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Subject: IDENTIFICATION OF AND PROGRAM PLANNING FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Application: Directors of Education
Supervisory Officers and Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities
Superintendents of Schools
Principals of Elementary Schools
Principals of Secondary Schools

Reference: This memorandum replaces Policy/Program Memorandum No. 8, “Learning Disabilities”, revised 1982.

INTRODUCTION

The ministry is committed to fostering a caring and safe learning environment in Ontario schools to support the success and well-being of all students, including students with learning disabilities.

This memorandum sets out requirements for school boards¹ for the identification of and program planning for students who have learning disabilities. It provides the ministry’s definition of the term *learning disability*, which must be used by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) in the identification of students who have learning disabilities.²

Information in the “Program Planning” section on pages 4–6 of this memorandum also applies to *any other students* who demonstrate difficulties in learning and who would benefit from special education programs and/or services that are appropriate for students with learning disabilities.

DEFINITION OF THE TERM *LEARNING DISABILITY*

The Ministry of Education defines *learning disability* as one of a number of neurodevelopmental disorders that persistently and significantly has an impact on the ability to learn and use academic and other skills and that:

- affects the ability to perceive or process verbal or non-verbal information in an effective and accurate manner in students who have assessed intellectual abilities that are *at least* in the average range;

1. In this memorandum, *school board(s)* and *board(s)* refers to district school boards and school authorities.

2. Subsection 8(3) of the Education Act gives the Minister of Education the authority to define exceptionalities of students and to require boards to employ such definitions.

- results in (a) academic underachievement that is inconsistent with the intellectual abilities of the student (which are at least in the average range) and/or (b) academic achievement that can be maintained by the student only with extremely high levels of effort and/or with additional support;
- results in difficulties in the development and use of skills in one or more of the following areas: reading, writing, mathematics, and work habits and learning skills;
- may typically be associated with difficulties in one or more cognitive processes, such as phonological processing; memory and attention; processing speed; perceptual-motor processing; visual-spatial processing; executive functions (e.g., self-regulation of behaviour and emotions, planning, organizing of thoughts and activities, prioritizing, decision making);
- may be associated with difficulties in social interaction (e.g., difficulty in understanding social norms or the point of view of others); with various other conditions or disorders, diagnosed or undiagnosed; or with other exceptionalities;
- is *not* the result of a lack of acuity in hearing and/or vision that has not been corrected; intellectual disabilities; socio-economic factors; cultural differences; lack of proficiency in the language of instruction; lack of motivation or effort; gaps in school attendance or inadequate opportunity to benefit from instruction.

RECOGNITION AND IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Many students with learning disabilities have already shown precursors or signs of learning disabilities before they enter school – such as language delays; difficulties with rhyming, counting, or fine-motor skills; or behavioural manifestations. However, for most students with learning disabilities, difficulties in learning may not be noticed until the early school years. After a period of instruction that has taken into account individual students' strengths and needs, it will become evident that some students who are experiencing difficulties in learning may potentially have a learning disability.

Learning disabilities range in severity. Their impact may vary depending on the environmental and cognitive demands on the student, the instructional strategies employed, and the individual student's profile and age.

Early and Ongoing Screening

School boards are required to implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of students.³ These procedures are part of a process of continuous assessment and program planning that should begin when a student is first enrolled in school and should continue throughout a student's school life.

Early screening and interventions are important in determining whether a student's difficulties in learning may be due to learning disabilities. Although learning disabilities are more commonly evident in primary grades, they may become evident at any stage in a student's development. For some students,

3. See clause 8(3)(a) of the Education Act.

learning disabilities may only become apparent as the students progress through the later elementary or early secondary grades when academic work and social demands increase in complexity.

Assessments

If assessment and instruction, including early intervention strategies, have been tailored over a period of time to a student's strengths and needs; if the student's progress has been closely monitored and assessed; and if the student persistently demonstrates key characteristics of potential learning disabilities, the student should be considered for more in-depth assessments.

Identifying learning disabilities requires the use of information from multiple sources. School boards are encouraged to use a multidisciplinary approach to assessing and identifying learning disabilities.

Assessments typically should include the following:

- information provided by the parent(s),⁴ the student, and the educator(s) (e.g., the language spoken at home, developmental history, observations in the classroom)
- educational history
- medical information (e.g., information on vision, hearing, and physical condition)
- educational assessments and/or other professional assessments (e.g., psycho-educational and/or psychological assessments, other assessments by health professionals)

Assessment measures should be based on Canadian norms, where possible; be culturally sensitive; and be provided to the student in accessible format, as required (e.g., sign language, Braille, large print). Assessment results should be conveyed using standard scores instead of grade levels or age and/or grade-level equivalencies.

All psycho-educational and psychological assessments must be performed by or under the supervision of a qualified member of the College of Psychologists of Ontario, with informed consent from the parent(s).

The results of the assessments must inform the development of the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Various factors and conditions (e.g., physical limitations, gender, cultural differences) that are *not* aspects of learning disabilities should also be taken into account when determining whether a student has a learning disability. Such factors and conditions may further complicate the recognition and identification of learning disabilities, and they may contribute to or exacerbate the challenges that students with learning disabilities may face.

4. In this memorandum, *parent(s)* refers to parent(s) and guardian(s).

PROGRAM PLANNING

This program planning section applies to the following students:

- students who have been identified as exceptional by an IPRC
- any other students who demonstrate difficulties in learning and who would benefit from special education programs and/or services that are appropriate for students with learning disabilities

The determining factor for the provision of special education programs or services is not any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition, but rather the needs of individual students based on the individual assessment of strengths and needs.

Assessment results should inform the description of a student's strengths and needs and be used to determine special education programs and/or services for the student. The school principal may decide to develop an IEP for a student who demonstrates difficulties in learning and who would be likely to benefit from a special education program and/or services appropriate for students with learning disabilities.

If a student has been identified as exceptional by an IPRC, the school principal shall take into consideration the following:

- the recommendations on identification and/or placement made by an appeal board to the school board
- the recommendations of the IPRC, the school board, or the Ontario Special Education Tribunal regarding the exceptional student's special education program and/or services⁵

Special education programs may be delivered through a range of placements. Students may benefit from assessment and instruction that is personalized, precise, explicit, and intensive, as required. Special education programs and/or services should be made available by the school board to help students with learning disabilities to access the Ontario curriculum expectations. Since students who have learning disabilities have at least average intellectual abilities, the special education program and/or services they receive should reflect and nurture these abilities.

The IEP reflects the unique learning profile (e.g., cognitive processes) of the student and the severity of the student's learning disability or disabilities. Principals should ensure that parents, students (where appropriate), and relevant school personnel are invited to participate in the IEP development process.

School boards, schools, and educators may put intervention strategies in place to support students with learning disabilities through a tiered approach,⁶ in which high-quality, evidence-based assessment and instruction are systematically provided and respond to an individual student's strengths and needs. The nature, intensity, and duration of interventions are always determined on the basis of evidence gathered through frequent and systematic monitoring of the student's progress. Systematic, sequential

5. For further details, see clause 6(6)(b) and subsection 16(2) of Regulation 181/98.

6. For more information on the tiered approach, see *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, K-12, 2013*.

instructional approaches use specific instructional interventions of increasing intensity to address targeted learning needs of students with learning disabilities.

The following assessment and instructional approaches and intervention strategies, which can be used along with a tiered approach with greater personalization and precision, should be considered in supporting the learning and teaching of students with learning disabilities:

- *Universal Design for Learning.* The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)⁷ should be applied to assist educators in designing products and environments (e.g., teaching strategies; pedagogical materials and tools, including technologies) to support students with learning disabilities in accessing the Ontario curriculum.
- *Differentiated instruction.* Students with learning disabilities may particularly benefit from assessment and instruction that are differentiated to take into consideration their strengths, interests, learning styles, and readiness to learn. Any of the following elements can be differentiated: the content of learning (what students are going to learn, and when); the process of learning (the types of tasks and activities); the products of learning (the ways in which students demonstrate learning); and the affect/environment of learning (the context and environment in which students learn and demonstrate learning).⁸

The IEP of students with learning disabilities may include the following special education program strategies, with the goal of providing a program that maximizes the student's ability to access the curriculum:

- Instructional, environmental, and assessment accommodations should be provided, as appropriate, so that the student is able to access grade-level curriculum expectations and to demonstrate learning.
- Modification of learning expectations may include the use of expectations at a different grade level and/or an increase or decrease in the number and/or complexity of expectations. Modified learning expectations that are drawn from a lower grade level will only be considered if the student cannot demonstrate learning with the aid of any of the approaches and/or strategies described above.
- Alternative expectations and/or courses that are not derived from an Ontario curriculum policy document (e.g., expectations focused on social skills, self-advocacy, transition planning, study skills) will be developed as needed.

Transition planning must be considered as part of the IEP development process when developing programs for students with learning disabilities, in accordance with Ontario Regulation 181/98 and Policy/Program Memorandum No. 156, "Supporting Transitions for Students with Special Education Needs", February 1, 2013, and *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools – Policy and Program Requirements, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2013*. Transitions for students with learning disabilities occur in a variety of contexts: upon entry to school;

7. The goal of UDL is to create a learning environment that is open and accessible to all students, regardless of age, skills, or situation. Instruction based on principles of universal design is flexible and supportive, can be adjusted to meet different student needs, and enables all students to access the curriculum as fully as possible.

8. For more about these elements, see *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, K–12, 2013*.

between grades; from one program area or subject to another; when moving from school to school or from an outside agency/facility to a school; from elementary to secondary school; and from secondary school to the next appropriate pathway (e.g., work, further education, apprenticeship).

IMPLEMENTATION

The requirements set out in this memorandum will take effect January 2, 2015. School boards and the ministry will monitor the implementation of the requirements of this memorandum through existing accountability mechanisms.

RESOURCES

The field of learning disabilities is constantly evolving as new strategies, tools, and technologies become available. School boards are encouraged to make use of a growing body of knowledge about educational practices, tools, and strategies that are effective for students with learning disabilities. Boards may seek community partners who can provide support for students with learning disabilities and their families.