Bureau of Special Education
Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and SLD/Dyslexia Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (Updated 2023)

1. What is a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)?

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Definition of SLD:

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disability, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (34 Code of Federal Regulation §300.8(c)(10))

8 Academic Domains of SLD:
- Oral Expression
- Listening Comprehension
- Written Expression
- Basic Reading Skills
- Reading Fluency Skills
- Reading Comprehension
- Mathematics Calculation
- Mathematics Problem Solving

2. What is SLD/Dyslexia?

Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) Working Definition of Dyslexia:*

Dyslexia is included in the IDEA as a specific learning disability. Dyslexia impacts reading, specifically decoding and accurate and/or fluent word recognition and spelling. Dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and is unexpected and/or inconsistent with a student's other abilities often despite the provision of appropriate instruction. Dyslexia *usually* results from a significant deficit in phonological processing (i.e., a persistent difficulty in the awareness of and ability to manipulate the individual sounds of spoken language).

Typically, students with dyslexia have strengths in areas such as reasoning, critical thinking, concept formation, problem solving, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and social communication (e.g., conversation). Early identification and appropriate instruction targeting the underlying phonological, word reading, and spelling deficits that characterize dyslexia may minimize its educational impact.

Essential Clarifications

- Dyslexia is not *primarily* the result of visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disability; a lack of appropriate instruction; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.

- Early identification of the characteristics of dyslexia is critical, leading to focused, evidence-based interventions, accommodations, self-awareness, self-empowerment, and school and life success.

- Without targeted, systematic and explicit instruction/interventions along with accommodations (e.g., accessible educational materials in content area subjects), students with dyslexia may have:
  - reduced reading experiences that may impact the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge,
  - difficulty with written expression, and/or
  - difficulty learning a second language.

- Students with dyslexia may demonstrate additional behavioral and/or emotional reactions to their difficulty with learning to read.

- Effective, research-based interventions for phonemic awareness and/or phonics may bring some students with dyslexia to grade expectations in those areas, but the students may still have lingering difficulties in reading fluency, spelling, and/or written expression, which may require intervention.

*This working definition was developed by the CSDE with input from an external stakeholder workgroup and was based on a review of applicable literature, the IDEA, and current definitions in use by other states, organizations and legislation.

3. What are the three common profiles of reading?

The three profiles grow out of the Simple View of Reading, a widely cited scientific model of reading, which says that good reading comprehension requires competence in two broad areas: word recognition/decoding and oral language comprehension. Both good word reading and good oral language comprehension are required to have good reading comprehension. That is, proficient readers will be strong in both of these areas. Students who are struggling readers may have a weakness in word reading; or in some aspect of oral language comprehension; or in both areas.

	WORD RECOGNITION Below Average	WORD RECOGNITION Average or Higher
ORAL LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION **Average or Higher**	**Specific word recognition difficulties (SWRD)**	**Good reader**
ORAL LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION **Below Average**	**Mixed reading difficulties (MRD)**	**Specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD)**

The first profile is termed Specific Word Recognition Disabilities (SWRD) because these poor readers have reading problems that are specific to reading words, but their language comprehension abilities are average or better. If a student has SWRD, you would expect to see that the student has difficulties with word recognition (e.g., real word reading, nonsense word reading, and/or automaticity of word reading). The student's broad oral language comprehension, including vocabulary knowledge, is average or higher. When reading text the student can decode well, the student's reading comprehension is good. Areas of difficulty include basic reading skills. Areas of difficulty do NOT include listening comprehension. Often these students will be identified with SLD/Dyslexia.

The second profile is termed Specific Reading Comprehension Disabilities (SRCD) because these students have reading problems specific to reading comprehension, but their word reading skills (including their phonological skills, such as phonemic awareness and nonsense word reading) are average or higher. If a student has SRCD, you would expect to see that the student has difficulties with reading comprehension that are NOT due to poor (inaccurate or nonautomatic) decoding. Often these problems are based in vocabulary/oral language comprehension. Areas of difficulty include reading comprehension, and sometimes, listening comprehension. Areas of difficulty do NOT include basic reading skills.

The third profile involves Mixed Reading Disabilities (MRD). If a student has MRD, you would expect to see that the student has difficulties with reading comprehension that are based in BOTH word reading AND vocabulary/language comprehension. The student's reading comprehension problems exceed what can be explained by poor decoding. Example: a poor decoder has difficulties with reading comprehension even in decodable text, because of vocabulary limitations that affect comprehension. Another example: a poor decoder has comprehension difficulties that are evident not only in reading, but also during teacher read-alouds and oral discussions. Areas of difficulty include reading comprehension, basic reading skills, and sometimes, listening comprehension.

4. Who can identify a student with a SLD or SLD/Dyslexia?

According to the IDEA, upon completion of the administration of assessments and other evaluation measures, a group of qualified professionals and the parent of the student [planning and placement team (PPT) in Connecticut] determines whether the student is a student with a disability as well as the educational needs of the student. The IDEA requires that professionals who administer assessment tools and strategies to assist in the identification of a student as having SLD or SLD/Dyslexia must be trained and knowledgeable regarding such assessments. As defined in the IDEA, a Specific Learning Disability includes conditions such as dyslexia. Definitions of dyslexia vary, but all propose that dyslexia is a learning disability that impacts the area of word reading (decoding). Since the PPT must provide assessments in all areas of suspected disability, for a student who is suspected of having SLD/Dyslexia, professionals with expertise in reading - and especially in word recognition and decoding - would be critical team members, as well as those with considerable knowledge in other areas of concern (e.g., language, mathematics, and writing). The IDEA does not indicate that there is one category of professional who is uniquely qualified to provide such identification.

5. What is an appropriate evaluation for a student suspected of having a SLD or SLD/Dyslexia?

To help ensure that an evaluation is appropriate (i.e., consistent with the requirements of the IDEA), the PPT must first gather input from multiple sources (e.g., information from families, general education classroom teachers, interventionists, as well as data from curriculum-based measures, standardized assessments, student records, observations). This input should include a review of existing evaluation data to determine what additional data, if any, are needed to identify a learning disability, establish a student's need for special education, and write an IEP. Included in this review must be any evaluative data gathered during a scientific research-based intervention process, including Tier I. Core General Education Curriculum, as well as other academic and behavioral data that can be used to rule out that the student's learning difficulties are due to a lack of appropriate instruction. In Connecticut this process is called Scientific Research Based Intervention (SRBI) (CSDE 2010), also referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

When planning the evaluation, the PPT must: 1) use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental and academic information about the student, including information provided by the parents; 2) not use any single measure or assessment as the sole criterion for determining whether the student is a student with a disability; 3) use instruments that are technically sound (i.e., reliable and valid), *for their intended purpose*, and that may assess the relative contribution of cognitive, behavioral, physical, and developmental factors, in addition to academic and linguistic factors; 4) use assessments that are tailored to

assess areas of specific educational need and not merely those that are designed to provide a general intelligence quotient or broad levels of achievement; 5) assess a student in all areas related to the suspected disability; and 6) use measures that are sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of a student's special, education and related service needs.

When determining whether a student has a learning disability, the PPT must ensure the student is observed in the student's learning environment, including the general education classroom setting, to document the student's academic performance and behavior *in the area(s) of difficulty*. Results of the observation should include any relevant behavior observed and the relationship of that behavior to the student's academic functioning, as well as the student's level of engagement.

Dyslexia is a distinct type of learning disability in reading involving core difficulties in decoding and accurate and/or fluent word recognition and spelling, often associated with poor phonological processing and rapid naming abilities. Therefore, in addition to other areas of concern, assessment of students suspected of having a reading disability, including SLD/Dyslexia, should address the five critical components of reading recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, with a particular emphasis on the first three areas because these are the core weaknesses in dyslexia.

To identify any poor reader's profile, assessments of out-of-context word recognition and decoding, oral vocabulary knowledge, broad oral language comprehension, and reading comprehension are needed. It is desirable to assess automaticity as well as accuracy of word reading, along with text reading fluency. An in-depth speech/language evaluation by a Speech-Language Pathologist should be considered for students whose difficulties include oral language (listening) comprehension. If a speech/language evaluation is already available, it should be carefully considered in comprehensive evaluations for SLDs in reading. Please see the [CSDE Assessment Resource Guide](#) for many other appropriate measures of component reading and language skills.

6. Is a student identified with SLD or SLD/Dyslexia automatically eligible for special education services?

A student identified with SLD or SLD/Dyslexia may or may not be eligible for special education services. A student is not considered to be eligible for special education under the IDEA unless the student has a disability and, as a result, needs special education and related services. Therefore, in addition to meeting the criteria for a learning disability, in order for a student to be eligible for services under the IDEA, the PPT must determine that the student's learning difficulties require specially designed instruction. Some students with SLD or SLD/Dyslexia may need accommodations or related services in order to benefit from the same instruction as their

peers; however, they may not need specialized instruction and, therefore, would not be eligible for special education services.

7. What is appropriate specialized instruction for a student with SLD or SLD/Dyslexia?

As with any student who is receiving special education services, all instruction must be individualized. Each student will have a different profile of strengths and areas of concern, thus there is no one single best program, method of instruction, or intervention for every student with SLD/Dyslexia. However, there is a great deal of evidence- based research supporting structured literacy instructional approaches as successful methods for working with students with SLD/Dyslexia. These instructional approaches can differ in specific techniques and materials, but they all include structured, explicit, systematic, cumulative instruction in key components of language and literacy. These key components include phonological skills, phonics and word recognition, spelling, oral reading fluency, grammar and syntax, text comprehension, writing, and study skills. Because the difficulties of students with dyslexia center upon the development of word recognition, decoding, and spelling skills, structured literacy approaches in these areas are especially important for them.

8. What is Structured Literacy (SL) instruction?

This Connecticut explanation of *Structured Literacy* was based on a review of applicable literature and research, and has been heavily influenced by The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) definition (IDA 2015, 2020).

According to the IDA, the term *Structured Literacy* (*SL*) refers to both the content and methods or principles of instruction. "*SL* does not involve just one particular program or method. In fact, many well-known intervention programs, methods, and approaches fall under the umbrella of *SL*, such as the Wilson Reading System, the Orton-Gillingham method, the Lindamood Phoneme Sequence Program, and Direct Instruction, as well as several other approaches" (IDA 2019b, 7). *Structured Literacy* instruction prepares students to decode words in an explicit and systematic manner. SL "integrates listening, speaking, reading and writing and emphasizes the structure of language across the speech sound system (phonology), the writing system (orthography), the structure of sentences (syntax), the meaningful parts of words (morphology), the relationships among words (semantics), and the organization of spoken and written discourse" (IDA 2019b, 6). This approach not only helps students with SLD/Dyslexia, but can be helpful for many other students as well.

The content of *Structured Literacy* instruction is marked by several elements:

- ❖ **Phonological and Phonemic Awareness – Phonological awareness** involves awareness of and the ability to manipulate the sound structure of spoken words. Phonological

awareness includes rhyming, counting words in spoken sentences, and clapping syllables in spoken words. The highest level of phonological awareness, and a key skill for learning to decode and spell printed words, is **phonemic awareness**. Phonemic awareness includes the ability to segment spoken words into their individual component sounds, which are called phonemes; the ability to blend individual phonemes into whole words orally; and the ability to delete or substitute phonemes in spoken words.

❖ **Sound-Symbol Association/Phonics –** Once students have developed the awareness of phonemes of spoken language, they must learn how to map the phonemes to symbols (i.e., printed letters), which then enables them to decode unfamiliar printed words by blending their constituent sounds, or spell words by using the appropriate letters to represent their constituent sounds. Sound-symbol association must therefore be taught and mastered in two directions: letters to sounds (reading) and sounds to letters (spelling). The instruction of sound-symbol associations is often referred to as **phonics**.

❖ **Patterns and Conventions of Print (Orthography) –**One important aspect of orthography that is often taught in *Structured Literacy* approaches involves syllable patterns (syllable types).Six basic syllable types in English are: closed, vowel-consonant-e, open, consonant-le, r-controlled, and vowel combination. Knowledge of syllable types can assist readers to determine the sound of the vowel in the syllable. Other aspects of orthography are also important to teach. For example, syllable division rules can heighten the reader's awareness of where a long, unfamiliar word may be divided for greater accuracy in reading or sounding out a word; teaching other common orthographic patterns, such as when to use –ck, –tch, or –dge at the end of a short-vowel word, helps children spell correctly.

❖ **Morphology** – A **morpheme** is the smallest unit of meaning in the language, individual words as well as word parts that carry meaning. A *Structured Literacy* curriculum includes the study of common morphemes such as base words, roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Learning about morphology is important not only for reading words, but also for spelling and vocabulary development.

❖ **Syntax** – **Syntax** is the set of principles that dictate the sequence and function of words in a sentence in order to convey meaning. Aspects of syntax include grammar, sentence variation, and word order.

❖ **Semantics** – **Semantics** is the aspect of language concerned with meaning, including word-level meaning (i.e. vocabulary), meanings of phrases (e.g., metaphor and figures of speech) and sentences, and understanding more lengthy text and discourse. Cohesive ties, such as connectives (sometimes called signal words), are especially helpful in

understanding text and discourse. For example, words such as *therefore, consequently, as a result* signal cause-and-effect relationships between ideas in a text, whereas *overall, in sum, to sum up*, signal a summary of important points. Teaching about text and discourse structure (e.g., a narrative is organized differently from an informational text) is also very important. The curriculum (from the beginning) must include instruction in the comprehension of written and oral language.

All students, including those with SLD, need instruction in the previously mentioned areas; but students with SLD do not necessarily require intervention in every single area. For example, students with specific word recognition difficulty (SWRD) typically have core weaknesses in phonological/phonemic awareness (PA), word decoding, and spelling, so intervention that includes the areas of PA, phonics, orthography, and morphology is usually essential for them. However, they can generally receive instruction in the other areas (syntax and semantics) as part of core general education (Tier I) instruction, based on Connecticut Core Standards, and with accommodations, as needed for access.

Conversely, students with specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD), who have age-appropriate phonological, word recognition, and decoding skills but problems specific to comprehension, will often require interventions that address syntax and semantics, and perhaps morphology because of its role in vocabulary development; however, usually they will not require interventions related to phonological awareness, orthography, or phonics, because they do not have weaknesses in these areas. Based on the Connecticut Core Standards, they should receive (or should have received, in the early grades) instruction in these other areas (PA, phonics, and common orthographic patterns in words) during core general education (Tier I) instruction.

Structured Literacy is distinctive in the principles that guide how critical elements are taught.

- ❖ **Systematic and Cumulative** – *Structured Literacy* instruction is systematic and cumulative. **Systematic** means that skills are taught in a logical order, with important prerequisite skills taught before students are expected to learn more complex skills. **Cumulative** means that there is ongoing review and practice of previously learned concepts and skills, to help students retain them and build automaticity.

- ❖ **Explicit Instruction** – *Structured Literacy* instruction requires the deliberate teaching of important concepts and skills with ample teacher-student interaction. It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce important concepts and skills on their own, merely from exposure or incidental learning opportunities.

- ❖ **Diagnostic Teaching** – The teacher must be adept at individualized instruction, instruction that meets a specific student's needs. The instruction is based on careful and continuous assessment, both informally (e.g., observation) and formally (e.g., using

standardized measures through progress monitoring). Basic skills such as letter-sound knowledge and decoding must be mastered to the degree of automaticity. Automaticity of foundational skills is critical to freeing all the student's attention and cognitive resources for comprehension and expression (IDA 2015). If groups are well-planned and homogeneous in terms of student needs, individualized instruction can often be effectively delivered in small groups (e.g., 1 teacher to 3 students) and does not necessarily require 1:1 instruction.

❖ **Hands-on, engaging, and multimodal** - Methods often include hands-on learning such as moving tiles into sound boxes as words are segmented and spelled, using hand gestures to support memory for associations, building patterned words with letter tiles, assembling sentences with words on cards, color-coding sentences in paragraphs, and so forth. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are often paired with one another to foster multimodal language learning.

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