

Using RTI within a Comprehensive SLD Evaluation: A Review of a State's First Year Efforts

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The Idaho State Department of Education (SDE) recently revised its SLD identification policy to include a requirement to document a student's response to intervention coupled with a comprehensive evaluation. To implement this policy, the SDE is using multiple implementation drivers. In this article, we describe how and why the new policy was developed and review baseline data from the first year of implementation. The review of first year implementation efforts indicates a need for wide-scale support, particularly in the areas of progress monitoring, academic achievement and psychological processing assessment. The SDE's action plan resulting from this process is presented and implications for continued implementation are discussed.

More than seven years after the reauthorization of the IDEA 2004, the state of specific learning disability (SLD) identification is perhaps more varied than ever. Reviews of state practices of SLD identification indicate tremendous variation across states in the policies and procedures employed for identifying students as SLD (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Some states are maintaining the use of the discrepancy formula while some are using response to intervention (RTI) procedures, some using comprehensive evaluations of psychological processes, and others using a combined RTI and comprehensive evaluation approach.

For a number of reasons, a combined approach to SLD identification has widespread support in the field (e.g., Hale, Flanagan & Naglieri, 2008; Fletcher, Lyons, Fuchs & Barnes, 2007; Pennington, 2008). First, there is strong agreement the discrepancy approach to SLD identification is not valid (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Additionally, despite the initial support RTI received as a promising alternative to SLD identification, that view is no longer widely held due to the many limitations of the RTI process that make it indefensible as a disability determination model (Burns, Jacob, & Wagner, 2008; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Hale, Wyckoff & Fiorello, 2011). Finally, given the practical concerns about the overtaxing of limited resources to serve students with disabilities, there is an interest in ensuring students are correctly identified in order to receive appropriate services (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Johnson & Mellard, 2006). Despite the general agreement on these issues, there is very little consensus regarding the specifics of a comprehensive evaluation. While some argue the evaluation should maintain a functional academic focus (e.g. Fletcher et al, 2007), others argue an assessment of psychological process-

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ing is required to determine the cause of the learning difficulty and to identify potential instructional interventions (Flanagan, Alfonso & Mascolo, 2011).

As the field wrestles with the particulars of SLD identification, policymakers and practitioners are left in the uncomfortable position of either maintaining now discredited models of SLD identification (e.g. discrepancy; RTI only) or of creating new policies informed by a nascent and incomplete research base. They do not have the luxury of suspending services for students while the research community works to identify, design and validate models; rather, they must continue to work within a less than ideal context to best meet the needs of students struggling to learn. The purpose of this paper is to examine how one state developed and piloted SLD identification criteria aligned with current understandings of the SLD construct.

Idaho State SLD Identification Policy

The Idaho State Department of Education (SDE) recently revised its SLD identification policy to reflect a comprehensive evaluation approach. The revised policy consists of three main components. First, the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) must document the student is failing to meet grade level performance standards, despite having received appropriate instruction and intervention. This component is documented through the use of an RTI process. The low achievement can be measured by state, district, or other measures that indicate the student has failed to achieve grade level standards whereas the majority of his classmates have met expectations. Documentation of the intervention(s) provided to the student along with a graph charting limited progress, establishes the student has failed to respond to high quality instruction and intervention.

Once the team has established the student's learning problems are not the result of a lack of instructional opportunity, they conduct a comprehensive evaluation to determine the cause of the student's failure to respond. Academic achievement assessments in the specific area of suspected disability are administered. Standardized testing is required to provide evidence regarding the specific area(s) of concern as well as to ensure the learning difficulty is evident on more than one measure of performance (i.e. not due to differences in standards from state to state or district to district). Finally, the team must assess the student's cognitive processing skills in order to determine whether the student's profile reflects what is known about the nature of the specific learning disability (Pennington, 2008). For example, a student with a suspected learning disability in the area of reading fluency may have ipsative and normative weaknesses in processing speed and phonological processing. Such a finding would be consistent with the hypothesis that a psychological processing deficit impedes the student's progress despite average capabilities in other academic and processing areas (Hale et al., 2011; Pennington, 2008).

Throughout the evaluation process, the team considers whether any of the exclusionary factors might impact student performance and adjusts procedures accordingly. For example, specific procedures for assessing students who are not native English speakers are detailed in Idaho's policy to ensure language proficiency is not the primary cause of the student's learning difficulties. Table 1 summarizes the state requirements for SLD identification.

Table 1. Idaho SLD Identification Policy Summary

Functional Definition Component	Required Documentation
Unexpected Low Achievement	Grade level assessments in the related area that indicate the student is below grade level. Documentation that appropriate interventions have been provided but the student has not responded to those interventions. Academic achievement testing in the specific area(s) of concern that indicate low achievement
Disorder in one or more of the psychological processes	Cognitive processing assessments that indicate a deficit in an area that is related to the academic area of concern
Not due to other factors	Data that indicates other students are benefiting from the instruction. Team indicates that they have considered other factors and determined they are not present OR are not the primary cause of the student's low achievement

The adoption of this model was a difficult decision at the state level. While the state stakeholder group agreed the discrepancy approach and the RTI approach only did not capture the salient characteristics of SLD, there currently is no well-defined SLD classification system. In light of the lack of established alternatives, the SLD committee worked with the emerging consensus in the field that a) SLD represents a real construct that is intrinsic to the individual; b) SLD is related to specific processing deficits; and c) specific processing deficits are different from general cognitive delays or deficits (Keogh, 2005), and created a model intended to capture these salient characteristics. The difficulty of course, is in the operationalization of these constructs, both in terms of establishing criteria for specific measures and cut scores, as well as in the implementation of the new procedures. Therefore, once the revised policy was established, the SDE also created a plan to collect data to inform in the short term, the extent to which practitioners were able to comply with the new requirements, and in the long term, to determine the defensibility of the model as an approach to SLD identification.

Challenges of Implementing SLD Policy

Idaho's revised SLD policy represented a significant change to practice not only for MDTs, but also for the state's entire education system. RTI is in place in some districts across the state, but overall, most districts are in various stages of implementation, with many choosing not to implement at all. The requirement in the SLD identification process to document student response to intervention represents somewhat of a back door approach to requiring RTI, in that teams must document the efficacy of both core instruction as well as research-based interventions implemented to address specific skill deficits. Because the SLD identification policy requires documentation of effective instruction and intervention, schools by default

must now implement these practices. In short, the success of implementation of the revised SLD policy requires a significant shift in general education practice.

The change also presents significant shifts in practice for the MDT in terms of assessment practices. The previous SLD identification policy required the documentation of a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement, reflecting a definition of SLD predicated largely on capturing that the learning difficulty was unexpected (Hallahan & Mock, 2003). In Idaho, achievement was measured through the use of broad area scores on standardized academic achievement tests and aptitude was measured through full-scale IQ scores. The evaluation process was standardized for all students suspected of having an SLD, and teams implemented these practices primarily for documentation purposes.

The revised policy assumes a clinical approach to the evaluation, and represents an attempt to capture the salient characteristics of SLD. MDTs must first provide appropriate interventions to support student learning; then, if the student does not respond to these interventions, the team conducts a comprehensive evaluation using assessments specific to the area of academic concern and related cognitive processes to determine the nature of the student's learning difficulty. In essence, the revised SLD policy requires MDTs to engage in hypothesis testing. In addition to these shifts, the new policy does not specify cut scores, measures or specific links between cognitive processes and academic areas. This was intentional, because there is not sufficient evidence to inform those types of specific decision rules and because there is evidence that suggests SLD is heterogeneous to the point that establishing decision rules with universal applicability may not be possible (Pennington, 2008). While the decision to leave the policy open to clinical judgment under set parameters was intentional to avoid the same problems the discrepancy model encountered, the lack of specificity presents additional challenges to MDTs grappling to implement these changes, and concerned about compliance monitoring.

In summary, the change in special education policy has created a need for significant shifts in practice for numerous stakeholders. However, new practices are difficult to implement in large, established systems (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner & Sugai, 2009). In order for the new SLD identification policy to be brought to scale successfully, the SDE had to establish a process to collect and analyze data to inform the training needs as well as the utility of the new model.

Implementation Drivers

The successful statewide implementation of educational practices is a long term, challenging process that entails multiple stages (Fixsen et al., 2009) and can be supported through the use of numerous implementation drivers (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Policy is one of several implementation drivers that support the scaling up of practice (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Policy alone however, is not effective in bringing the practice to scale in a manner consistent with the intended goals. In the case of SLD identification, the intended goal is the accurate identification of the SLD population and better service delivery for all students (Johnson, Mellard, & Byrd, 2005). Achieving these goals must be supported by efforts to develop professional capacity, provide organizational supports and collect data for implementation (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Fixsen et al, 2009).

The Idaho SDE convened a multi-stakeholder committee to develop and support SLD policy implementation. The committee includes stakeholders from state, regional, district and school sites as well as from Institutions of Higher Education, with expertise in various areas to include school psychologists, special educators, RTI coordinators, professors and regional special education coordinators. Once the SLD policy was developed and had received input from a larger stakeholder group, the charge of the committee shifted from developing policy to supporting implementation. First, the committee decided to conduct a pilot of the new SLD eligibility process. Districts submitted one SLD eligibility file per school to be reviewed through a peer review process held at the end of the school year. This process was designed to provide feedback to schools and districts as well as to identify training needs. The results of the first year of the peer review are the emphasis of this article. The primary questions addressed are:

- 1) How well do the SLD eligibility reports reflect the new SLD identification policy?
- 2) What are the areas of need for professional development across the state?

METHOD

In order to support the MDTs in implementing the new policy, several training opportunities were offered by the SDE during the 2008-09 school year. First, a series of informational trainings was developed. Trainings were 90 minutes long and conducted by members of the SLD committee to various stakeholder groups at state conferences and regional meetings. Two regional training sessions were also conducted within the state's largest districts. Participants included special and general education teachers, school psychologists and assessment coordinators. All districts had at least one representative to attend at least one training session.

Participants

During the 2009-10 school year, districts submitted at least one SLD eligibility report for the state peer review project. A copy of the eligibility report was submitted to the authors for data coding and analysis. A coding system was developed to capture all relevant information from the SLD eligibility reports to include: evaluation purpose, student demographics, IEP team information, academic area of concern, core curriculum and interventions used, progress monitoring, academic achievement and psychological processing assessments, exclusionary criteria, and the eligibility decision.

For most variables, the coding system was categorical. Numerical values such as percentage of students meeting benchmark and standard scores on assessments were entered directly. For progress monitoring data, a system of five yes/no codes were created: 1) did the file contain a graph, 2) was there a trendline, 3) was there an aimline, 4) were decision points included either on the graph or in the description of student progress, and 5) was the rate of improvement (ROI) compared to national, state, or district ROIs to determine adequate progress?

Two data coders were trained in the coding procedures, and the SLD eligibility reports were distributed equally by region to each coder. The second author super-

vised data coding and conducted interrater reliability checks of 25% of the files. Interrater reliability was computed by the overall percent agreement of all the variables on one eligibility report, with agreement ranging from .80 to .94 on the reviewed files. The coded data was then entered into a database, during which inconsistencies in coding were resolved by the study's first two authors.

Data Analysis

Once the database was constructed, the data was analyzed in several ways. Frequencies and crosstabs by grade level were computed to obtain demographic and other characteristics of the files such as area of academic concern, interventions and assessments used. Next, in order to identify areas of need for training, we developed a file filtering process based on the state eligibility requirements, with the addition of decision rules to allow for analysis (see Table 2). To determine the extent to which each of the individual components were reflected in the files, we applied each of the filters individually by academic area of concern (e.g. Basic Reading Skills, Oral Expression, Math Calculation). We analyzed files by area because we hypothesized adherence to the criteria would vary in areas for which there are not well-established intervention, progress monitoring tools or assessments. Because some files indicated more than one academic area of concern for a student, the total number of academic areas of concern ($n = 673$) is greater than the 196 (the number of reports reviewed). For each academic area of concern, we first applied a series of conditional statements that reflected the new identification criteria. Once that process was completed, we ran each of the filters separately, and recorded the percentage of total files within that academic area of concern that met each specific component.

RESULTS

Table 3 presents the characteristics of the students included in the reviewed files. Sixty-seven percent ($n = 130$) of the files represented an initial evaluation, with 12 files (6%) listed as reassessments for students transferring from other districts or states, and 39 files (20%) listed as three-year reevaluations. Fifteen files (7%) did not indicate the purpose of the evaluation.

Table 2. Description of Filters

Filter Number	Description	Rationale
1	The student was found to have an SLD and at least one area of academic concern was indicated.	Ensure that all files found that student had an SLD
2	The file included data that documented that core instruction was generally effective (data includes a standardized assessment and 70% or more of class meeting proficiency) and the student of concern was not meeting performance standards.	Best practice for RTI recommends 80% - a statewide review of performance indicates most school range from 75 – 90%
3	The file included information that an intervention consistent with the checked academic area of concern was provided to the student.	Purpose of intervention is to address learning needs; must be aligned to student need.
PM Filter	The file included a progress monitoring graph that had an aimline, a trendline, decision rules and data to determine whether the student was making appropriate progress in the intervention.	Best practice for PM includes these components (see for example, Hosp & Hosp (2003))
4	The file indicated that the SLD was not due to a lack of instruction, and an observation of the student was conducted in a setting relevant to the appropriate area of concern.	Qualitative data to support quantitative data collected.
5	The file included an academic achievement test specific to the academic area of concern with a standard score on a composite, cluster or 2 or more subtests of < 90.	Research indicates that students with LD tend to have performances < 25 th percentile
6	The file included a psychological processing assessment with at least one standard score < 90.	Research reviews indicate students with LD tend to have performances about 1 SD < mean

Table 3. Participant characteristics

	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grades 7 - 9		Grades 10 - 12		Total										
	I	T	R	I	T	R	I	T	R	I	T	R	I	T	R	I	T	R	I	T							
Gender (girls)	15 (11)		15 (16)		14 (17)		11 (13)		11 (2)		10 (8)		20 (16)		10 (6)		107 (89)										
Evaluation Purpose	21	1	2	27	1	2	24	4	3	15	1	3	7	1	3	11	1	4	18	2	14	6	1	8	130	12	39
	22 (4)		30 (1)		29 (1)		23 (0)		11 (2)		16 (1)		32 (3)		14 (1)		178 (13)										
English (Spanish)	22		20		18		16		8		11		18		7		121										
Basic Reading	18		15		20		14		8		12		17		8		113										
Reading Comprehension	21		25		26		16		9		13		15		6		132										
Reading Fluency	6		1		8		1		0		1		7		1		25										
Oral Expression	9		0		5		4		2		2		8		6		37										
Listening Comprehension	11		7		11		14		4		9		23		9		88										
Written Expression	8		2		10		13		6		9		21		7		77										
Math Calculation	7		5		10		13		6		8		21		9		80										
Math Problem Solving	7		5		10		13		6		8		21		9		80										

Academic Areas of Concern by Grade Level

Reading fluency was the most frequently checked academic area of concern, with 67% of the files indicating reading fluency as an area of SLD for the student (n = 132). More than half of the reading fluency evaluations were for students in Grades 1 – 3 (n = 72). Basic Reading was the next most frequently checked area of concern (62%, n = 121), half of which were for students in Grades 1 – 3 (n = 60). The pattern of Reading Comprehension changed across grade levels. In Grades 1 – 5, Fluency and Basic Reading Skills were checked more frequently, but by 6th grade and up, the number of files indicating Reading Comprehension as an area of concern surpassed the number of files indicating concerns in Fluency or Basic Reading Skills.

In the middle school years (Grades 7 – 9), math calculation, math problem solving and written expression were the most frequently cited academic areas of concern; representing 25% of the total number of cases. For all areas of concern, the high school grades had the lowest numbers of files. The areas of oral expression and listening comprehension were the least frequently assessed areas of concern across grade levels (n = 25, 37 respectively).

Identifying Training Needs

Figures 1 - 3 present the results of applying the filters individually to each academic area of concern. Overall, there are some general patterns across areas of concern; for example, across areas, high percentages of files included an observation conducted in an appropriate location and included a psychological processing score of < 90. Additionally, across areas very few files were able to meet the progress monitoring filter.

For the remaining filters however, results varied. The documentation that core instruction was effective was higher for the academic areas of reading and math, but no files documented effective core in the area of oral expression and listening comprehension, and only 40% of the written expression files documented core instruction was effective. This is consistent with the fact the state currently does not assess in these areas statewide. This pattern was consistent for the intervention filter; higher percentages of files in the academic areas of reading and math included appropriate interventions, but for oral expression and listening comprehension, this was not the case.

Finally, the results of applying the academic achievement test filter across areas were mixed. Basic reading and reading fluency had somewhat low percentages of files meeting this filter (40 and 35% respectively); listening comprehension had the lowest percentage of files meeting this criteria (21%). Oral Expression and written expression had the highest percentage of files meeting this criteria (68 and 72% respectively).

Figure 1. Reading Files by Area of Concern and Filter

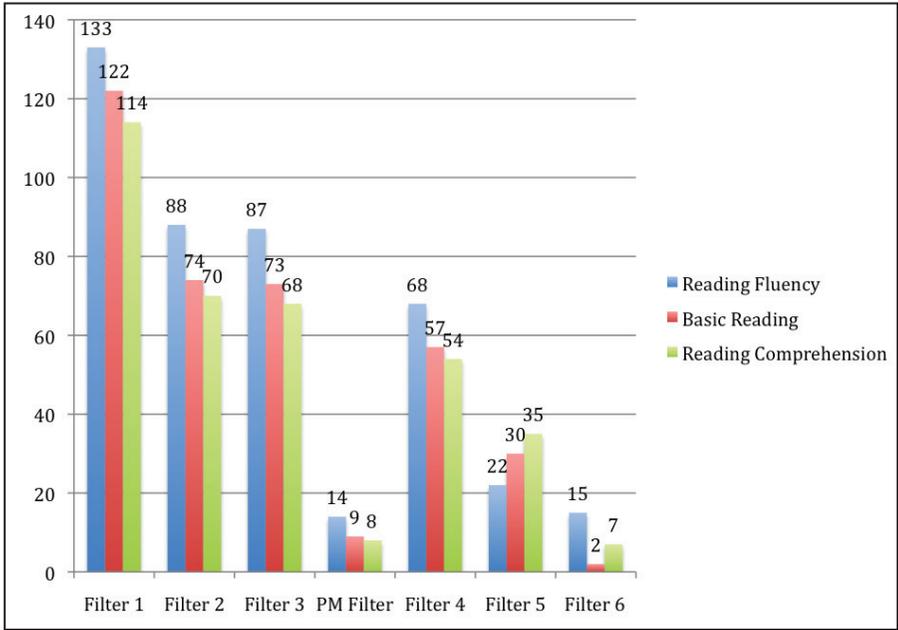


Figure 2. Oral Expression, Listening Comprehension and Written Expression Files by Filter

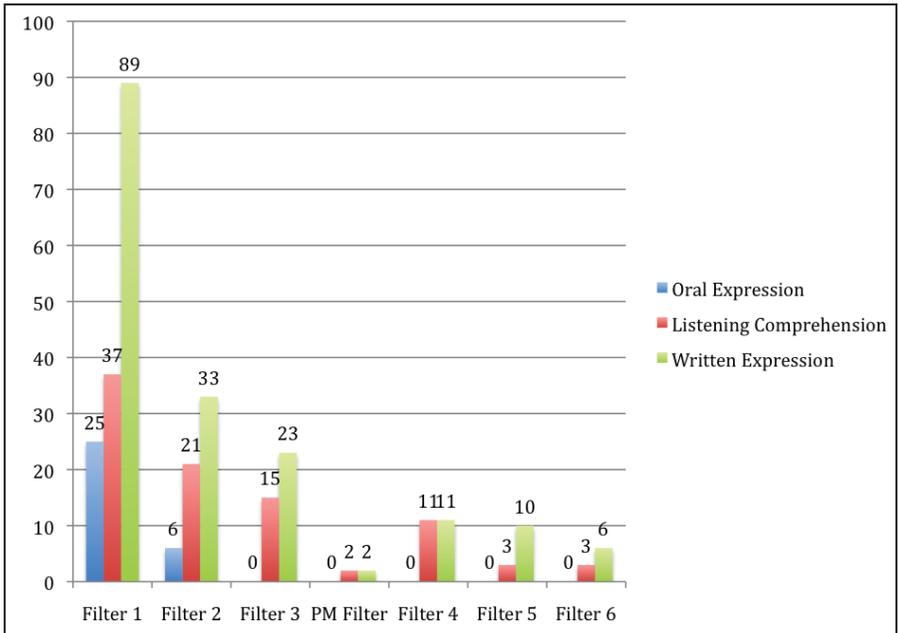
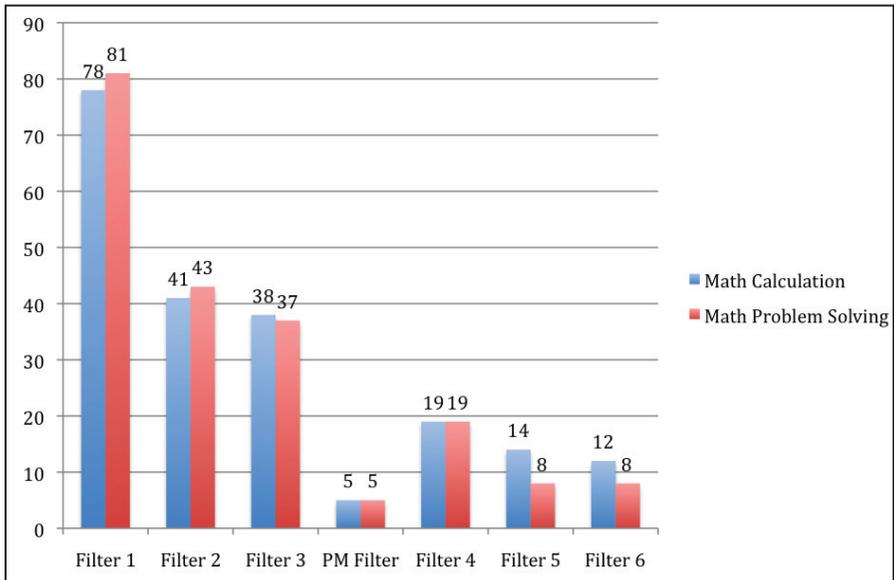


Figure 3. Math Files by Filter

DISCUSSION

This paper reported the first year results of Idaho's revised SLD eligibility policy implementation. As part of the scaling up efforts to promote effective assessment practices for students with learning disabilities, the Idaho SDE has focused primarily on developing professional capacity and providing organizational supports (Fixsen et al., 2009). This article reports on the use of an organizational support data system that was compiled through a pilot review project, and discusses how the SDE will use that data to design a plan for developing professional capacity to promote effective identification practices for students with SLD.

Limitations

It is important to note that several limitations warrant caution in the interpretation of findings. First, the SLD eligibility reports provided by school districts in this study were not a random sample. This limits the generalizability of the results, although given the number of small schools and districts in the state, it is likely that if a school compiled an eligibility report with missing data in one area, another report compiled by the same school would have missing data. Additionally, the revised state eligibility policy does not include the assignment of cut scores and decision rules for eligibility, but rather relies on a clinical approach to evaluation. However, in order to conduct the analysis, we applied decision rules based on current practice and research. Different decision rules may have led to different results, and it is critical to interpret findings with this understanding. Nevertheless, the results of this first year review represent a statewide effort to implement a systematic process of data collection and evaluation geared towards improving an MDT's ability to appropriately assess students with SLD, thereby offering important insights into the professional development needs to obtain this goal.

Documenting RTI within the Comprehensive Evaluation.

Overall, the results of this review indicate several challenges for the successful implementation of the new SLD policy. First, based on the percentages of files without appropriate documentation that core instruction is effective, interventions are provided and progress monitored, general education teachers and building leaders require support in the implementation of tiered-service delivery models that include universal screening, evidence-based instruction and intensive levels of support for their students, especially at the secondary grades. This alone represents a sizable task many states are contending with (Burns et al., 2008; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010), but one that becomes critical in states in which a student's response to instruction is a component of the SLD eligibility process. This review highlights the need to examine more closely how RTI training is provided statewide, in particular in the areas of progress monitoring, and in the provision and documentation of effective instruction and intervention.

The results of applying the individual filters highlight areas that need to be addressed to support improved SLD identification practices. For example, the areas of oral expression and listening comprehension may require a different approach to identification. It appears school teams do not have access to assessments, interventions and progress monitoring tools in these areas, which makes the documentation of a student's response to intervention difficult. The results also highlight the need to support districts in implementing interventions and progress monitoring before referring a student for a comprehensive evaluation. Progress monitoring information within the eligibility process is a measure of student response to intervention, providing a way to ensure appropriate instruction has been provided. When done well, referrals to special education can be reduced as students with learning challenges have their needs met early (see for example Johnson & Boyd, in press). RTI data is an important aspect of the SLD eligibility process that allows an MDT to conclude with more confidence that a child's learning difficulties are not due to a lack of appropriate instruction. RTI is also an important component of creating an effective instructional system to address the needs of all learners. Continued training of and resources for implementing intervention and progress monitoring in schools is needed statewide.

Clinical Models of Evaluation

This review also indicates MDT's require more guidance in the use of a clinical approach to evaluation. Prior to the revision of the SLD policy, Idaho used a discrepancy model that required the documentation of a 15-point discrepancy between regressed IQ scores and broad area academic achievement scores. As one school psychologist noted during a training, "The discrepancy model may not have been best practice for students, but at least when our files were audited, we knew we were in compliance. The new procedures can reflect better practice for students, but how will we know if we meet state requirements?" His comments reflect the uncertainty about how to move forward with a practice that will certainly result in eligibility evaluations that differ in the particulars but are consistent in the general process. The new identification policy reflects the heterogeneity of the SLD construct and how it manifests differently for children (Pennington, 2008). While this change is more consistent with conceptualizations of SLD, it presents practical challenges for implementation.

Academic achievement testing also appears to be an area in which practitioners require support. Specific academic achievement assessment can help diagnose a student's particular difficulties within the area of concern and can inform the nature of the intervention and if the student is found to have a learning disability, the nature of the individualized education program. Many of the files reviewed did not meet this filter because the team elected to use a broad area score, or used an assessment not aligned to the specific area of academic concern. This suggests that MDTs are administering an assessment because it is a requirement rather than because it helps inform the evaluation and subsequently, instructional planning for a student. Developing stronger assessment literacy may help improve the identification practice for students with SLD.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the implementation process, the challenges of implementation have been identified through a systematic collection and analysis of data, which now informs the next steps for the SDE. As a result of this first year data analysis, the SDE created an action plan for developing the professional capacity of all stakeholders. For example, the results demonstrate an urgent need to support districts in implementing RTI processes more effectively. Although some training has been provided in the past, it is well documented that training alone results in only a very small percentage of teachers implementing a practice with fidelity (Knight, 2010). Implementing an effective response to intervention system requires a substantial infrastructure; roles, responsibilities, and resources must be sufficiently defined and supported if the practice is to be effectively implemented (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). This review has prompted the SLD to work in concert with the state's RTI coordinator to identify successful sites to determine what has made them successful, and then to determine how best to bring these practices to scale.

In addition to informing professional development requirements, this review raises several interesting questions about the impact of policy decisions on the construct of SLD. For example, the findings of this review indicated that two-thirds (67%) of the students evaluated for SLD had concerns in the area of reading fluency. In the early elementary grades, 82% of the files included reading fluency as an area of concern for students. Reading First and AIMSWEB are supported statewide for grades 1 – 3. Do the results of this review reflect an increase in the number of students with fluency problems or do the findings merely reflect an increase because AIMSWEB ORF is one of the tools most widely available? Conversely, oral expression and listening comprehension represented the fewest number of referrals. Is this because of the lack of instruments with which to identify students or because of a lower prevalence of this type of learning disability? Additionally, very few schools are documenting the adequate use of intervention and progress monitoring tools, which are essential components of an RTI system, and also have been demonstrated to significantly reduce the number of students referred for special education when used effectively. As a result, it is possible that students are being overidentified as SLD.

These concerns are important to answer, because an improved evaluation process can lead to a more reliable means of identifying students with specific learning disabilities, and ultimately to better services. Continued evaluations such as the one described in this study can help improve the implementation process and begin to inform broader questions about the impact the policy will have on shaping the construct of SLD within Idaho. Although the results of this review are informative, it is important to remember that data was collected at the beginning of a significant paradigm shift. The change in policy has created gaps in professional capacity and practice that need to be systematically addressed through data collection and responsive action.

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