inappropriate for use with English learner students.<sup>2</sup>
7. Academic delays are believed to be the result of the child growing up with two languages instead of being identified as a possible cognitive disability.<sup>3</sup>



1 Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice* (REL 2015-086). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

2 U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2017). *English Learner Toolkit* (2nd Rev. ed.). U.S. Department of Education.

3 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>.



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### How can schools and districts address these factors and ensure consistent and appropriate identification of English learner students with disabilities?

1. Include experts in second-language acquisition, learning disabilities, content, and the child's language and culture on pre-referral child study and on special education evaluation teams.<sup>1,3</sup>
2. Create parent education and input opportunities that include information on the U.S. education system and the rights and responsibilities of parents of students in special education.<sup>1</sup>
3. Hire bilingual parent liaisons who can communicate with parents in their first language, advocate for parents, and facilitate meetings with parents.<sup>1</sup>
4. Use multiple forms of data for decision-making, such as observations of the student in different school settings (classroom, cafeteria, playground), multiple classes with different teachers, and in small group and classroom instruction and information on what the child knows and is able to do in both their home language and English.<sup>1,3</sup>
5. Find out about the student's first language proficiency from their parents, through tests, and with assistance from translators.<sup>1</sup>
6. Administer the student's special education evaluation in their native language and in the mode of communication, oral or written, that is most likely to provide the most accurate information about the student's abilities.<sup>2</sup>

1 Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice* (REL 2015-086). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

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## Identifying and Meeting the Needs of English Learner Students with Disabilities

### What are some actions districts and schools can take to best serve English learner students with disabilities?

1. Provide clear guidelines to educators in the district and schools about how to serve dually-identified students (Burr, Haas, & Ferrier, 2015).<sup>1</sup>
2. Include participants on the IEP team who know about the student's language needs and who are experts in second language acquisition and differentiating between disabilities and English language proficiency challenges (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2017).<sup>2</sup>
3. Provide an interpreter for parents in IEP team meetings and have the IEP, Section 504 plan, and other related documents translated into the parent's primary language, if needed (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2017).<sup>2</sup>
4. Link English learner and special education data through the district or school data system to support collaboration across the programs (Burr, Haas, & Ferrier, 2015).<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Burr, E., Haas, E., & Ferriere, K. (2015). *Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice* (REL 2015-086). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. (2017). *English Learner Toolkit* (2nd Rev. ed.). Author.