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Identifying Multilingual Learners With Specific Learning Disabilities: Data, Advice, and Resources for School Teams

Introduction

This WIDA Focus Bulletin provides expert educator advice, templates for organizing student referral data, commonly encountered scenarios, and resources for improving accurate identification of students identified as English learners (whom WIDA refers to as multilingual learners[1]) for Specific Learning Disabilities.[2] Auditory processing, dyslexia, and dysgraphia are three intersecting aspects of Specific Learning Disabilities (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2014). Refer also to IDEA Sec. 300.8 (c) (10) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) for the federal definition of a Specific Learning Disability.

How might school teams improve accurate identification of multilingual learners for disabilities—especially for the most prevalent category of literacy-related disability known as Specific Learning Disabilities?

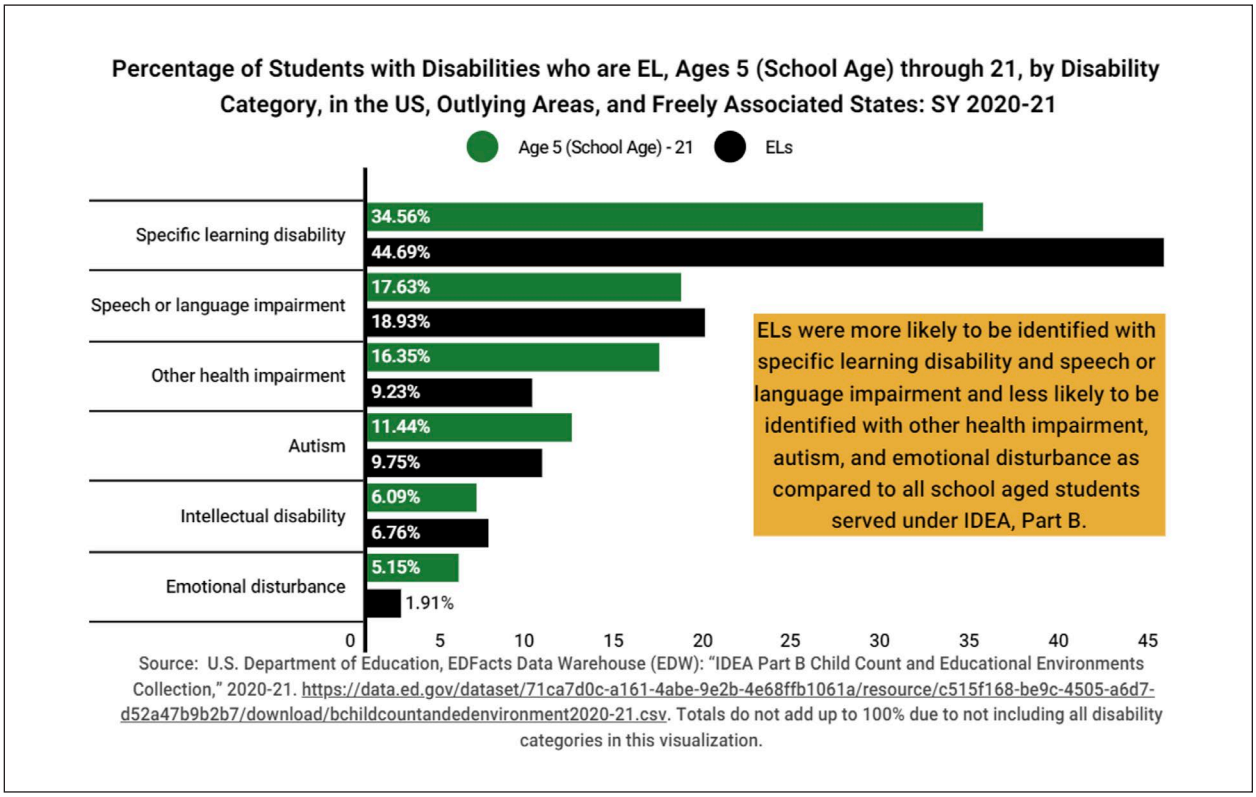
This bulletin was originally published in 2017. In 2023, it was updated to include data on 2020–2021 identification rates, new advice, data templates, scenarios, and new resources. In 2025, additional updates were made for clarity and link accuracy.

[1] WIDA refers to students identified as English learners as multilingual learners to emphasize the value and assets each student brings to the community. Refer to https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/learners. In recent years, these students have been referred to as either English learners (ELs) or English language learners (ELLs). In this bulletin, when referencing federal data, the term English learner will be used; otherwise, the term multilingual learner will be used.

[2] To avoid confusion with either Spanish Language Development or Second Language Development, the term Specific Learning Disabilities is not abbreviated in this bulletin.

Specific Learning Disabilities are the most prevalent of the 13 federal categories[3] for which students are identified as having a disability. Nationwide, nearly 45% of students identified as multilingual learners who have been dually identified as having a disability under IDEA, Part B, are classified as having a literacy-related disability known as a Specific Learning Disability (Office of Special Education Programs, OSEP, 2022)—compared with nearly 35% of the non-EL students who have been identified as having a Specific Learning Disability.

Figure 1: Comparison of disabilities identification rates between English learners and non-English learners.



Source: OSEP (2022); image used with permission.

Recent Rates for Identifying ELLs for Disabilities: Over or Under-Identification? Or Other Factors?

For several decades, researchers and practitioners in the United States have expressed concerns about the rate of identification of multilingual learners for disabilities (Linan-Thompson, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2010). Explanations for overidentification rates often point to educator confusion between the

[3] The 13 IEP categories of disabilities are Autism, Deaf-blindness, Developmental delay, Emotional disturbance, Hearing impairment, Intellectual disability, Multiple disabilities, Orthopedic impairment, Other health impairment, Specific learning disability, Speech or language impairment, Traumatic brain injury, and Visual impairment.

normal process of additional language acquisition and literacy and language-related disabilities, as well as the lack of availability of native language assessment (Hamayan et al., 2013).

Additionally, apart from educators' unfamiliarity with multilingual learner language acquisition and limited access to native language assessments, Swanson, Orosco, and Kudo (2017) propose that inaccurate identification methods and varying state definitions of learning disabilities also play a role in contributing to these differences in identification rates. (Note: Some districts in local-control states create their own definitions and norms.)

For more than half of states, in 2020–2021, the identification rate for multilingual learners for Specific Learning Disabilities was higher than the national average of 45%. Are states with higher Specific Learning Disability identification rates over-identifying multilingual learners for this category of disabilities? Or are differences among state rates due to differences in state (and/or local) disabilities definitions and identification practices?

Table 1: Percent of English learners with Specific Learning Disabilities who are ELs, ages 5 (school age) through 21 (school year 2020–2021).

State Education Agency	Percentage	State Education Agency	Percentage	State Education Agency	Percentage
Alabama	**54%**	Kentucky	27%	**North Dakota**	**47%**
Alaska	**55%**	Louisiana	*	**Ohio**	**48%**
Arizona	**46%**	Maine	36%	**Oklahoma**	**51%**
Arkansas	40%	**Maryland**	**48%**	Oregon	36%
California	**49%**	Massachusetts	27%	**Pennsylvania**	**46%**
Colorado	**53%**	Michigan	35%	Rhode Island	44%
Connecticut	**46%**	Minnesota	42%	**South Carolina**	**50%**
Delaware	**60%**	Mississippi	44%	**South Dakota**	**47%**
District of Columbia	41%	Missouri	34%	Tennessee	38%
Florida	42%	**Montana**	**47%**	Texas	42%
Georgia	**55%**	Nebraska	36%	**Utah**	**62%**
Hawaii	41%	**Nevada**	**59%**	Vermont	23%
Idaho	34%	New Hampshire	41%	Virginia	44%
Illinois	44%	New Jersey	32%	**Washington**	**49%**
Indiana	35%	**New Mexico**	**58%**	**West Virginia**	**45%**
Iowa	*	New York	35%	Wisconsin	32%
Kansas	**54%**	**North Carolina**	**52%**	Wyoming	42%

Note: Identification rates above the national average of 45% are are set in bold.
* Data flagged by OSEP due to questionable data quality
Sources: OSEP (2022); NCEO (2022).

Nationally, in school year 2020–2021, nearly 14% of the general student population was identified for a disability under IDEA Part B, with almost 12% of that group being dually identified as English learners (OSEP, 2022). In contrast to the aforementioned states with high Specific Learning Disability identification rates in 2020–2021, a different subset of states had Specific Learning Disabilities identification rates that were closer to or lower than the national average identification rate of 35%.

Further investigation of those states with lower than average multilingual learner identification rates for Specific Learning Disabilities in 2020–2021 reveals similarly lower multilingual learner identification rates for disabilities in general (i.e., yes/no, the student has a disability): Massachusetts (12% of students identified for disabilities are dually identified as English learners), New York (10%), Iowa (8%), Wisconsin (7%), Indiana (6%), Michigan (6%), New Jersey (4%), Kentucky (4%), Missouri (3%), and Vermont (2%). Are states with lower Specific Learning Disability identification rates under-identifying English learners for disabilities? Or are there other factors impacting their rates? Further research and exploration of this data is needed.

Where to Explore Recent Data on Disabilities Identification Rates

- The interactive English Learners with Disabilities Tableau visualizations on the National Center for Educational Outcomes (NCEO) website provide a deeper dive into this data, offering 2020–2021 summary data, data by disabilities category, and data by state.
- For a deeper dive into the nuances of multilingual/disabilities identification data, see the National Center for Learning Disabilities 2020 Report: Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: Trends Among English Learners.

Central to our inquiries into national, state, and local identification data is the long-standing perception that Specific Learning Disabilities is one of the more subjective categories of disabilities, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups (EdSource, 2014; Scott, Haeurwas, & Brown, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009). It bears repeating that differences in state identification rates may be due to a variety of factors, including educator unfamiliarity with multilingual learner language acquisition and lack of access to native language assessments—but also due to inaccurate identification methods and variability in state disabilities definitions and identification practices.

In order to assist educators in systematically navigating the diverse array of factors that could impact the misidentification of multilingual learners for Specific Learning Disabilities, experienced educators hailing from Colorado and New Jersey present insightful advice in the rest of this WIDA Focus Bulletin.

- Colorado educators **Tracy Hibbard** and **Sandy Rasmussen** stress the importance of interdepartmental collaboration as well as gathering and analyzing a range of data to increase validity and reliability of decisions. They highlight the need to think differently about student data (including its examination in relation to "true peers").

- New Jersey educators **Maggie Churchill** and **Adela Joyce** provide advice on preparing student data for referral meeting discussions and share a sample template for displaying this data. They also offer techniques for enhancing student and family participation in these meetings.
- New Jersey educators **Julie Ochoa** and **Dr. JoAnne Negrin** share commonly encountered scenarios and advice for working through them. These scenarios and other guidance are available in the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (2023) *Guidance for Intervention, Evaluation, and Delivery of Special Education Services to Multilingual Learners*.

Advice From Expert Educators

Expert educators from Colorado and New Jersey offer five pieces of advice:

- Foster interdepartmental collaboration.
- Initiate the identification process in a timely manner.
- Gather and think about data differently during team discussions.
- Prepare data for the referral meeting.
- Enhance student and family participation in the meeting.

Foster Interdepartmental Collaboration

We asked our Colorado experts Sandy Rasmussen and Tracy Hibbard about how to foster successful interdepartmental collaboration. They did not start with "everyone in place" and "the perfect team." Our experts reported that collaboration "took time to build, and to get the right people in place to collaborate and make a difference for their students." They intentionally invited staff from both language development and disabilities backgrounds to participate in school team meetings and they set aside time to build their relationships.

Poudre School District Multicultural/Special Education referral team. Front row left to right: Tracy Hibbard, Sandy Rasmussen, and Colleen O'Rourke-Worman. Back row: Daniel Gallegos, Melinda Surace.

> **Tracy:** When I look back, I can see how we've really changed how we collaborate with school teams as well as with other district departments. We focused on building collaboration from the bottom up. When a child becomes scattered between providers, it can be difficult to meet her needs. We set aside a lot of time supporting networking among teachers and helping identify what each specialist can offer the team. As the teams began sharing resources, they found that a collaborative approach made life easier rather than creating additional work.

Sandy: Now that we collaborate, I feel like we have a consistent message to school teams on how to collect and interpret a body of evidence when they have an ELL with academic concerns.

Tracy: It has also been exciting that our collaboration has provided a model for school sites to observe the synergy of cross-department collaboration and the immense positive effects it generates for student outcomes.

Initiate the Identification Process in a Timely Manner

When identification questions began to be sent to their team, Sandy and Tracy realized it was not just a problem of over-identification of multilingual learners for disabilities, but one of misidentification. Some multilingual learners in their district had been mistakenly identified as having disabilities. Other multilingual learners who needed special education services were not being identified—primarily because school teams were reluctant to make an identification decision when students were in the early stages of English language acquisition.

Adele Joyce and Maggie Churchill

Similarly, the latter issue also arose for Maggie Churchill (of Closter Public Schools) and Adela Joyce (of Paterson Public Schools), two expert educators from New Jersey. They often rely on federal guidance outlined in the *Dear Colleague letter* (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2015; pp. 24, 29). This guidance cautions against delaying the disabilities identification process until the multilingual learner has fully acquired English. It states:

> SEAs and school districts must ensure that all EL students who may have a disability, like all other students who may have a disability and need services under IDEA or Section 504, are located, identified, and evaluated for special education and disability-related services in a timely manner. . . .
>
> The Departments are aware that some school districts have a formal or informal policy of "no dual services," i.e., a policy of allowing students to receive either EL services or special education services, but not both. Other districts have a policy of delaying disability evaluations of EL students for special education and related services for a specified period of time based on their EL status. These policies are impermissible under the IDEA and Federal civil rights laws, and the Departments expect SEAs to address these policies in monitoring districts' compliance with Federal law.

Gather and Think About Student Data Differently During Team Discussions

Our New Jersey experts Adela Joyce and Maggie Churchill shared the kinds of information they gather for the initial referral meeting:

> **Maggie:** We meet with students and families to build a complete snapshot of a child prior to initial referral to the Child Study Team. Like detectives, we seek input from students through teacher–student interviews about what they think they need, anecdotes from teachers based on classroom interactions, and background information from families that accurately reflects the child and family's cultural and linguistic background.
>
> **Adela:** We build our referral document in stages, beginning with a narrative summary. We research the family and, if needed, use translators during these meetings: Who is here with the child? Was there instability in the country that impacted the decision to leave? What is the child's language history—were there any interventions? Any relevant medical information? Below is a list of the kinds of data we gather [Table 2].

Table 2: Categories of student data collected

Cultural Considerations	Linguistic Considerations
• Circumstances of student's and family's arrival • Cultural and social background • Native language proficiency • Prior knowledge and experience • Student/family funds of knowledge • Lived experiences • Cultural heritage maintenance • Communication styles and practices • Parental engagement and family support (and any changes currently occurring?) • Home visits • Educational background —How many years? What grades?	• Language and communication needs • Number of years student has been exposed to English (and in which settings—schools, siblings) • Supplemental instruction needs: Opportunity for direct instruction in child's native language and communication mode (ASL, hearing-impaired, Braille) • Appropriate cognitive level for instruction and materials • Appropriate English language proficiency level and domain-proficiencies (Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing) and domain exceptions; refer to guidance in the WIDA Working *Paper Less Than Four Domains* • General education expectations with modifications as needed for mainstream • In which language skills will be achieved • Exposure to explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies • Exposure to a read-aloud routine • Exposure to explicit vocabulary instruction • Exposure to scaffolded performance-based tasks • If the child received English instruction in their home country school(s) • If the child attended preschool and if it was a bilingual classroom

Source: Adapted from Vaughn et al. (2006).

Gathering data is the first step; thinking about it differently is also important. Colorado experts Sandy Rasmussen and Tracy Hibbard suggested the following key considerations to improve team discussions and the decision-making process:

Consider environmental factors first. Before developing a student profile, first consider the environment in which the student is situated. Consider whether the learning environment appropriately supports the student and their language needs.

> **Sandy:** When we support our local teams, we stress the importance of first looking at the environment in which the child is situated: Has the learning environment appropriately supported the child and his/her language needs? What are the barriers to the child accessing the content and instruction? Is there a significant birth, development, or health history? Has the child had a recent vision screening? Has the student frequently moved? It is only after examining environmental factors and ensuring the student can access the content that the team can then look closely at individual student performance.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

Language and learning disabilities are generally due to factors intrinsic to the learner, such as a neurological impairment or a problem with symbolic processing, whereas second language learning difficulties are typically due to factors extrinsic to the learner, such as the language learning process itself or cross-cultural differences.

—Hamayan et al. (2013)

Consider the whole child. Use guiding questions to build a body of evidence. Because every child is unique, use guiding questions to build a body of evidence around the whole child; avoid cookie-cutter checklists.

Consider student strengths during meaningful activities. Build an assets-based student portrait (not just a student profile that focuses on gaps in performance); be sure to examine student language development performance during meaningful activities rather than only focusing on their use of isolated components of language. Connect with family to better understand student strengths and resources, especially during meetings.

Consider student progress in relation to the progress of similar peers. Display and analyze student data to compare student progress in relation to their peers who are making typical progress over time; work with your district data office to develop these local, normed samples of "typical" peers. Sandy and Tracy recommend using a T-chart like the one shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: T-chart.

Student Progress in Relation to Progress of Similar Peers	
Difficulties typical to English language learning or due to environmental factors	Difficulties indicating a disorder of psychological process of learning (not typical for ELs)

Source: Based on an example from Poudre School District Integrated Services Department (provided by Tracy and Sandy).

Tracy: In addition, our group has focused on starting a process to create local norms to determine what is typical growth for multilingual learners on district measures for reading and math using NWEA's MAP assessments as well as DIBELS. We're consulting with our district data department for guidance on how to compile the data using the district's student information system.

Sandy: We also had some in-depth discussions regarding which multilingual learners to include in this "typical" group and which to exclude in order to determine typical growth for multilingual learners, such as excluding students identified with a disability or identified as gifted or talented.

Our group feels that such district-developed norms (and student profiles) can help guide school team discussions when they are analyzing the academic progress of multilingual learners, such as supporting their understanding that while an ELL might not be reaching benchmark goals, they are demonstrating expected growth when compared to other "typical" multilingual learners in the district.

Prepare Data for the Referral Meeting

Our New Jersey experts Maggie Churchill and Adela Joyce shared their template for organizing student data for the referral meeting. The Closer Look on page 10 shows this template. Paradoxically, it is sometimes easier to develop a picture of what learners cannot do in relation to the standards, rather than what they can do. Maggie and Adela make a point of beginning with data that emphasize student strengths and assets. (Remember that the data shown in the template may not be the only data to be gathered. Selection of data may vary due to situational circumstances, student-related factors, educator choice, and other considerations.)

Sample Template for Student Referral Data

BACKGROUND

Here's what I've learned outside of school and know about XXXX: [Launch your overview with student strengths and assets]. The student demonstrates particular strength in (interest). He/she enjoys (hobby, sport, interest). He/she also does/practices/takes additional lessons in (interest). He/she expresses interest in . . . He/she said that in the future, he/she hopes to . . .

XXXX is a XX-year-old student in the XX grade. He/she arrived at XXXX School in (month) of 20XX (XX grade) from his/her native country, XXXX. XXXX's native language is XXXX. The student tested at a reading level of his/her native language. He/she attended XXXX school in XXXX and had XX grades on his/her report card. XXXX's parents provided documentation upon registration of XXXX's medical history and therapies related to his/her disability that were followed in his/her country. His/her English language proficiency level upon arrival was screened at End of Proficiency Level #.

Important cultural considerations related to the student's background include . . .

LANGUAGE DATA

The district uses digital programs to track the progress of English language learners throughout the year. The data provided from XXXX assesses students' literacy, reading, and grammar skills through a series of tasks, audio readings, and game-based activities to determine language-learning performance and readiness. In (month) of 20XX, XXXX's initial level of literacy in English was pre-primer, as determined by the placement test. As of (month) 20XX, XXXX has achieved a score of XXXX (beginning XX grade) on his/her benchmark literacy test, which measures phonemic awareness, sight-word reading, and spelling. In oral vocabulary, XXXX achieved a score of XX, or mid-XX grade level, for word recognition, decoding, and fluency reading. In comparison with a "true peer," that is, classmates from similar backgrounds/languages, XXXX [add description of comparative language performance]. With [XX type of scaffolding], he/she is able to XXXX.

READING DATA

In the area of reading, XXXX is at the beginning level of reading comprehension and is working on XX grade level texts in the XXXX program. His/her scores indicate he/she is not yet ready to be assessed in the area of comprehension, so he/she continues to develop skills to build readiness. XXXX listens to informational and narrative texts read aloud and answers

comprehension questions based on reading skill strategies, like determining the main idea, identifying author's purpose, and understanding the meaning of words from their context. XXXX's standardized test score on the mid-year district English language arts exam was XX—partially meeting, which represents an increase from his beginning-of-year score of XX —not meeting. In comparison with a "true peer," that is, a classmate from similar backgrounds/languages, XXXX [add description of comparative language reading performance]. With [XX type of scaffolding], he/she is able to XXXX.

LITERACY DATA

XXXX works daily at the XX grade spelling book. This book presents XX grade-appropriate words in short and long vowels that follow a particular spelling rule or pattern. Sight words frequently used in writing are also included. He/she completes familiar tasks easily but needs clarification when encountering new tasks. He/she consistently achieves very good scores when spelling XX grade memorized words. XXXX works on the level XX of the phonics program to learn English words for picture-based, high-frequency nouns.

He/she is working on the XX grade level of the vocabulary program to learn the meaning and usage of words within contexts. His/her scores are consistently in the range of XX for XX grade level. He/she has completed XX units to date. In comparison with a "true peer," that is, a classmate from similar backgrounds/languages, XXXX [add description of comparative literacy performance]. With [XX type of scaffolding], he/she is able to XXXX.

Enhance Student and Family Participation in Meetings

New Jersey experts Maggie Churchill and Adela Joyce also shared three pieces of advice to improve meaningful student and family participation in the referral meeting. These important considerations are often overlooked.

Check student self-awareness of their own needs. What does the student believe will help him/her/them to succeed?

> **Maggie:** In middle school, I've worked directly with students to seek their input and help build self-awareness of strengths and needs in order to prepare for the initial referral meeting. We include their input in the process through a template to gain student-provided information. (On the next page is an example template that Maggie created with one of her students.) The prompts are read aloud, and the student checks their answers. As the teacher, I also take notes on what the student says and share it with them. This collaboration tool empowers the student to build self-awareness.

Self-Assessment: How well do I know myself?

Check the answer that best describes you.

	Yes	Maybe	I Need Help With This
I am organized.			
I am always prepared for school.			
Math is a good subject for me.			
I bring my materials to class.			
Reading is easy for me.			
Sometimes I have trouble paying attention.			
I always do my homework.			
I am good at spelling.			
I am forgetful sometimes.			
I complete projects on time.			
Writing is hard for me.			
I don't always hear my teacher's directions.			
I have good grades.			
I study at home by myself.			
It takes me a while to finish my work.			
I would like to do better in school.			

Ask your teacher: What are my strengths as a student?

I would like more help in . . .

Engage family participation. What is the family's view of disability, knowledge of the disability, accessibility of services, student's needs and strengths, and family support system?

> **Adela:** We have to really reach out to families, especially if they are not literate, so we can understand their needs and to help them learn the structure of school in the United States. When they understand their child's disability, they can ask better questions. They need to know about services, like adaptive technology (devices for home or in school), home instruction, and in-school accommodations. We share a teacher-created action plan with parents to show them how the child is progressing along with the time and accommodations needed to reach the standard. This helps to build a parents' vision about what to accurately expect from the child in order to reach success.

To gain working knowledge of their students and the assets they bring, so they can incorporate it into their lessons, Maggie and Adela often ask families about their own home practices and funds of knowledge. Using the topic list on page 5 of the Washington State Funds of Knowledge Toolkit, they ask students and their families to share home and community practices around specific topics like agriculture, sports, or language.

> **Maggie:** What we love about this activity is that it gets everyone to share stories that they already know while building teacher knowledge of student assets. I can recall and refer back to these funds of knowledge and bring students as contributors of knowledge into lessons and classroom activities.
>
> **Adela:** Once we gather students' funds, we purposefully include their personal stories and experiences based on cultural, linguistic, and geographic knowledge that they share with us. We are trying to include any student interest, skill, or knowledge gained outside of school and integrate it into academic lessons. We want schooling to be both culturally relevant and sustaining. The knowledge we have about each other is not necessarily from a textbook; it creates a closer home–school connection for students.

Provide qualified translators. Have district-approved translators been arranged prior to the meeting?

> **Maggie and Adela:** There are so many technical terms used that it is important to have a translator present, when needed, at meetings to also address questions and these technical terms. For more information, check out the U.S. Department of Education guidance on communicating with families.

Recommended Reading

What are my choices? Facilitating meaningful conversations with families of culturally and linguistically diverse students during the disability referral process

The blog post from Colorín Colorado offers educators specific prompts and models for facilitating referral and school conference conversations with families. The goal is to move away from deficit-oriented framing to lessen debate and increase school–family dialogue.

Commonly Encountered Referral Scenarios

WIDA consulted with Julie Ochoa and Dr. JoAnne Negrin regarding common referral process scenarios involving students potentially having Specific Learning Disabilities.

These two experts are part of the Multilingual Learners Leadership (MLL) Committee within the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), and in 2023, they collaborated with other committee leaders, including the Special Education Committee, to create a comprehensive guidance document to address common questions administrators across the state have about effectively supporting dually identified multilingual learners in the classroom. Refer to NJPSA (2023) for more information.

The following scenarios are adapted from real-life examples. Student names have been changed.

Dr. JoAnne Negrin (left), Supervisor of Multilingual Learning and Performing Arts in Vineland, NJ and Chair of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) Multilingual Learners Leadership (MLL) Committee.

Julie Ochoa (right), Supervisor of ESL and Bilingual Programs, Franklin Township, NJ

Scenario 1: Camila

Camila, a 15-year-old student in grade 10, is a recent arrival to the United States from Honduras and reports that she has not been in school since grade 1. Upon entry, she is screened by an ESL teacher and scores at Proficiency Level 1 in her English language proficiency. A writing sample in her first language was also taken and evaluated by a bilingual teacher. Her first language writing sample was similar to writing created by first graders. In math, Camila was able to count, add, and subtract up to 100. After about 6 weeks of being in school with only ESL support and limited bilingual support in math, her teachers expressed concern about her performance and limited growth. Therefore, an initial referral was made to the Child Study Team (to begin the disabilities evaluation process). **What would you do? What additional information would you want to see, if any?**

Debrief/Advice

Given that Camila has been in the country for only 6 weeks and that the last grade completed was grade 1, the Child Study Team suspect that her schooling performance could be due to lack of exposure to school and teaching. NJ Code 6A:14-3.5(b)[4] specifically states that the lack of English proficiency or years of formal schooling should not be the reason for the referral to the Child Study Team. This does not mean, however, that if a disability is suspected, a student may not be evaluated. It does mean, however, that the data presented to the Child Study Team should be **thorough, thoughtful, and specific**. In this instance, there is not sufficient evidence to suspect a learning disability. Next steps would be as follows:

[4] Important Reminder: The examples provided here reference sections of the New Jersey code. Readers are advised to consult the legal provisions and regulations applicable in their respective state.

- Refer the student to the school's multitiered system of support (MTSS) process so that strategies can be identified, implemented, and documented.
- Ensure that strategies selected are specific to the suspected area of difficulty or disability.
- Collaborate with the ESL and/or bilingual teacher.
- Once data is collected, a re-referral can be made to the Child Study Team, if a disability continues to be suspected.

Gauge Student Opportunity to Learn

- Kathy Escamilla (2015) points out that rather than viewing student challenges with schooling as a problem within the child, the problem may be due to lack of appropriate activities to facilitate the development of academic language and literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- Focusing only on the "problems" within individual students does not address needed systemic changes and can further perpetuate the cycle of performance "gaps" and educational barriers.

Scenario 2: Mikhail

Mikhail, a third-grade student whose home language is Russian, received a 3.1 overall composite score on ACCESS the prior year and has been in the United States for 2 years. He has made great progress in learning English and is comfortable speaking with his peers and teachers.

When speaking and writing, Mikhail omits all articles (the, a, an). Because of this, there is concern on the part of the home room teacher that he may have a learning disability. He is therefore referred to the Child Study Team. The documentation that is brought to the Child Study Team includes the student's ACCESS scores, literacy assessments, and samples of his writing. **What would you do? What additional information would you want to see, if any?**

Debrief/Advice

The ESL teacher brought to the meeting evidence that the Russian language has no articles. Using contrastive analyses, she showed that the student's expression in English could be connected to the influence of his first language and its grammatical structures. (For background information, she consulted the specific information about the Russian language in the Language and Country Projects located on the Languages of Rhode Island Project webpage.) The ESL teacher also shared evidence showing similar performances by true peers of this student. In this case, Mikhail's true peers spoke the same language, came from similar backgrounds and similar home experiences, and all were demonstrating similar use of articles (the, a, an) in English. In other words, Mikhail's expression in English was following the normal trajectory of a student at this level of English for whom Russian was the home language. In this case, the behavior being observed was related to language development and not a disability.

Scenario 3: Francisco

Francisco, A 10-year-old student from the Dominican Republic, is a recent arrival to the United States and is enrolled in the district's bilingual program. His intake screening results indicated Level 1 proficiency in English. The staff giving the initial language screener shared anecdotal observations that he did not yet know letters and sounds and had trouble writing his name. Francisco did not have a strong working knowledge of 1:1 correspondence with either letters/sounds or with numbers. He was not able to complete a full reading of a pre-kindergarten level text. The bilingual teacher reviewed the data and decided to do additional assessments in Francisco's home language (Spanish), where she found that he had limited phonemic awareness and was not able to segment or blend sounds. His ESL teacher reported that Francisco was displaying typical behaviors of a student with Level 1 English language proficiency, so his bilingual teacher decided to try a few interventions related to the specific areas of concern:

- The bilingual teacher examined Francisco's phonetic knowledge of letters and their associated sounds in English, starting with the letter M. When Francisco showed difficulty in remembering both the letter and its sound, the bilingual teacher decided to try a multisensory approach: She had Francisco trace the letter in the sand while saying its name, she added it to a card on a ring for him to practice and review daily, and she had him say the letter name and the sound every day. The teacher created a document where she charted the strategies, logged the dates she implemented them, and took notes on his progress.
- To support development of phonemic awareness, the bilingual teacher used Elkonin boxes, or the "penny push" strategy, to practice hearing and isolating sounds in words. She added this strategy to the chart previously mentioned.

After two months of intensive daily practice, Francisco demonstrated very little progress, so the bilingual teacher made a referral to the Child Study Team. The following data was brought to the Child Study Team with the help of the ESL teacher:

- The strategy charts mentioned earlier and a summary statement of their results
- A history of the student, his educational experiences in the Dominican Republic and a summary of an interview with Francisco's mother, who relayed her concern and the information that he "kept failing" in school
- A statement from the bilingual teacher examining Francisco's learning outcomes as compared to his true peers
    - This included students from the same country, same educational experiences (a country, ½ day program), same background and same entry level of English, and same starting point in literacy. She provided a chart indicating progress other students had made and how Francisco's learning progress was an outlier in comparison.
- Another statement from the ESL teacher outlining the expected learning trajectory of Francisco's true peers
    - This included students from the same country, same educational experiences (a country, half-day program), same background, and same entry level of English. The ESL teacher noted that he was showing some progress, although limited, in production of oral English but that reading and writing were more of a challenge for him. Even with scaffolding, he was only able to copy written text and reproduce oral samples of language.

Even so, the Child Study Team was not convinced that Francisco's performance was due to lack of exposure to quality education in the Dominican Republic. **What would you do? What additional information would you want to see, if any?**

Debrief/Advice

The data clearly indicated that Francisco was having difficulty learning even with very specific and targeted instruction. However, the relationship between the ESL/Bilingual and the Special Education department was still in its infancy. The Child Study Team (of which language specialists were not members) did not trust their language specialists' data and information being brought to the table. Therefore, advice here would be as follows:

- Make sure to communicate with Child Study Team members before referring students for a possible learning disability. Collaboration is the only way to keep educators anchored in the fact that we are all here for the benefit of all students and to promote respect and professionalism.
- At an administrative level, provide professional development for both the ESL/Bilingual teachers and the Special Education teams in order to foster understanding of each other's areas of expertise.
- Promote consistent and close collaboration between the ESL/Bilingual department and the Special Education department in order to foster learning, awareness, and respect.

Note: In this case, even though Francisco's case was brought to the Child Study Team throughout the year, Francisco was not accepted for evaluation until a year later. He was eventually classified as having a Specific Learning Disability.

Final Thoughts

Our final thoughts for this bulletin come from our New Jersey experts JoAnne Negrin and Julie Ochoa:

> The question, "Is it a language issue, or is it something more?" is often posed in schools. Educators face the challenge of making intricate decisions about children's educational paths with limited evidence and expertise spanning distinct fields, often not shared by all involved. Paradoxically, well-intentioned yet inappropriate decisions can sometimes result from incomplete knowledge.
>
> The key to ensuring tailored services for all students lies in aligning processes and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Yet achieving this collaboration can be challenging. Special education, general education, ESL, and bilingual education adhere to separate state and federal regulations. Best practices may overlook the nuances and the intersectionality in our students' backgrounds and abilities. When compounded by resource scarcity, the situation may become even more complex and sometimes may even devolve, leading to well-meaning but disjointed efforts.

Throughout this bulletin and linked resources, we aim to empower educators who are hesitant to speak up because they do not feel they have a comprehensive enough understanding of the issues. By offering unified guidance, resources, and scenarios, we seek to demystify this expertise intersection, encouraging conversations about collaborative approaches to address every child's linguistic and neurological needs.

More Resources

This list of resources includes state manuals as well as links to resources for supporting struggling EL students in addition to referral to special education service, highlighting the following:

English Learners With Disabilities: Shining a Light on Dual-Identified Students

This brief from New America provides an overview of the separate but intersecting federal policies that govern the identification of and services provided to EL students and students with disabilities. For policymakers, administrators, and practitioners.

Supporting English Learners and ELs With Disabilities

In this collection of resources, produced by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, educators, practitioners, and school leaders demonstrate how they are working to meet the needs of EL students with disabilities. For teachers and coaches.

WIDA Staff Articles and Focus Bulletins

American Indian English Language Learners
SLIFE: Learners With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

Use a student portrait to look closely at the assets the student brings and collect culturally responsive data. What information is available about each student's strengths, interests, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and collaborations with other students? These two WIDA Focus Bulletins provide specific guidance on how to weave learner strengths, interests, and cultural and linguistic considerations into a learner portrait.

Language-Focused Family Engagement

This WIDA Focus Bulletin introduces readers to the four pillars of Language-Focused Family Engagement and provides tools to help educators examine their local family engagement practices.

WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> **CLOSER LOOK**

Embedding the Can Do Cycle Throughout the School Year

This Focus Bulletin reframes the WIDA Can Do Philosophy as a can do cycle of actions that can be embedded into teaching and learning experiences throughout the entire school year. In it, we offer resource banks of questions that can be used to elicit student assets and reflect on ways to build on student assets at the beginning of each unit, during each unit, and at the end of each unit.

Supporting Multilingual Learners Language Growth Through Language Development Portfolios

This Focus Bulletin illustrates how teachers and students can use language development portfolios to interpret and document language growth. The bulletin follows the story of how a grade-level team introduced portfolios to their practice, posing several questions the team asked as they refined their usage. It closes by offering two sample tools that teachers can use and adapt to capture multilingual learners' language growth using modified Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) from the WIDA English Language Development Framework, 2020 Edition.

Collaboration: Working Together to Serve Multilingual Learners

This WIDA Focus Bulletin emphasizes the many benefits of collaboration. The collaborative approach is presented as a cyclical process with shared responsibility by educators assessing, reflecting upon, planning for, and teaching multilingual learners.

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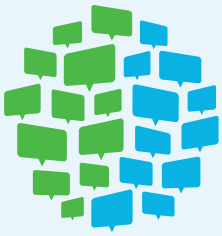

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