



“Idaho’s Specific Learning Disability Criteria”

Slide 1: Hello and welcome to this presentation of Idaho’s specific learning disability criteria brought to you by the National Center on Response to Intervention in collaboration with the Idaho State Department of Education: Division of Special Education and Boise State University: Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies, Special Education Statewide Technical Assistance Center. In preparation for this webinar we felt it was important to illustrate the deliberate and continued collaboration among various programs in the SEA as well as with our higher education partners in the design, development, and implementation of Idaho’s SLD eligibility process.

Slide 2: First, let me introduce myself. My name is Richard Henderson. I’m the state director of special education for the Idaho State Department of Special Education. With me is Dr. Evelyn Johnson, who is an associate professor at the College of Education at Boise State University. With us also is Gina Hopper, the associate director of Special Education Statewide Technical Assistance, or SESTA at the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at BSU. Nancy Thomas Price, RTI coordinator for the Idaho State Department of Education, and Dr. Fernanda Brendefur, Title III/LEP coordinator, Idaho State Department of Education.

Slide 3: Our objectives for this presentation are as follows: we want to provide you with a description of Idaho’s approach to SLD identification, review the flowchart of the process, review the guidance provided to LEAs about SLD identification, recommendations, requirements as part of the comprehensive evaluation, a component we call “standing ground,” ways to assess fidelity, and rollout overcoming the challenges faced along the way.

Slide 4: When we were considering making changes to the Idaho SLD policy, we recognized that although the national definition has been relatively stable over time, the way in which the criteria have been operationalized in the state has been problematic both at the SEA and LEA levels. While the classic discrepancy approach was developed to address the notion that low achievement was somehow unexpected, the research was pointing to a greater consensus in the belief that discrepancy was not a valid means of identifying the right students. So at best, we were in a place of sometimes identifying the right student, sometimes identifying a student who didn’t have a learning disability but was exhibiting learning problems that were due to other factors like construction or curriculum, or in a more tragic sense, missing a student who truly did have a learning disability, but was not recognized due to the hazards in using discrepancy policies and procedures in identification practices. They say sometimes where you end is dependent on where you begin, and that is a very true statement for us in this case, as we started at the beginning with what is found in IDEA in 2004. According to IDEA, an SLD is a disorder



in one or more of the basic psychological processes that manifests itself in an imperfect ability to learn. In conjunction, it is not a learning problem that is primarily a result of what we would classically describe as the exclusionary factors. We chose this as the foundation of our state definition based upon four important points. 1: It aligns with the federal definition, 2: Current research evidence is not sufficient to recommend hard cut scores, 3: It is consistent with evidence demonstrating that students can have impairments in very specific areas, and 4: Allows for evaluation and intervention planning to be more closely aligned to address the particular needs of the student. Now Evelyn will take us through an overview of the SLD policy, talk about the timelines involved, and the components of what constitutes a comprehensive evaluation. Evelyn.

Slide 5: As Rich pointed out, the driving force behind the change to our policy was to get greater alignment of the components of the definition with our evaluation process. So in Idaho we modeled our SLD eligibility to reflect the three main components of the federal definition. That is, the child presents with difficulty in one or more academic areas, further evaluation reveals that the child has a psychological processing deficit that is related to the academic area of concern, and it has been determined that there are not competing explanations for the child's learning difficulty. The overall goal is to ensure that our definition and resulting practices are designed to reflect what we currently know and understand about the nature of specific learning disabilities. That is the broad overview, and in the next slide we'll talk in much more detail about how each of these components is operationalized. Nancy will start the conversation by talking us through the RTI process. Nancy.

Slide 6: The state training that we provide focuses on developing a consistent district model for RTI. When working with educators we focus on how to look at data at all levels: district, school, grade level, class, and student level. If data at any level show that core instruction is not effective for a large percentage of students, schools problem solve what is not working at that core level. Districts are taught how to establish criteria for who is considered at risk as well as how to determine the target population for those students within the risk population whose progress will be monitored or receive additional support, and also decision rules for each tier of instruction. If lack of instruction or inadequate core can be ruled out, additional support for the student is warranted. Schools and districts are provided guidance for developing consistent practices. Options are to adjust the current Tier II intervention, begin a second Tier II intervention, or add more intensity with the Tier III intervention. The progress monitoring graph that is required to be submitted with the eligibility documents requires data from at least one Tier II intervention, and requires an aim line, a trend line, any decision points, the student's rate of improvement, and an indication of what local or national norms are used. Data must also be submitted that demonstrates that most students are responding to core instruction. Parent involvement is one of the overarching factors, and parents should understand every aspect of RTI, and that these best



practices are supported by research. In the training we walk through how to create a simple document much like a brochure that describes a district's model of the RTI framework. This document can then be shared with parents at parent teacher conferences, back to school night, individual conferences, and is available in every district office as well as the office of the school. School personnel introduce parents to RTI as a model of prevention, describing how screening, progress monitoring, a tiered system of support, and data-based decision making inform instruction at every level and allow teachers to intervene early if their child is at risk. Districts also create a letter that goes home to an individual student's parents if they begin or end a Tier II or Tier III intervention. Prior to getting that letter, a parent would already have a good understanding of the RTI framework. Evelyn. Once we have sufficient evidence that the child is not responding to our evidence-based instruction and intervention that serves as the trigger, so-to-speak, for beginning the comprehensive evaluation process. So to this point, the team has collected lots of evidence about the student's performance within the general education setting and the associated interventions. Additionally, the team has observed student performance within the classroom to determine whether environmental or instructional accommodations can be made to support learning. When students don't respond to these efforts, an evaluation process to help identify the underlying causes for the child's learning difficulties is conducted. The information to date should allow the MDT to develop a hypothesis about the nature of the student's learning difficulty, and this hypothesis helps drive the evaluation. First an academic achievement assessment in the area of the concern is conducted. In Idaho, we require nationally norm-standardized assessments in the specific area of concern. This helps to further pinpoint the specific nature of the child's learning difficulty and helps to compare student performance to a set of national norms to ensure that the learning difficulty isn't Idaho specific. Psychological processing assessment is also conducted, and here the team is trying to identify the underlying explanation for the student's learning difficulty as well as to identify student strengths. This assessment helps to inform the type of individualized instruction and accommodations that might support student learning outcomes. Throughout the RTI and comprehensive evaluation, exclusionary factors are constantly considered. In particular when we are working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, it is important that we consider exclusionary factors to determine whether they are the primary cause of the student's learning difficulty. In the next slides, Fernanda will present information on Idaho's toolkit, which was developed to address the specific needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Fernanda.

Slide 7: The Idaho State Department of Education developed the Idaho toolkit as a response to ongoing district requests for more guidance in the area of special education as it pertains to English learners. In order to make the guidance comprehensive and effective, it was critical that the project be collaborative among the different programs that serve English learners. Therefore, the Idaho toolkit was a collaborative effort among the Title III-LEP, Title 1-A, and special



education programs. In addition, the State Department partnered with Meta-Associates under the direction of Dr. Susan Duron.

Slide 8: The Idaho toolkit consists of a self-evaluation survey that is taken by all participants receiving training in six modules. The surveys serve as a needs assessment for tailoring training to meet each district's specific needs. Once survey results have been calculated, training is centered on the module or modules most needed by each district. Each module is focused on an area critical to the education of English learners: Module 1: Foundations, Module 2: Language and Culture, Module 3: Family and Community, Module 4: Effective Curriculum and Instruction, Module 5: Assessing ELLs, and Module 6: Determining Special Education Eligibility. Modules do not need to be taken in sequence, rather, in the order that is most needed by individual districts. Next, Gina will share the process used for the rollout in training.

Slide 9: The changes to the SLD policy reflected a tremendous change in practice. A multifaceted approach to policy rollout and initial training efforts was devised. First, the FCE representatives presented the new policy at state and regional conferences and at meetings. Additionally, informational webinars that provided broad overviews of the policy changes were conducted and archived. During the first year of implementation, districts participated in a pilot peer review process. Districts submitted eligibility files to the state department, two-day peer reviews were held in each of the four regions of the state. Special education teachers, school psychologists served as peer reviewers and were trained to use a rubric to evaluate the SLD eligibility file. Feedback in the form of a rubric scoring qualitative feedback were provided for each file. Additionally, data from the peer review was coded into a state database to examine the extent to which the pilot files reflected the SLD policy. This data was analyzed to determine specific areas of need for training. Based on the review, an annual tie in for training was developed and implemented. Each month, training on a different topic related to SLD eligibility was provided to the peer reviewers either through webinars or live deliveries. The peer review process was repeated in year 2, but scaled back to one statewide review. We are currently in the process of evaluating the year 2 data and developing professional development and technical assistance plans to continue to support successful policy implementation.

Slide 10: Shared resources: the SDE is fortunate to have a partnership with the University of Idaho through a specific project called the Idaho Training Clearing House and through SESTA located at the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at BSU. The ITC provides the technology support for webinars, web postings, warehousing documents, archives, etc. and SESTA coordinates all the statewide training and works with the ITC to provide instant access of resources for all SDE projects contracted through SESTA of which SLD is part of the technical assistance projects. On the ITC, viewers can find examples of exemplar files, archived webinars



relating to SLD, specific state forms, procedures and guidance, and training information and resources to support the efforts of school personnel implementing the new policy. The previous slide demonstrates the design and rollout of the policy, however one important aspect is to measure fidelity and show continuous improvement of the process. The next few slides discuss fidelity to the RTI framework and to the process. Nancy will discuss how implementation fidelity is addressed.

Slide 11: In order to increase fidelity to RTI implementation, it was first critical to develop a common understanding throughout the state of what RTI actually is. It is important that districts understand and implement RTI as a framework of prevention for continuous school improvement. This year, the beginning implementer series training was provided for about 60% of our districts. This clarifies the content of RTI. The four essential components and overarching factors are clearly defined and explored in depth over three modules. An RTI toolkit supports the training and provides all necessary material to deliver the training in the district and schools. District and school administration were required to attend and that included the director of special education. A tool that is explored in each module is the NCRTI's implementation integrity rubric. It includes a worksheet with guiding questions to help districts determine their level of implementation and the type of evidence and artifacts that would support their self-assessment. It is not a required component of the SLD eligibility, and is not a compliance tool, but rather a teaching tool to improve practice and implementation integrity of the RTI framework. Fidelity to curriculum, instruction, and assessment is covered in depth as part of the module training. We have been fortunate to have intensive support from the NCRTI this year. Training, tools, and data-collection methods were developed with their input and vetted by a national panel of experts. Gina.

Slide 12: When thinking of the process fidelity, in 2010, again, each school submitted a new SLD file to be peer reviewed and have feedback provided. The peer review process was integral to providing school personnel with the necessary support to implement the new policy. Teams of reviewers submitted their applications from across the state. Peer reviewers were screened into 3 groups: school psychologists, special education teacher, special education director. From the applicants, teams of two were designed. Each team consisted of one school psychologist and either a special education teacher or a director. In year 1, trainings were conducted in the four regional locations with the training team consisting of Dr. Evelyn Johnson, Gina Hopper, and Cary Semmelroth. To keep this message and training consistent, the same trainers went to the four regions and provided training to all peer reviewers on the process, which entails being trained on a review matrix, reviewing sample files, and calibrating responses as a group to gain inter-rater reliability. Once peer reviewers were trained in the morning session, actual school files were peer reviewed using the matrix and scoring summary sheet found on the ITC website.



From there, the files were coded by the research team with analysis completed for further statewide planning and professional development decision making. In year 2 the process was repeated with a few changes. All peer reviewers came to one central location and setup four regional review teams and one file for districts was required to be submitted for peer feedback.

Slide 13: The most significant challenge we faced with this policy implementation was that although it targeted a small percentage of Idaho students, it required important changes in both general education and special education practice. Although it has always been necessary to ensure that learning difficulties were not due to a lack of appropriate instruction, the new policy requires evidence to support this, as well as evidence to demonstrate that reasonable intervention has been attempted, but the child has failed to respond to those efforts. The comprehensive evaluation also represents a paradigm shift for the members of the MDT. Prior to current policy, Idaho used a discrepancy approach to SLD identification, and our school psychologists and special education teachers now have to learn new approaches to assessment, hypothesis testing, and intervention. These paradigm shifts require strong leadership at the district and school levels. As part of our training efforts, we are targeting leaders at the building and district level to facilitate implementation. Training is critical to successful policy implementation, but due to numerous resource constraints, we have embraced technology to support our implementation. Gina.

Slide 14: This slide represents the partnership with the Idaho Training Clearinghouse and is a reminder of where Idaho's training resources are electronically stored under the Professional Learning Community tab, specific learning disabilities page. The hyperlink at the bottom of this slide shows you where to click on to find those resources. In closing, we would like to thank the National Center for RTI for allowing this opportunity to share the work we have done here in Idaho with the rest of you.

Slide 15: The next few slides contain the contact information for myself and each panel member that presented here today, and we would like to invite you to send any comments or questions that you may have about our SLD process to whomever you feel might be able to help you.

Slide 16: If you are not sure who that might be, please feel free to contact me, and I will be more than happy to assist you. Thank you again, and we sincerely hope you have enjoyed our presentation.