



CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

IEP Preview Series: Mini-Series on SLD

Part 4: Understanding a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW)

Welcome and Introductions

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Director**

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Guest Speakers

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Sincere Appreciation Extended to:

**Dr. Perri Murdica, Director of Pupil Personnel
Services, Watertown Public Schools**



Learning Targets

- Review the Federal and State requirements for determining eligibility and the existence of a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and the revised Multidisciplinary Evaluation Report (MER).
- Understand Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) methods, how to use a PSW in SLD eligibility determinations, and some implications of PSW methods for assessment.



Federal and State Required Eligibility Criteria

| Multidisciplinary Evaluation Report (MER) Section II. SLD Eligibility Criteria | Criteria Met |
|---|--|
| <p>A. The student makes inadequate achievement for the student's age or for meeting State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the student's age or State-approved grade level standards.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mathematics calculation <input type="checkbox"/> mathematics problem solving <input type="checkbox"/> oral expression <input type="checkbox"/> written expression <input type="checkbox"/> listening comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>B. The student makes insufficient progress in the area(s) identified above to meet age or State-approved grade-level standards, even with scientific research-based interventions.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>The student exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, in the area(s) identified above, relative to age or State-approved grade-level standards that is determined by the PPT to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>C. The student has been provided appropriate instruction (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction in the essential components of reading, math, and writing), delivered by qualified personnel.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>D. The student meets exclusionary factors (i.e., the student's difficulties are not primarily the result of: a visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disability; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.)</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>E. The evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to appropriately identify all of the student's special education and related services, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>F. The PPT has reviewed Section I. Required Evaluation Components and Section II. Eligibility Criteria and has determined, in accordance with IDEA § 300.306(c)(1), that the student has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area identified below, and requires special education and/or related services. services.</p> <p>Specification of Type of Reading Disability: <input type="checkbox"/> mixed reading difficulties (MRD) <input type="checkbox"/> specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD) <input type="checkbox"/> specific word-recognition difficulties (SWRD)</p> <p>The PPT has determined that the student has Specific Learning Disability/Dyslexia.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |



Additional Federal and State Required Eligibility Criteria

G. The IQ discrepancy (ability/achievement) model was not used to determine eligibility.*

*The PPT may request the administration of individual IQ tests if the planning and placement team (PPT) believes such tests could provide information that would be helpful in an evaluation.

H. A disorder in one of the basis psychological processes in understanding or using spoken or written language was not required as part of the eligibility decision.



Scientific, Research- Based Interventions (SRBI)

- All three tiers are part of a comprehensive educational system. Therefore, the tiers should not be viewed as categorical placements or as “gates” to special education supports and services.
- A referral for special education evaluation should be considered if data demonstrate continued lack of response to interventions.
- Students may be referred for an evaluation for special education at any time and in any tier of instruction.



Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW)

- A PSW alternative is being added to Criterion B in Connecticut's eligibility criteria (Section II. of the MER), as this alternative is included in the IDEA eligibility criteria.
- The eligibility criteria do not require a PSW in SLD eligibility determination, however a PSW is an alternative for Criterion B in Section II. of the revised MER (i.e., the student makes insufficient progress, even with SRBI, OR exhibits a PSW).
- PSW methods can focus on a variety of abilities.
- Little research on how PSW methods actually work and relate to instruction has been done (Schneider & Kaufman, 2017).
- PSW methods focused on IQ indices, IQ subtest performance, and other cognitive processing measures have limited relevance for instructional planning (Elliott & Roesing, 2015; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2019).
- PSW methods focused on academic-linguistic performance, as well as SLD identification methods involving RTI, are more educationally relevant than PSW approaches based on cognitive measures (Fletcher et al., 2019).



If a PSW is used in identification

Operational guidelines (e.g., Schulz, Simpson, & Lynch, 2013) suggest:

- Approximately 30 standard score points or more between strengths and weaknesses (whether using academic/linguistic or cognitive measures)

AND

- Triangulating data from educational history, informal assessments, screening and progress monitoring, observations, etc.

A PSW should reflect consistency across the data and be supported by these different types of evidence.



PPT Considerations Regarding PSW

- A PSW is not required for a student to be identified as SLD or SLD/Dyslexia.
- Whether or not a student exhibits a PSW, all other eligibility criteria must be met, including low achievement.
- A PSW should not be primarily due to inadequate instruction.
- PSW methods focused on academic/linguistic performance can be helpful in educational planning and are relevant to understanding a student's needs.

Eligibility decisions are based on an individualized, comprehensive evaluation that considers an array of student data, not rote application of a formula.



Example 1: Lee, Grade 8

(A student with a PSW who is not eligible under SLD criteria.)

- Concerns raised about Lee's reading from about Grade 6.
- Main concerns are about reading comprehension; basic reading skills are strong.
- Math is on grade level; this area has always been a strength
- Lee has been receiving small-group SRBI for reading comprehension.
- Compliance and engagement in intervention is generally good.
- Strong agreement on team that he is making good progress in intervention and is on a trajectory to catch up.
- However, Lee's guardian referred him for comprehensive evaluation.



Example 1: Lee, Grade 8 continued

Selected Test Scores from Comprehensive Evaluation

- Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (WJ) Math subtests are all solidly average or higher; highest math subtests are Quantitative Concepts (SS = 118) and Calculation (SS = 124).
- WJ Reading subtests: Word Identification = 116; Word Attack = 107; Passage Comprehension = 90; Reading Fluency = 95
- WJ Academic Knowledge = 80
- WJ Oral Language subtests: Oral Comprehension = 91; Picture Vocabulary = 84
- Student's performance on specific items for Academic Knowledge and Picture Vocabulary suggested lack of exposure/experience as the main issue, because he generally knew the items to which he had been exposed in school (e.g., questions about Abraham Lincoln).
- Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) indices: Verbal Comprehension = 85; Perceptual Reasoning = 121; Processing Speed = 90; Working Memory = 105



Example 1: Lee, Grade 8 continued

Additional Test Scores from Comprehensive Evaluation

- Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-V): Accuracy = 12; Rate = 11; Fluency = 11; Comprehension = 8 (all in average range)
- On an informal reading inventory, Lee's highest instructional level in graded word lists was Grade 10.
- His highest instructional level in passages was Grade 8.
- These scores support the view of his SRBI team that he is progressing well in reading comprehension.

Lee DOES have a PSW in relation to his academic/linguistic skills performance (i.e., his math calculation and concepts, as well as his basic reading skills are strong, but his reading comprehension and listening comprehension are significantly lower, perhaps related to weaknesses in vocabulary and background knowledge). He also has a PSW in relation to his cognitive performance (e.g., WISC-IV indices).



Federal and State Eligibility Criteria - Lee

| Multidisciplinary Evaluation Report (MER) Section II. SLD Eligibility Criteria | Criteria Met |
|--|---|
| <p>A. The student makes inadequate achievement for the student's age or for meeting State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the student's age or State-approved grade level standards.</p> <p> <input type="checkbox"/> mathematics calculation <input type="checkbox"/> mathematics problem solving <input type="checkbox"/> oral expression <input type="checkbox"/> written expression <input type="checkbox"/> listening comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills </p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>B. The student makes insufficient progress in the area(s) identified above to meet age or State-approved grade-level standards, even with scientific research-based interventions.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>The student exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, in the area(s) identified above, relative to age or State-approved grade-level standards that is determined by the PPT to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>C. The student has been provided appropriate instruction (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction in the essential components of reading, math, and writing), delivered by qualified personnel.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>D. The student meets exclusionary factors (i.e., the student's difficulties are not primarily the result of: a visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disability; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.)</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>E. The evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to appropriately identify all of the student's special education and related services, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>F. The PPT has reviewed Section I. Required Evaluation Components and Section II. Eligibility Criteria and has determined, in accordance with IDEA § 300.306(c)(1), that the student has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area identified below, and requires special education and/or related services.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |



Despite having a PSW, Lee is not eligible under SLD criteria because:

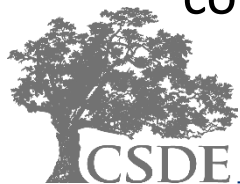
- Reading comprehension on standardized testing is currently in average range.
- Listening comprehension (oral comprehension) is in average range.
- He is making adequate progress in his reading comprehension intervention and is on a trajectory to catch up.
- PPT does not suspect a Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) or other disability.
- Additional considerations: Weaknesses in vocabulary and academic (background) knowledge appear to be experiential in nature.
- It would be important to ensure that Lee's weaknesses in vocabulary and background knowledge continue to be adequately addressed in his core general education program and his SRBI intervention (strengthened, if necessary).



Example 2: Rachel, Grade 5

(A student without a PSW who is eligible under SLD criteria.)

- Rachel first evidenced reading difficulties in Grade 1.
- Early on, her difficulties involved phonemic awareness, basic phonics, and spelling skills; she appeared to progress well in SRBI and interventions were discontinued in Grade 2.
- In Grade 4 problems with reading fluency and reading comprehension emerged.
- Rachel sometimes has difficulties with comprehension even when reading text she can decode well.
- Math is also a weakness, especially in problem-solving.
- She has been receiving SRBI in multiple areas of reading as well as math (with a focus on problem-solving).
- She is not on a trajectory to catch up in reading fluency, reading comprehension, or math problem-solving.



Example 2: Rachel, Grade 5 continued

Selected Test Scores from Comprehensive Evaluation

- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-IV) Receptive Vocabulary = 84
- WIAT-IV Oral Discourse Comprehension = 86
- WIAT-IV Word Reading = 82
- WIAT-IV Pseudoword Decoding = 92
- WIAT-IV Reading Comprehension = 84
- WIAT-IV Oral Reading Fluency (passages) = 78
- WIAT-IV Orthographic Fluency = 76
- WIAT-IV Decoding Fluency = 86



Example 2: Rachel, Grade 5 continued

Additional Test Scores from Comprehensive Evaluation

- Informal assessments as well as WIAT-IV subtest scores indicate continuing difficulties in reading multisyllabic words.
- Highest instructional reading level in text = Grade 4; highest independent level = Grade 2.
- Difficulties in text reading relate partly to multisyllabic word reading; also, even when reading texts she can decode accurately, Rachel finds questions involving vocabulary and inferencing especially difficult.
- WIAT-IV Numerical Operations = 90
- WIAT-IV Problem Solving = 78
- Results of a Speech/Language evaluation concluded average to low average oral language comprehension and verbal expression.
- WISC-V Indices: Visual Spatial = 92; Verbal Comp = 86; Fluid Reasoning = 88; Working Memory = 82; Processing Speed = 80

There is some variability in Rachel's scores, as would be true for nearly all students. However, there is not enough variability to constitute a PSW, either in relation to academic/linguistic performance (e.g., reading-math) OR cognitive performance (e.g., WISC-V indices).



Federal and State Eligibility Criteria - Rachel

| Multidisciplinary Evaluation Report (MER) Section II. SLD Eligibility Criteria | Criteria Met |
|--|---|
| <p>A. The student makes inadequate achievement for the student's age or for meeting State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the student's age or State-approved grade level standards.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mathematics calculation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mathematics problem solving <input type="checkbox"/> oral expression <input type="checkbox"/> written expression <input type="checkbox"/> listening comprehension <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>B. The student makes insufficient progress in the area(s) identified above to meet age or State-approved grade-level standards, even with scientific research-based interventions.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>The student exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, <i>in the area(s) identified above</i>, relative to age or State-approved grade-level standards that is determined by the PPT to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>C. The student has been provided appropriate instruction (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction in the essential components of reading, math, and writing), delivered by qualified personnel.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>D. The student meets exclusionary factors (i.e., the student's difficulties are not primarily the result of: a visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disability; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.)</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>E. The evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to appropriately identify all of the student's special education and related services, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category.</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| <p>F. The PPT has reviewed Section I. Required Evaluation Components and Section II. Eligibility Criteria and has determined, in accordance with IDEA § 300.306(c)(1), that the student has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area identified below, and requires special education and/or related services.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mathematics problem solving <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills</p> <p>Specification of Type of Reading Disability: mixed reading disability (MRD)</p> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |



Despite not having a PSW, Rachel is eligible under SLD criteria because:

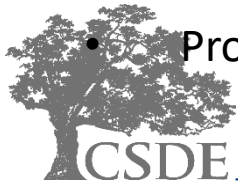
- She has been showing insufficient response to SRBI in both reading and math.
- She meets the low achievement criterion, in multiple areas.
- Although she has language weaknesses, she does not meet eligibility criteria for SLI.
- Team does not suspect any other disabilities.
- Her difficulties are not primarily due to exclusionary factors such as limited English proficiency, cultural factors, lack of instruction, etc.
- Additional considerations: Although Rachel's pseudoword decoding is in average range, she is still having significant difficulties reading real words, especially multisyllabic words; orthographic/decoding fluency scores support idea that her reading fluency difficulties are based at least partly in word reading; her special education program needs to include intervention in multisyllabic word reading as well as reading fluency, reading comprehension (e.g., vocabulary, inferencing), and math problem-solving.
- Rachel's reading profile involves a mixed reading disability (MRD), with difficulties relating both to word reading AND language comprehension.



Example 3: Antoine, Grade 2

(A student with a PSW who is eligible under SLD criteria.)

- Antoine has struggled in reading since the beginning of kindergarten; he passed a kindergarten oral language screening.
- Despite ample exposure to literacy at home and in preschool, he knew few letters upon entering K and had great difficulty learning letter-sound correspondences.
- Phonemic awareness also was a serious problem, both in relation to phoneme blending and segmentation.
- Antoine enjoys being read to and his comprehension during read-alouds continues to be at grade level or higher. He offers insightful contributions to class discussions.
- He had some initial difficulties with learning numbers in K but progressed much better in math than reading.
- In both Grade 1 and 2, math skills seen as grade-appropriate, and he has met all Tier 1 benchmarks in math.
- SRBI has focused on phonemic awareness skills, phoneme-grapheme correspondences, and basic phonics skills.
- Progress in SRBI has been slow and he is not on a trajectory to catch up.



Example 3: Antoine, Grade 2 continued

Selected Test Scores from Comprehensive Evaluation

- WJ-IV Reading subtests: Word Identification = 60; Word Attack = 64; Passage Comp = 50 (student reached a ceiling quickly on this subtest due to inability to read most words)
- WJ-IV Spelling = 58
- WJ Picture Vocabulary = 110
- WJ-IV Oral Comprehension = 115
- WJ-IV Math subtests: Calculation = 94; Applied Problems = 101
- Academic knowledge subtests all in average range
- WISC-V indices: Verbal Comprehension = 120; Visual Spatial = 105; Fluid Reasoning = 90; Working Memory = 76; Processing Speed = 70
- Further testing with the CTOPP documented severe phonological weaknesses (all composites < 75); Spelling negatively impacts written expression.

Antoine has a striking PSW, both in relation to his academic/linguistic performance (i.e., listening comprehension and math are much stronger than basic reading), and his cognitive performance (e.g., WISC-V indices).



Federal and State Eligibility Criteria - Antoine

| Multidisciplinary Evaluation Report (MER) Section II. SLD Eligibility Criteria | Criteria Met |
|--|---|
| <p>A. The student makes inadequate achievement for the student's age or for meeting State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the student's age or State-approved grade level standards.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mathematics calculation <input type="checkbox"/> mathematics problem solving <input type="checkbox"/> oral expression <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> written expression <input type="checkbox"/> listening comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>B. The student makes insufficient progress in the area(s) identified above to meet age or State-approved grade-level standards, even with scientific research-based interventions.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>The student exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, in the area(s) identified above, relative to age or State-approved grade-level standards that is determined by the PPT to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments.</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>C. The student has been provided appropriate instruction (i.e., explicit and systematic instruction in the essential components of reading, math, and writing), delivered by qualified personnel.</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>D. The student meets exclusionary factors (i.e., the student's difficulties are not primarily the result of: a visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disability; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.)</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>E. The evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to appropriately identify all of the student's special education and related services, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category.</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>F. The PPT has reviewed Section I. Required Evaluation Components and Section II. Eligibility Criteria and has determined, in accordance with IDEA § 300.306(c)(1), that the student has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in the area identified below, and requires special education and/or related services.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> written expression <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reading fluency skills <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> basic reading skills</p> <p>Specification of Type of Reading Disability: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> specific word-recognition difficulties (SWRD)</p> <p>The PPT has determined that the student has Specific Learning Disability/Dyslexia.</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |



Antoine is eligible under SLD criteria because:

- He has very low achievement in basic reading skills and spelling.
- Reading comprehension also very low but his difficulties here are clearly due to word reading, not language comprehension; reading fluency could not even be tested because of his inability to read words.
- He is making inadequate progress in SRBI AND has a PSW.
- However, he would meet Criterion B (Section II. of the MER) for SLD eligibility just based on the PSW alone, even if progress in SRBI was deemed adequate; and vice versa (i.e., just based on limited progress in SRBI).
- His difficulties are not primarily due to exclusionary factors such as another disability, cultural factors, lack of instruction, etc.
- Antoine's profile is one of SWRD; he has severe SLD/Dyslexia.



More about Antoine's PSW

- Cognitive PSW (Verbal Comprehension = 120, Processing Speed = 70, Working Memory = 76) supports findings in reading, showing that oral comprehension is a strength for Antoine but WM and PS are weaknesses (consistent, e.g., with CTOPP composites).
- However, the academic/linguistic PSW is much more helpful for educational planning.
- Academic/linguistic PSW is much more informative for an identification of SLD/Dyslexia.
- Academic/linguistic PSW is much more informative about areas that need to be addressed in special education: phonemic awareness, basic reading skills, spelling.
- Academic/linguistic PSW clarifies that his low reading comprehension score is not due to comprehension but to word reading.
- Academic/linguistic PSW also provides insights about strengths that can be tapped in instruction and in determining appropriate accommodations (e.g., oral presentation of content).

Note that assessment and analysis of struggling students' academic/linguistic skills is helpful for ALL students, whether or not they have a PSW.



Summary

- The revised MER, which summarizes Federal and State evaluation components and eligibility criteria requirements, includes an alternative for Criterion B (Section II. of the MER): the student makes insufficient progress, even with SRBI, OR exhibits a PSW.
- A PSW is not required for a student to be identified as SLD or SLD/Dyslexia.
- Whether or not a student exhibits a PSW, all other eligibility criteria must be met, including low achievement.
- A PSW should not be primarily due to inadequate instruction.
- PSW methods focused on academic/linguistic performance can be helpful in educational planning and are relevant to understanding a student's needs.
- Eligibility decisions are based on an individualized, comprehensive evaluation that considers an array of student data, not rote application of a formula.





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