

**Technical Assistant Bulletin (revised July 2017)**

**Specific Learning Disability; Including Dyslexia; Dysgraphia; Dyscalculia**

**September 2019**

**Overall Emphasis and Purpose:**

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is one of the 13 categories of disability recognized by the IDEA. SLD is the only disability category for which the IDEA establishes special evaluation procedures, in addition to the general procedures that are used for all students with disabilities. The definition of a SLD is “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 do mathematical calculations.” During the 2017 legislative session, a bill was passed authorizing schools to identify dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia, as subcategories under the overarching SLD classification.

**What this means for you as a Special Educator/Service Provider:**

- The identification of a SLD requires that the student exhibit a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State approved grade level standards, or intellectual development, as a result of a comprehensive evaluation.
- A student identified with a specific learning disability, with or without dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia, must also exhibit educational impact and require specialized instruction.
- Identification of a student as having dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia does not automatically mean that the student has an SLD pursuant to the IDEA.
- Identification of a student with dyslexia is appropriate only when a student has difficulty with phonological processing or decoding and/or encoding (which may affect reading fluency and comprehension) and also exhibits a processing deficit in some area. However, a student may be identified with a SLD if the criteria is met without demonstrating a processing deficit.
- Identification of a student as having dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia does not guarantee any specific items, methodology, services, or placement be included on an IEP.
- A student with dyscalculia may exhibit difficulty with calculation, multi-step equations and word problems.
- A student with dysgraphia may have physical and/or language-based challenges with the written process, impacting stamina, legibility spelling and/or organization.
- If the student does not require specialized instruction, indicating ineligibility for an IEP, teams should consider whether other supports are appropriate (AIS, StIP, 504).

**What the Special Educator/Service Provider needs to do if not already doing:**

- Ensure that school staff are supported in implementing research and/or evidence-based intervention for any student who is struggling. Progress monitoring is a key component of determining the effectiveness of the intervention prior to considering the possibility of a disability under the IDEA.
- The IEP team must consider exclusionary factors, such as a lack of appropriate education, intellectual disability, visual, hearing, or motor impairment, emotional disability, cultural or environmental factors, or limited English proficiency, when determining the presence of a SLD.
- Conduct an observation of the student after the referral has taken place, in the content area where the difficulty can be observed.
- When conducting a comprehensive evaluation with a full battery of assessments, gather additional data including supplemental assessments, informal measures, county-, school- and/or classroom-performance data, work samples, and other information for the IEP team to consider when making the decision that a student has a SLD.
- If, after completing a comprehensive evaluation, the data does not reflect the presence of dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia, the student may still be eligible as having a SLD. The “Other” section on the IEP should be checked.
- Consider whether the student meets the eligibility for any one of the sub-categories for SLD: dyslexia; dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, and document it on the IEP.
- Use specificity in identifying dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia, to identify individualized strategies and supports on the student’s IEP.
- Contact the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) assigned to your school if assistance is needed in determining the appropriate intervention and/or instructional recommendations if the student has been identified as having dyslexia.

## Definitions

**Specific Learning Disorder:** 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 do mathematical calculations, consistent with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) criteria. Dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia are recognized as conditions that may underlie a student's specific learning disability, provided that all criteria are met under IDEA.

**Dyslexia:** According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

**Dysgraphia:** A neurologically based specific learning disability, dysgraphia can present as difficulties with spelling, poor handwriting, and trouble putting thoughts on paper. It can be a language based and/or non-language based disorder. When it is language based, a student may have difficulty converting the sounds of language into written form, or knowing which alternate spelling to use for each sound. When it is non-language based, a student may have difficulty performing the controlled fine motor skills required to write. Students with dysgraphia may speak more easily and fluently than they write.

**Dyscalculia:** A neurologically based specific learning disability that is characterized by unusual difficulty solving arithmetic problems and grasping math concepts. The most common problem is with "number sense". This is an intuitive understanding of how numbers work and how to compare and estimate quantities. Students may know *what* to do in math class, but not understand *why* they are doing it because the logic behind the calculation is missing.

### Instructional Implications:

- Maryland does not require a universal screener for dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia.
- Dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia CAN be referenced on the eligibility page of the IEP.
- The PLAAFP must include data-based, student specific information for planning specially designed instruction. It may be helpful to include information about the specific condition underlying the student's disability for the purpose of instructional planning and IEP implementation.

### Specially Designed Instruction and Strategies:

- Characteristics of students with dyslexia may include struggles with phonemic awareness, phonological processing, alphabetic principle, decoding, and/or spelling making it difficult to read fluently or quickly enough to comprehend.
- A student with dyslexia may require structured literacy instruction, in addition to specially designed instruction, that includes phonology, sound-symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Instruction must be explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic. Accommodations for accessing grade-leveled texts and materials of instruction may also be necessary.

### Specially Designed Instruction and Strategies:

- Characteristics of students with dysgraphia may include struggles with the physical and/or language-based components of writing. They may present with difficulty spelling, poor handwriting, trouble putting thoughts on paper, poor organization of writing, and/or poor endurance for handwriting.
- A student with dysgraphia may require accommodations such as typing or speech-to-text input, shortening responses, or allowing alternative methods of output. Handwriting instruction should be explicit and target foundational skills of letter formation, automaticity, and fluency. Multisensory techniques and modeling will be beneficial.

### Specially Designed Instruction and Strategies:

- Characteristics of students with dyscalculia may include struggles with recalling basic math facts, solving multi-step problems, solving word problems, understanding information on graphs or charts, understanding words related to math, and identifying math symbols.
- A student with dyscalculia may require intervention that is less reliant on language and auditory memory. This may include chunking information, focus on key elements of the questions, and building strong connections between prior and new knowledge.

