South Lane School District's Approach to Identifying Students with Specific Learning Disabilities: *Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses*

Introduction

The 2004 Reauthorization of IDEA included the option of using a Response to Intervention (RtI) or a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) approach to identify students with Specific Learning Disabilities. This was included in IDEA due to concerns regarding the intelligence-achievement discrepancy approach. These concerns included:

- Delaying services until the discrepancy between a student's intelligence and achievement, is large enough to meet state criteria (i.e., wait to fail);
- Limited use of high quality measures of student performance (i.e., progress monitoring);
- The use of assessment tools that do not lead to effective interventions that can be implemented in the classroom environment; and
- An overrepresentation of children and youth from poor and minority backgrounds in special education programs.

Given these concerns the State of Oregon took the *additional step* of removing the intelligence-achievement discrepancy approach as an option for Oregon school districts. As a result, Oregon schools are left to weigh the relative merits of Response to Intervention (RtI) or a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) as a means for identifying students with Specific Learning Disabilities.

To be sure, in South Lane School District we use aspects of RtI and multi-tiered instruction; we also realize that these instructional systems are driven by a robust general education instructional system. RtI is based on reliable and valid instructional systems, adequate resources to deliver instruction, the ability to monitor progress & adjust instruction when progress is not sufficient, and a means to document the fidelity of instruction both within and across school settings. In other words, although RtI has many instructional merits, *at this time* we do not believe SLSD's RtI practices are rigorous enough to support the weighty decision of special education identification. Should the general education system initiate robust RtI systems, special education identification systems (in regards to Specific Learning Disability) may follow. Until that time, SLSD will be left to use the Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses as the default approach for identifying Specific Learning Disabilities.

What is a "Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses" Approach?

IDEA 2004 provides that in determining eligibility for special education services as a student with a specific learning disability (SLD) teams may use an approach identifying "a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to intellectual development, that is determined by the team to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability…"

Models for using a pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) are based on the following characteristics (Hanson, Sharman, Esparza-Brown, 2009):

- The Full Scale IQ is irrelevant except for Mental Retardation (MR) diagnoses.

- Children classified as SLD have a pattern in which most academic skills and cognitive abilities are within the average range. However, they have isolated weaknesses in academic and cognitive functioning. This conforms to Sally Shaywitz' (2003) declaration that dyslexia is "an isolated weakness in a sea of strengths."

- Cognitive abilities that do not relate to the area of academic concern are average or above.

Additional features include:

- An eligibility model that can be used across grade levels and academic subjects.
- Identification and/or acknowledgment of the co-occurrence of disabilities among some students (e.g. those with ADHD or mental health impairments). Evaluation within a PSW model provides information required for a comprehensive evaluation to "… identify all of the child's special education and related services needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child is classified" (SELPA, 2009).
- The need to provide more information about within learner traits in relation to environmental demands. When instructional variables are ruled out through a response to intervention process, the assumption is that the student has a specific learning disability (that the reason for underachievement resides in the individual). The comprehensive evaluation required within a PSW model provides information about learner traits that are only assumed by a student's lack of response to high quality intervention, and never specified.
- Research showing links between various cognitive processes and academic achievement (i.e. Berninger, V. W., Abbott, R., Thomson, J., Wagner, R., Swanson, H. L., Wijsman, E., & Raskind, W.; 2006; McGrew & Wendling, 2009, Semrud-Clikeman, 2005; Woodrich & Schmitt, 2006).

It is important to note that, despite SLSD's decision not to use RtI as a vehicle for special education, PSW models emphasize the importance *to first document* the provision of high quality interventions and the monitoring of progress in general education. This is ideally done within a multi-tiered process that (a) provides interventions of increasing intensity for struggling students and (b) monitors student progress in response to these interventions. Simply put, special education identification (or lack there of) should not get in the way powerful interventions for students.

Identification Procedures Using a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Method

Step 1: Pre-evaluation consideration of potential exclusionary factors

- Academic interventions
    - What has been tried already?
    - Evidence of student progress (RTI); trend line vs. aim line
- Behavioral interventions (if applicable)
    - What has been tried already?
    - Functional Behavior Assessment results
    - Behavior data collected
- Student grades: Evidence of below grade level expectations for extended time?
- Curriculum Based Measurement results (e.g. Easy CBM): Evidence of student skills below the 20th percentile in area of suspected disability?
- State assessment history: Evidence of not meeting standard in the area of suspected disability?
- Prior standardized assessment results: Has SLD been assessed for student before? What were the results?
- Attendance history
    - <80% over last calendar year considered a probable exclusionary factor
    - 80%-90% over last calendar year considered a contributory factor
    - <80% in any of last three school years considered a contributory factor
- Cultural/linguistic factors: ELPA under level 4 considered contributory factor
- Evidence of health factors significantly contributing to lack of academic growth/performance?

If the team considers the evidence outlined above and determines that there are not significant exclusionary factors and that sufficient interventions have been implemented without sufficient progress, proceed to Step 2 of evaluation process.

Step 2: Standardized Academic Assessment

- Administer full academic battery (not limited only to area of suspected academic weakness)

- Proceed to Step 3 of evaluation process if:

    o Any specific academic area assessed ≤ 15th percentile, **or**

    o Any specific academic area assessed ≤ 25th percentile, **and** at least one standard deviation lower than other assessed academic area(s)

Step 3: Standardized Cognitive Assessment

- Cognitive evaluation should consist of full or partial batteries from one or more tests

- Cognitive evaluation should measure for all CHC neuropsychological processes: Comprehension/Knowledge (Gc), Fluid Reasoning (Gf), Visual Spatial Thinking (Gv), Auditory Processing (Ga), Processing Speed (Gs), Short-Term Memory (Gsm), Long-Term Retrieval (Glr)

- Specific linkage between a particular cognitive process and a particular academic skill need not be in evidence. For consideration, however, research evidence suggests that the following cognitive factors may tend to be closely related to reading and math skills:

    o Reading Achievement:

        - Auditory Processing (Ga), including Phonetic Coding (PC)

        - Comprehension-Knowledge (Gc), including Lexical Knowledge (VL) and General Information (KO)

        - Long-Term Storage and Retrieval (Glr), including Associative Memory (MA) and Naming Facility (NA) or Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN)

        - Processing Speed (Gs)

        - Short-Term Memory (Gsm), including Working Memory (WM)

    o Math Achievement:

        - Fluid Reasoning (Gf), including Induction (I) and General Sequential Reasoning (RG)

        - Comprehension-Knowledge (Gc)

        - Long-Term Storage and Retrieval (Glr), including Naming Facility (NA) and Association Memory (MA)

        - Processing Speed (Gs)

        - Short-Term Memory (Gsm) and Working Memory (WM)

- To provide evidence for a Pattern of Strengths and Weakness, at least one cognitive weakness and at least three cognitive strengths must be in evidence
    - Cognitive weakness ≤15th percentile
    - Cognitive Strength ≥ 25th percentile

Figure 1: Specific Learning Disability Identification Procedures

Existing Data: Grades, OAKS, CBM → Pre-Evaluation Data Collection ← Interventions tried & progress data

Pre-Evaluation Data Collection ↓

Sufficient evidence to proceed?

No → Assign to alternate intervention

Yes ↓

Administer Full Academic Battery ↓

Any academic area ≤ 15th percentile OR Academic area ≤ 25th percentile and at least 1 standard deviation lower than other academic areas(s)

No → Assign to alternate intervention

Yes ↓

Administer Cognitive Battery ↓

1 or more Cognitive weaknesses (≤ 15th percentile) and 3 or more cognitive strengths (≥ 25th percentile)

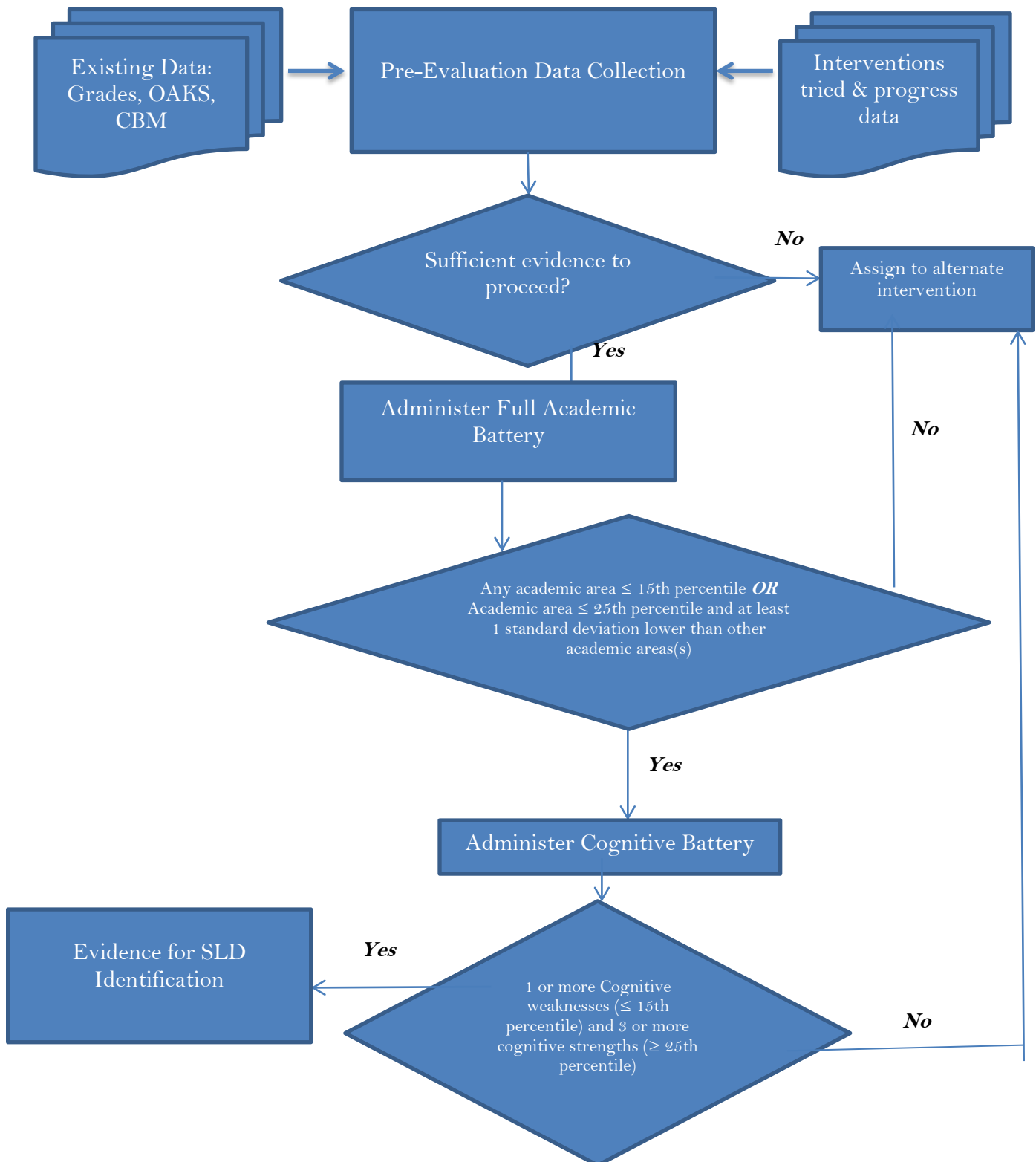*Yes* → Evidence for SLD Identification

No → Assign to alternate intervention

Figure 2: Guidelines for Determining Strengths and Weaknesses for Specific Learning Disability

Assessment Type	Strength	Weakness
CBM: Benchmarking and Progress Monitoring	≥ 20th percentile ("Benchmark" zone) Data points at or above aim-line	≤ 10th percentile ("Intensive" zone) Data points below aim-line for at least 4 consecutive weeks
Oregon State Assessment	"Meets" or "Exceeds" grade-level expectations	"Does Not Yet Meet" grade-level expectations
Norm-Referenced Tests (Achievement, IQ)	≥ 25th percentile	≤ 15th percentile
Curriculum Assessments and Tests	Score ≥ 80%	Score ≤ 70%
Grades	A's or B's / "Meets" or "Exceeds" grade-level expectations	D's or F's / "Does Not Meet" grade-level expectations
Teacher Report	Student performs at or above expectations when compared to other students in the classroom	Student performs well below expectations when compared to other students in the classroom
Observations – Academic	Student demonstrates average to above-average understanding of academic content in comparison to other students in the classroom	Student demonstrates that he or she does not understand the majority of the academic content
Observations – Behavioral/Functional	Student demonstrates typical functional and behavioral skills in comparison to other same-age or same-grade students	Most of the student's functional and behavioral skills appear to be well-below average in comparison to other same-age or same-grade students
Rating Scales	Scores fall within the "normative" range (usually T-scores of 40 to 60)	Scores fall within the "clinically significant" range (usually T-scores ≥ 70 or ≤ 30)