Identification of a Specific Learning Disability

The 2004 Reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included the option of using a Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) approach to identify students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). This was included in IDEA due to concerns regarding the intelligence-achievement discrepancy approach. These concerns included:

- Delaying services until the discrepancy between a student's intelligence and achievement is large enough to meet state criteria (i.e., wait to fail);
- Limited use of high quality measures of student performance (i.e., progress monitoring).
- The use of assessment tools that do not lead to effective interventions that can be implemented in the classroom environment;
- Failure to differentiate between children with a specific learning disability and those who have academic problems related to poor or limited instruction;
- Failure to adequately identify children at the lower end of the IQ range; and
- An overrepresentation of children and youth from poor and minority backgrounds in special education programs

Coloma Community Schools (CCS) recognizes that special education identification (or lack thereof) should not get in the way of powerful interventions for students. CCS utilizes the MTSS model of instruction; we also realize that these instructional systems are driven by a robust general education instructional system.

MTSS is based on reliable and valid instructional systems, adequate resources to deliver instruction, the ability to monitor progress & adjust instruction when progress is not sufficient, and a means to document the fidelity of instruction both within and across school settings. Although the MTSS has many instructional merits that may contribute to the process of identifying a student with a Specific Learning Disability, these practices alone are not adequately sufficient to support the weighty decision of special education identification. Given this, CCS has adopted the Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses as the default approach for identifying Specific Learning Disabilities.

Identification Guidelines Using a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Method

Step 1: Pre-referral consideration of potential exclusionary factors

- Academic interventions
- Behavioral interventions (if applicable)

- Student grades: Evidence of below grade level expectations for extended time?
- Curriculum Based Measurement results: Evidence of student skills below the 20th percentile in area of suspected disability?
- State assessment history: Evidence of not meeting standard in the area of suspected disability?
- Prior standardized assessment results: Has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) been assessed for student before? What were the results?
- Attendance
- Cultural/linguistic factors
- Evidence of health factors significantly contributing to lack of academic growth/performance?
- Parents have been notified of concerns regarding their student. Parent input has been obtained and considered.

If the team determines that there are not significant exclusionary factors, and that interventions were implemented over time without sufficient progress, proceed to Step 2 of the evaluation process.

Step 2: Standardized Full and Individual Multidisciplinary Evaluation

- Administer a comprehensive academic and cognitive battery.
- Administer a comprehensive standardized language assessment if referral reasons include reading comprehension, written language, listening comprehension, oral expression, or speech concerns.
- Specific linkage between a particular cognitive process and a particular academic skill need not be evident for consideration. However, research suggests that the cognitive weaknesses tend to be closely related to academic deficit area(s).
- Observe the student in the learning environment pertinent to the academic area(s) of concern, unless an observation was conducted during the pre-referral process. Any Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MET) member other than the general education teacher may conduct the observation.

Step 3: Analysis of the Data

- Examine data from all sources to determine the presence of a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in academic skills(s) and cognitive processing in that the Team considers relevant to (SLD) in the following areas:
    1. Weakness in classroom performance relative to age;
    2. Weakness in achievement relative to age;
    3. Weaknesses in classroom performance relative to State approved grade-level standards;

4. Weakness in achievement relative to State approved grade-level standards;
5. Weaknesses in classroom performance relative to intellectual development;
6. Weaknesses in achievement relative to intellectual development.

- Proceed with eligibility if the preponderance of evidence suggests that there is a pattern of strengths and weaknesses present that is relevant to SLD eligibility, AND the student requires specialized instruction.