



Specific Learning Disability

What is a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)?

A specific learning disability is 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 the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. This term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of vision, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic differences, or limited English language proficiency.

All Michigan schools must apply the definition of specific learning disability from our Federal and State special education laws.

Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities

The laws and rules regarding the identification of students with specific learning disabilities have changed since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. Prior to this legislation, diagnostic teams were required to utilize the Severe Discrepancy approach in the identification of a specific learning disability. Under this model, the students suspected of having a specific learning disability were administered an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test and a test of academic achievement. Students who demonstrated a discrepancy of 15 points between these measures were determined to have a specific learning disability. This approach is not the best way to identify a specific learning disability for numerous reasons. One of the most important objections to this method is that by the time a student shows a severe discrepancy in academic achievement, they have experienced so much failure in school, that it is difficult to put in place interventions to close the performance gap between the student and their classmates. This model has appropriately been deemed the "Wait to Fail" model of identification.

In response to the changes in the Federal definition of Specific Learning Disability, the Michigan Department of Education amended Michigan's Administrative Rule 340.1713, Specific Learning Disability Defined Determination on September 11, 2008. A clarification memo dated January 22, 2009 from the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services allows the use of three options for determining specific learning disability eligibility. The three options are as follows:

1. Continuation of the Severe Discrepancy as one part of a full and individual evaluation. Severe Discrepancy may never be used alone to determine a student eligible as a student with a specific learning disability.
2. The option that a school district may use a process that is based on a student's response to scientific, research-based interventions. This process is commonly referred to as Response to Scientifically Research Based Intervention (RtSRBI).
3. Identify a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in determining SLD eligibility.

Identification of SLD within the Wexford-Missaukee Intermediate School District (WMISD)

Several committees within the WMISD have been operating since 2003 with the focus of implementing Response to Intervention within its constituent Local Education Agencies (LEA). The intent of the committees was to put in place a system of prevention as well as a method of identification of specific learning disabilities which can be applied consistently within the seven local school districts. Following Michigan's interpretation of IDEA 2004 regarding specific learning disability identification, a focus on utilizing RtSRBI as well as a model for determining a pattern of strengths and weaknesses was placed. In order to comply with Federal and State rules and recommendations, which is consistent with current research in the area of learning disabilities, it was determined that when conducting initial evaluations of students with suspect specific learning disabilities.

1. The practice of applying the severe discrepancy definition of specific learning disability is no longer appropriate. No longer will a determination of specific learning disability be made solely on the existence of a discrepancy between performance on an IQ test and achievement test.
2. The RtSRBI is the preferred method to be utilized in the identification of specific learning disability. The decision to use RtSRB will be made by each school's problem solving team for each grade and content

area where the school meets the criteria set forth by the WMISD Response to Intervention Professional Learning Community in the document *Response to Intervention (RTI): A Multi-Tiered System of Student Support*.

3. In the case where a school, grade level or content area does not meet the criteria to use RtSRBI as an option for identification, the diagnostic team will utilize the pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) model. Data obtained during the RtSRBI process will be considered within the evaluation; however, the team will use the *Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Decision Rule Grid* when making the decision for eligibility.

All schools within the WMISD are implementing RtSRBI to some extent in specific grade levels and in specific content areas. In the case where a student is suspected of having a specific learning disability in a content area where the school meets the criteria to utilize RtSRBI as a method of identification and in a content area where the school does not meet the criteria, a hybrid approach for identification will be implemented. For example, for a student who is struggling in both reading and math, the RtSRBI may be used to determine eligibility for reading and the PSW model in math. If a school is using RtSRBI as a means of identification in a specific area, and the criteria under RtSRBI is not met for a specific student, the team will use PSW as a means of identification. For example, a parent requests a comprehensive evaluation prior to the student completing intervention criteria at Tier 2 and Tier 3. In all circumstances, the diagnostic team will determine the method used for each area of suspect disability prior to the evaluation.

In all areas of specific learning disability eligibility, all LEAs within the WMISD are currently using the Pattern of Strength and Weaknesses model.