

E.3 Learning Disabilities

Definition

In May 2002, the Ministry of Education and Child Care adopted the following definition of learning disabilities, adapted from the definition developed by the Canadian Learning Disabilities Association (January 2002).

Learning disabilities refers to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual disabilities. Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory and attention, and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making).

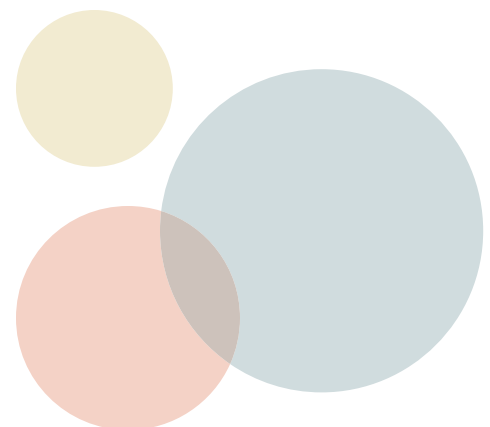
Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- Oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (e.g., decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- Written language (e.g., spelling and written expression)
- Mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving)

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking.

Learning disabilities are life-long. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs. Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement or achievement that is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurological factors or injury that alters brain function in a manner that affects one or more processes related to learning. These disorders are not due primarily to hearing and/or vision problems, social-economic factors, cultural or linguistic differences, lack of motivation, inadequate or insufficient instruction, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may co-exist with other disorders such as attentional, behavioural or emotional disorders, sensory impairments, or other medical conditions.



Identification and Assessment

Schools and school boards are responsible for assessing students for the purpose of planning instruction and support services and for identifying students with disabilities or diverse abilities.

Students with learning disabilities may not demonstrate obvious disabilities or diverse abilities before entering the school system. Due to their ability to perform well in some areas, academic difficulties may be misunderstood and viewed as lack of motivation until the learning disabilities are identified.

Identifying learning disabilities as early as possible can facilitate early intervention and may minimize ongoing learning difficulties. Due to the variations among learning disabilities, students demonstrate a range of patterns of difficulties and strengths. As a result, learning disabilities may be identified at a various stages of the student's school life.

Identifying learning disabilities requires multiple sources of both formal and informal assessment information. Ability, academic achievement and cognitive processes should be addressed through systematic documentation of the student's classroom performance and response to varying instructional approaches as well as through standardized measurement.

A process of systematic assessment and documentation identifies students with learning disabilities based on their:

1. persistent difficulty learning and
2. average or above average cognitive ability and
3. weaknesses in cognitive processing.

1. Persistent difficulty learning

The student's opportunity to learn is a primary consideration in identifying learning disabilities. Persistent difficulty refers to restricted progress that cannot be explained by inadequate attendance, cultural or linguistic differences, sensory deficits, social emotional factors, health issues and/or poor/insufficient instruction. Current research describes persistent academic difficulties as inadequate response to instruction or intervention.

Learning disabilities may be suspected when a student has had appropriate opportunities to learn but has not demonstrated expected progress toward learning outcomes related to:

- oral language development (listening, speaking, understanding)
- acquisition of pre-academic skills such as recognition of letters and numbers in the early primary years;
- acquisition of reading, written language, and/or numeracy
- retention, organization, understanding or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information (e.g. demonstrating organizational skills, using symbols, understanding visual aids, applying/generalizing learning).

Evidence of persistent learning difficulties may include curriculum-based assessment, standardized achievement tests and/or portfolios of student work. Assessment data should document systematic attempts to address the student's difficulty through instructional adaptations as well as the extent of the student's ongoing difficulties in spite of the variations in instructional approaches.

2. Average or above average cognitive ability

The usual way to assess cognitive ability is to use norm-referenced tests of cognitive abilities, commonly known as Level C Assessment.

Another way to estimate cognitive ability is to use a battery of norm-referenced measures, commonly known as Level B Assessment, to assess academic skills that depend upon the student's ability to reason. Such measures might be focused on mathematical problem-solving, reading comprehension, written expression and listening comprehension. Not all tests that focus on these skills can be assumed to yield a valid estimate of ability. If academic measures are used to estimate ability, school boards should ensure that the measures employed are appropriate for this purpose. The use of more than one measure is important.

Students with average or above potential will score at or above one standard deviation below the mean for their age on standardized tests.

3. Weaknesses in cognitive processing

Students with learning disabilities have impairments to processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. Their learning difficulties may arise from deficits in various aspects of

- attention
- language, phonological and/or visual-spatial processing,
- processing speed,
- memory, and/or
- executive functions (e.g., planning and decision-making).

Specific weaknesses may be suggested by informal measures of classroom performance and then be confirmed through norm-referenced assessment (Level C).

Identifying a student's processing difficulties provides an explanation for academic difficulties and facilitates the implementation of appropriate instructional approaches that may enable the student to demonstrate improved progress.

Social-emotional status should also be considered when investigating possible learning disabilities.

- Students with learning disabilities may demonstrate social problems as the result of their deficits in perceiving or processing visual clues and/or some aspects of language. These may appear as difficulties with social perception, social interaction and perspective taking.
- Students may develop emotional difficulties, with or without social problems as the result of frustration and self esteem issues developing secondary to their learning disabilities.
- Some students with average ability who do not have learning disabilities may demonstrate persistent difficulty learning due to stress associated with neglect, abuse, family upheaval, trauma, or other social problems.

Specialized assessment is required for formal diagnosis of learning disabilities. Level B and Level C assessments must be conducted by appropriately qualified professionals who can interpret results considering the student's opportunities for learning, learning patterns, approach to tasks and response to instruction.

In some cases, learning disabilities may be identified in clinical settings. The assessment may be multidisciplinary, supplementing psycho-educational assessment with information from a speech-language pathologist, an occupational therapist or other medical personnel.

Assessment of a student to identify a learning disability should integrate information from a number of sources including the family, classroom teacher, counsellors (if involved), learning assistance or support records, formal student records, and any relevant medical reports (such as OT, PT, SLP), in addition to current test results.

The assessment should integrate information related to a number of factors:

- developmental and health history as well as current health status
- sensory acuity (i.e. hearing and vision), cultural and linguistic considerations and any potentially relevant socio-economic factors (including transience)
- history of attendance and academic performance
- current pre-academic or academic skills
- overall intellectual functioning
- specific cognitive processes, including strengths and weaknesses and their implications for learning
- current social-emotional status

All assessment information should contribute to the process of planning and monitoring the student's education program.

Planning and Implementation

Learning disabilities vary considerably in their severity and impact on learning. Students with severe learning disabilities will generally require intensive intervention. Students whose learning disabilities have not been identified and addressed early frequently exhibit secondary emotional and behavioural difficulties. Students may be gifted and have a learning disability. Students with learning disabilities require an educational plan that builds on their strengths while remediating and compensating for their disabilities. Research suggests three main approaches for supporting students with learning disabilities:

- intense direct instruction;
- instruction in learning and compensatory strategies; and
- adaptation of instructional practices and assessment strategies.

This instruction may take place in regular classrooms, but this does not preclude the use of different learning environments such as small group instruction in a resource room, self-contained classes or other specialized settings. The goal of the placement should be to meet the students' educational needs.

Some ways to support students with learning disabilities could include, but are not limited to the following:

- direct remedial, corrective, tutorial or skill-building instruction;
- adapted or supplementary curriculum and materials;
- alternate instructional and/or evaluation strategies, including adjudicated provincial examinations;
- use of equipment, including computer and audiovisual technology;
- social skills training;
- instruction and practice of self advocacy skills; and
- learning strategies instruction.

Evaluation and Reporting

Most students with a Learning Disability achieve the Learning Standards for their subjects or course with adaptations. As outlined in the Inclusive Education section of the [K-12 Student Reporting Policy](#), regular reporting procedures are used to communicate student learning for students who used adaptations and assessment supports to access and show their learning. They will also receive regular communications of student learning in the same way as their peers in any other program and at the same time as the school and/or districts' regular reporting periods.

Personnel

Teachers

With sufficient training and experience, classroom teachers will be able to meet the needs of most students with learning disabilities and provide an education program in which they can be successful, provided that specialized support is available when needed. In-service training opportunities and a collaborative team approach are recommended to support and encourage the development of the necessary skills and understandings which the classroom teacher may require.

Teachers with specialist responsibilities for supporting students with learning disabilities should fulfill the qualifications described for a learning assistance teacher (see Section D.1 Learning Assistance Services).

In addition, their qualifications should include advanced coursework in:

- characteristics and needs of students with learning disabilities; and
- specialized instructional and remedial strategies, technologies, materials and curricular adaptations.

As well, they should have training and demonstrated skills in:

- social skills development and behaviour management;
- co-operative planning and collaborative consultation; and
- assessment, classroom management and motivation.

Education assistants

Education assistants working with students with learning disabilities should have sufficient skills and training for the duties they are assigned, including:

- an understanding of learning disabilities;
- collaborative and communication skills;
- strategies for motivating students; and
- behaviour management skills.

It should be noted that education assistants work under the direction of a teacher and the general supervision of a teacher or school principal. In-service training should include opportunities to further develop skills in these and related areas.

Resources

Students who are print-disabled because of a learning disability may be eligible to receive alternative format material from the Provincial Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired- [Accessible Resource Centre - British Columbia](#). (see Appendices for PRCVI Information).