
Processes and Challenges in Identifying Learning Disabilities Among Students Who Are English Language Learners in Three New York State Districts

This project examined how three midsize school districts in New York State identify learning disabilities among students who are English language learners (ELLs). Requested by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), the report presents similarities and differences in the districts' practices and lists eight challenges these educators faced in identifying students who are ELLs and have learning disabilities. It also describes five conditions that appear to be important for avoiding misidentification.

— MARÍA TERESA SÁNCHEZ, CAROLINE PARKER, ANNA MCTIGUE, AND BERCEM AKBAYIN, EDC, PROJECT TEAM

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- To identify the processes by which personnel in three New York State school districts identify learning disabilities among students who are ELLs and the challenges the district personnel encounter in this process.

AUDIENCE & APPLICATION

- Policymakers at the NYSED.
- District, school and state officials interested in learning about the identification process of students who are ELLs and may have a learning disability.

METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative analysis.
- Data sources include:
 - interviews with district and school personnel in three midsize districts in New York State;
 - publicly available information from the NYSED web page and each of the three districts' web pages; and
 - supplemental information provided by interviewees.

FINAL PRODUCTS

- Issues & Answers Report published by the Institute of Education Sciences, which may be found at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=116>.

What Are Fast-Response Projects?

Fast-Response Projects are short-term projects that respond to regional and national needs and priorities and provide research-based knowledge to inform policy and practice. They use methods such as research syntheses, mining of existing data sets, and descriptive studies.



Processes and Challenges in Identifying Learning Disabilities Among Students Who Are English Language Learners in Three New York State Districts

This study describes how personnel in three midsize New York State school districts identify learning disabilities among students who are ELLs. It finds both similarities and differences in the districts' practices, with more differences in pre-referral than in referral practices. Among the differences in the pre-referral processes are: different staff organizational structures for discussing student progress; varied staff expertise in second-language development; varied use of child study teams across the districts; different supports and interventions in each district; and varied approaches to monitoring struggling students' progress. Among the differences in the referral processes are: different procedures for initiating referrals; different timelines for collecting student information; and different approaches to sharing information between the ELL and special-education departments.

Analysis of district and school interview data also revealed eight challenges to the identification of learning disabilities among students are ELLs. They are:

1. difficulties with policy guidelines;
2. different stakeholder views about timing for referrals of ELLs;
3. insufficient knowledge of disabilities, second-language development, and students' cultural backgrounds among personnel involved in identification;
4. difficulties providing consistent, adequate services to students who are ELLs;
5. lack of collaborative structures in pre-referral;
6. lack of access to assessments that differentiate between second-language development and learning disabilities;
7. lack of consistent monitoring for struggling students who are ELLs; and
8. difficulty obtaining students' previous school records.

In addition, by analyzing the differences in the pre-referral and referral processes and the challenges listed above, researchers found five interrelated elements that appear to be important for avoiding misidentification of learning disabilities among students who are ELLs. These elements are: adequate professional knowledge; effective instructional practices; effective and valid assessments and interventions; interdepartmental collaborative structures; and clear policy guidelines.

Contact Information

For more information about this project, e-mail Rebecca Carey (rcarey@edc.org) or visit REL-NEI online (www.relnei.org).

