

Strategies to Identify and Support English Learners With Learning Disabilities

Review of Research and State Practices

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Problem and Key Challenges

No definitive processes exist 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 development need, a learning disability, or some other factor(s).

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

- ◇ A lack of early intervention strategies
- ◇ Poorly designed and implemented referral processes

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 services that they need. 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.

Who Can Help Address this Issue

- ◇ Policymakers developing or revising policies and procedures for accurately identifying

which EL students are in need of special education services

- ◇ Practitioners educating and supporting these students

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, school staff 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 additional factors — including socioeconomic status, previous education experience, fluency in his or her first language, attitude toward school, attitude toward

learning English, and personality attributes — impact the student’s academic progress?

Key Data to Inform Decisionmaking

To accurately determine the source of an EL student’s academic difficulties, review multiple types of data, including:

- ◇ Standardized test scores
- ◇ Classroom observations and other nontest data
- ◇ Parental input

What We Know: Strategies for Administrators

Research suggests various ways that leaders can support educators in accurately identifying EL students with disabilities, and creating consistent processes and policies, including:

- ◇ Providing professional development for educators
- ◇ Implementing pre-referral strategies, such as the response to intervention approach
- ◇ Involving parents
- ◇ Considering multiple sources of data

- ◇ Developing clear policy guidelines and datatracking systems

What We Know: Review of State Practices

Drawn from guidelines and protocols used by the 20 states with the largest populations of EL students, five guiding principles suggest ways to identify and recommend assistance for EL students with suspected learning disabilities:

- ◇ Assess EL students’ language and disability needs using a response to intervention approach
- ◇ 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 reclassification criteria specific to EL students with disabilities
- ◇ Provide publicly available manuals to aid educators in identifying and supporting EL students with learning disabilities (see Guidance Manuals)

Comparison of features from 13 guidance manuals on supporting English learner students with suspected learning disabilities

Features	AR (2003)	AZ (in process)	CA (in process)	CT (2011)	IL (2002)	MI (2017)	MN (2005)	OK (2007)	OR (2015)	San Diego USD, CA (2012)	SELPA Administrators of CA (2017)	VA (2015)	VT (2010)
Total pages in guide	95			38	167	93	319	25	154	73	154	60	52
Information on second language acquisition and progress	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Guidance on assessments	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Instructional strategies	X		X		X	X		X	X		X		X
Best practices	X		X		X	X			X	X	X		
Information on the role of culture/acculturation	X	X	X		X		X	X	X ^a	X			X
Sample pre-referral or intervention program	X	X	X	X ^b	X	X	X	X ^c	X	X ^d	X	X ^e	X ^f
Plan for continuous evaluation/systemic review	X		X		X		X				X		
Information on proposing exit from special education		X	X										
Information on reclassification from EL status			X										
Laws and regulations related to rights of ELs		X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Guidance for working with families	X	X	X ^g	X ^g	X	X ^g	X	X ^g	X	X ^g	X ^g	X	X
Case examples	X		X		X	X							
Checklists	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
FAQs			X	X		X					X	X	X

Source: Information comes from the manuals referenced in the Guidance Manuals section.

^a Cultural humility framework

^b Early intervention flowchart

^c Evaluation flowchart

^d Comprehensive evaluation process

^e Early intervention flowchart and special

education process flowchart

^f Pre-referral flowchart

^g Sample parent interview

Guidance Manuals

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

- ◇ Arizona: *Identifying and supporting English learners with disabilities* (in process)
- ◇ 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* (in process)
- ◇ 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
- ◇ 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 ELL companion to reducing bias in special education evaluation*
<http://www.asec.net/Archives/Manuals/ELL%20companion%20Manual%20020212%5B1%5D.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_Linguistically_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
- ◇ Vermont: *English language learners in Vermont: Distinguishing language difference from disability*
<https://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* (currently in revision)
- ◇ Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Administrators of California Association: *Meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) with disabilities resource book*
<http://www.ccselpa.org/Publications/publications/SELPA%20EL-SPED%20Resource%20Book-Revised%20June%202017.pdf>

Sources

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REL West at WestEd. (2018). *Guidance manuals for educators of English learners with disabilities*. San Francisco, CA: Author. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/68>

For more information

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The information in this brief is based on a 2015 review of the research literature and state practices, and has been updated with additional information on guidance manuals.

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