

# Resources and Strategies for Identifying and Supporting English Learners With Learning Disabilities

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The information in this brief is based on a review of the research literature and state practices. It is geared toward policymakers developing guidance for accurately identifying which English learner (EL) students are in need of special education services, and educators of these students.

## Problem and Key Challenges


No definitive processes exist for identifying EL students with learning disabilities and determining the best academic supports for them. As a result, students can end up in classrooms or programs mismatched to their needs, which can hamper their academic achievement. Two main factors can lead to inconsistent identification of EL students with learning disabilities:

- ◇ A lack of understanding about why EL students are not making adequate progress
- ◇ Poorly designed and implemented referral processes

## What We Know: Important Questions from the Research Literature

The research suggests that there are several key questions that school staff should ask to distinguish between language issues and a possible learning disability:

- ◇ How does the student's progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English as a second language compare with the expected rate of progress for his or her age and level of English proficiency?

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- ◇ To what extent are behaviors that might otherwise indicate a learning disability be considered normal for the child's cultural background or part of the process of U.S. acculturation?
  - ◇ How might additional factors—including socioeconomic status, previous education experience, fluency in his or her first language, attitude toward school, attitude toward learning English, and personality attributes—impact the student's academic progress?
  - ◇ Is the student receiving instruction of sufficient quality to enable him or her to make the accepted levels of academic progress?

## Key Data to Inform Decisionmaking

To help accurately identify EL students with disabilities, use multiple types of data, including:

- ◇ Standardized test scores
- ◇ Classroom observations and other non-test data
- ◇ Parental input

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## Comparison of 10 state and district manuals on supporting English learner students who may have learning disabilities

Features	CT (2011)	IL (2002)	MI (2017)	MN (2005)	OK (2007)	OR (2015)	San Diego, CA (2012)	Santa Barbara, CA (2017)	VA (2015)	VT (2010)
Total pages in manual	38	167	93	319	25	154	73	154	60	52
Information on second language acquisition and progress	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Guidance on assessments	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Best practices		X	X			X	X	X		
Information on role of culture/acculturation		X		X	X	X <sup>a</sup>	X			X
Sample pre-referral or intervention program	X <sup>b</sup>	X	X	X	X <sup>c</sup>	X	X <sup>d</sup>	X	X <sup>e</sup>	X <sup>f</sup>
Plan for continuous evaluation/systemic review		X		X				X		
Laws and regulations related to rights of ELs	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Guidance for working with families	X <sup>g</sup>	X	X <sup>g</sup>	X	X <sup>g</sup>	X	X <sup>g</sup>	X <sup>g</sup>	X	X
Case examples		X	X							
Checklists	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
FAQs	X		X					X	X	X

Source: Data for each state or district are from the manuals listed under State and District Manuals.

- <sup>a</sup> Cultural humility framework
- <sup>b</sup> Early intervention flowchart
- <sup>c</sup> Evaluation flowchart
- <sup>d</sup> Comprehensive evaluation process
- <sup>e</sup> Early intervention flowchart and special education process flowchart
- <sup>f</sup> Pre-referral flowchart
- <sup>g</sup> Sample parent interview



## State and District Manuals

Ten states and districts have produced extensive, publicly available manuals to aid educators in accurately identifying and supporting EL students with learning disabilities:

- ◇ Connecticut: *English language learners and special education: A resource handbook*  
[http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/bilingual/CAPELL\\_SPED\\_resource\\_guide.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/bilingual/CAPELL_SPED_resource_guide.pdf)
- ◇ Illinois: *Serving English language learners with disabilities: A resource manual for Illinois educators*  
[https://www.isbe.net/Documents/bilingual\\_manual2002.pdf](https://www.isbe.net/Documents/bilingual_manual2002.pdf)
- ◇ Michigan: *Guidance handbook for educators of English learners with suspected disabilities*  
[http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ELs\\_with\\_Suspected\\_Disabilities\\_Guidance\\_Handbook\\_-\\_2017\\_558692\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ELs_with_Suspected_Disabilities_Guidance_Handbook_-_2017_558692_7.pdf)
- ◇ Minnesota: *The ELL companion to reducing bias in special education evaluation*  
<http://www.asec.net/Archives/Manuals/ELL%20companion%20Manual%20020212%5B1%5D.pdf>
- ◇ Oklahoma: *Identifying and assessing English language learners with disabilities*  
<http://sde.ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/SpecEd-IdentifyingELL.pdf>
- ◇ Oregon: *Special education assessment process for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students: Guidance and resources, 2015 update*  
[http://5c2cabd466efc6790a0a-6728e7c952118b70f16620a9fc754159.r37.cf1.rackcdn.com/cms/Special\\_Education\\_Assessment\\_Process\\_for\\_Culturally\\_and\\_Linguistically\\_Diverse\\_%28CLD%29\\_Students\\_with\\_logos\\_and\\_links\\_1489.pdf](http://5c2cabd466efc6790a0a-6728e7c952118b70f16620a9fc754159.r37.cf1.rackcdn.com/cms/Special_Education_Assessment_Process_for_Culturally_and_Linguistically_Diverse_%28CLD%29_Students_with_logos_and_links_1489.pdf)
- ◇ San Diego, CA: *CEP-EL: A comprehensive evaluation process for English learners: A process manual*  
<http://mes.sccoe.org/ali/15th%20ALI%20Doc%20Library/Comprehensive%20Evaluation%20Process%20for%20ELs%20Hanout%201%20of%202.pdf>
- ◇ Santa Barbara County, CA: *Meeting the needs of English learners (ELs) with disabilities resource book*  
[https://www.sbcselfpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/EL-SPED-Resource-Book-Revised-5-27-14-FINAL-6-1-17.doc\\_EditsLF-6-6-17\\_2.pdf](https://www.sbcselfpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/EL-SPED-Resource-Book-Revised-5-27-14-FINAL-6-1-17.doc_EditsLF-6-6-17_2.pdf)
- ◇ Vermont: *English language learners in Vermont: Distinguishing language difference from disability*  
<http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-federal-programs-distinguishing-language-difference-from-disability.pdf>
- ◇ Virginia: *Handbook for educators of students who are English language learners with suspected disabilities*  
[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special\\_ed/iep\\_instruct\\_svcs/english\\_lang\\_learners/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/iep_instruct_svcs/english_lang_learners/index.shtml)

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## Strategies for Identifying the Source of an EL Student's Academic Difficulties

- ◇ Providing professional development for educators
- ◇ Using pre-referral strategies, such as the response to intervention approach
- ◇ Involving parents
- ◇ Considering multiple sources of data

## What We Know: Guiding Principles from State Practice

Drawn from guidelines and protocols used by the 20 states with the largest populations of EL students, five guiding principles suggest ways to identify and recommend assistance for EL students with possible learning disabilities:

- ◇ Have a clear policy statement that additional considerations will be used in determining the need for special education services for EL students
- ◇ Provide test accommodations for EL students
- ◇ Employ exit criteria for English language support programs for EL students receiving special education services
- ◇ Assess EL students' language and disability needs using a response to intervention approach
- ◇ Provide publicly available manuals to aid educators in identifying and supporting EL students with learning disabilities (see State and District Manuals)

## Sources

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REL West at WestEd. (2017). *Ask A REL memo: Guidance manuals for supporting English learners with learning disabilities*. San Francisco, CA: Author.

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