



**Rapid Reference 10.2. An Operational Definition of Specific Learning Disability (Flanagan, Alfonso, & Mascolo, 2011 in Essentials of SLD Identification)**

Level	Nature of SLD <sup>1</sup>	Focus of Evaluation	Examples of Evaluation Methods and Data Sources	Criteria for SLD	SLD Classification and Eligibility
<b>I</b>	Difficulties in one or more areas of academic achievement, including (but not limited to) <sup>2</sup> Basic Reading Skill, Reading Comprehension, Reading Fluency, Oral Expression, Listening Comprehension, Written Expression, Math Calculation, Math Problem Solving.	<b>Academic Achievement:</b> Performance in specific academic skills (e.g., <i>Grw, Gq, Gc</i> ); may also include performance on measures of phonological and orthographic processing.	Response to quality instruction and intervention via progress monitoring, performance on norm-referenced, standardized achievement tests, evaluation of work samples, observations of academic performance, teacher/parent/child interview, history of academic performance, data from other members of Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) (e.g., speech-language pathologist, interventionist, reading specialist).	Performance in one or more academic areas is <i>weak or deficient</i> <sup>3</sup> (despite attempts at delivering quality instruction) as evidenced by converging data sources.	<p><b>Necessary</b></p> 
<b>II</b>	SLD does not include a learning problem that is the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disability; of social or emotional disturbance; or of environmental, educational, cultural, or economic disadvantage.	<b>Exclusionary Factors:</b> Identification of potential primary causes of academic skill weaknesses or deficits, including intellectual disability, cultural or linguistic difference, sensory impairment, insufficient instruction or opportunity to learn, organic or physical health factors, social/emotional or psychological disturbance.	Data from the methods and sources listed at Levels I and III. Behavior Rating Scales; medical records; prior evaluations; interviews with current or past counselors, psychiatrists, etc.	Performance is not <i>primarily</i> attributed to these exclusionary factors, although one or more of them may contribute to learning difficulties.	
<b>III</b>	A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological/neuropsychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written; such disorders are presumed to originate from central nervous system dysfunction.	<b>Cognitive Abilities &amp; Processes:</b> Performance in cognitive abilities (e.g., <i>Gc, Gf, Gv, Ga, Glr, Gsm, Gs</i> ), neuropsychological processes (e.g., attention, executive functioning) and learning efficiency.	Performance on norm-referenced tests, evaluation of work samples, observations of cognitive performance, task analysis/testing limits, teacher/parent/child interview, history of academic performance, records review.	Performance in one or more cognitive abilities and/or neuropsychological processes (related to academic skill deficiency) is <i>weak or deficient</i> <sup>2</sup> as evidenced by converging data sources.	

IV	Unexpected Underachievement – the specific learning disability is a discrete condition differentiated from generalized learning failure by average or better cognitive ability and a learning skill profile exhibiting significant variability indicating processing areas of strength and weakness.	<p><b>Data Integration —Analysis of a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Consistent with SLD</b></p> <p>Determination of whether academic skill weaknesses or deficits are related to specific cognitive area(s) of weakness or deficit; pattern of data reflects a below average aptitude-achievement <i>consistency</i> with otherwise average or better ability to think and reason.</p>	Data gathered at all previous levels as well as any additional data following a review of initial evaluation results (e.g., hypothesis testing, demand analysis).	No statistically significant or clinically meaningful difference between cognitive and academic deficits (e.g., <i>circumscribed aptitude-achievement consistency</i> ); statistically significant or clinically meaningful difference between (cognitive and academic) deficits and (cognitive and academic) strengths (e.g., <i>circumscribed ability-achievement discrepancy with cognitive areas of strength represented by standard scores <math>\geq 90</math></i> ); clinical judgment supports the impression that the child’s overall ability to think and reason will enable him or her to benefit from tailored or specialized instruction/intervention, compensatory strategies, and accommodations, such that his or her performance rate and level will likely approximate more typically achieving, non-disabled peers.	 <p><b>Sufficient For SLD Identification</b></p>
V	Specific learning disability has an adverse impact on educational performance.	<p><b>Special Education Eligibility<sup>4</sup></b></p> <p>Determination of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for delivery of instruction and educational resources.</p>	Data from all previous levels and MDT meeting, including parents.	Child demonstrates significant difficulties in daily academic activities that cannot be remediated, accommodated, or otherwise compensated for <i>without</i> the assistance of individualized special education services.	<p><b>Necessary for Special Education Eligibility</b></p>

<sup>1</sup>This column includes concepts inherent in the federal definition (IDEA, 2004) and in Kavale, Spaulding, and Beam’s (2009) definition of Specific Learning Disability.

<sup>2</sup>Poor spelling with adequate ability to express ideas in writing is often typical of dyslexia and/or disgraphia. Even though IDEA 2004 includes only the broad category of written expression, poor spelling and handwriting are often symptomatic of a specific writing disability and should not be ignored (Wendling & Mather, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Weak or deficient performance (also called, *normative weakness*) is defined typically by standard score performances that are low average (i.e.,  $\leq 89$ ) or significantly below average (i.e.,  $\leq 84$ ), respectively, and that have ecological validity (e.g., standardized test performance is consistent with performance observed in the child’s everyday classroom or educational environment).

<sup>4</sup>The major specific learning disability may be accompanied by secondary learning difficulties that also may be considered when planning the more intensive, individualized special education instruction directed at the primary problem. For information on linking assessment data to intervention, see Rapid Reference 10.11.