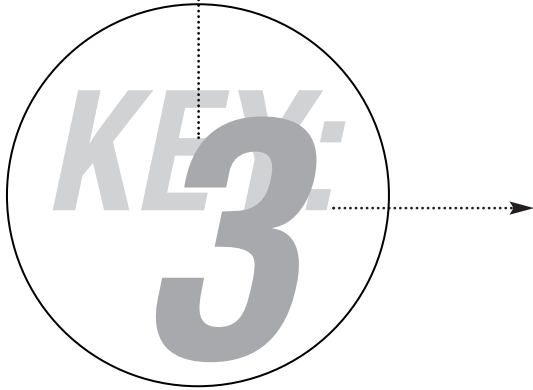


Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities



Identification and Assessment

It is important to have systems in place from kindergarten through senior high school to ensure students with learning disabilities are identified and appropriate educational supports are put in place. The optimal approach is to provide assistance as early as possible. Early identification and intervention for young children with learning disabilities leads to better school adjustment and performance. However, learning disabilities are lifelong and their negative impact may increase and become more evident as the demands of the school environment change. In addition, students may be able to mask their difficulties by using their strengths or by misbehaving to avoid learning challenges. Systems for identification and assessment are needed throughout the school years.

A collaborative team, such as a Student Support Team Model described on page 6 and a problem-solving approach to program planning, provide opportunities for the early and ongoing detection of learning problems and the identification of learning disabilities. Parents and/or classroom teachers need to be aware of signs that a child is encountering difficulties. (For early indicators of learning difficulties, see Appendix 4, pages 78–79.)

There are many reasons for student difficulties, one of which may be learning disabilities. A team approach maximizes the understanding of a student's difficulties. Specialized assessment is required for formal diagnosis of a learning disability.

Barriers to Identification

Parents and school personnel often express frustration about the barriers that interfere with the identification of learning disabilities. Some of these barriers are listed below.

- ▶ **The complex nature of learning disabilities**
 - Learning disabilities are an invisible handicap and are often misunderstood.
 - Students with learning disabilities encounter unexpected difficulties. They do many things well and may be labelled lazy or unmotivated when they encounter difficulties.
 - Learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group of disorders; i.e., there are many patterns of difficulties and strengths, and a range of severity of difficulties.
 - Teachers may not have a systematic way to identify students who are not progressing well or to initiate steps to determine a student's needs.

- ▶ **Issues in identification**
 - There is no single test to identify or diagnose a learning disability and the definition of a learning disability may be operationalized in different ways. Different school jurisdictions and different professionals may use differing criteria for diagnosing a learning disability.
 - Identification procedures for significant underachievement; e.g., two years below grade level, are not sensitive to the detection of learning problems in young children.
 - Readiness screening of young children for future learning problems is expensive, time-consuming and frequently inaccurate.

- ▶ **Narrow view of assessment**
 - Assessment is often mistakenly equated with testing to label students rather than being viewed as a team process that contributes to program planning.
 - Students may be put on a wait list for formal diagnostic assessment before programming or interventions are initiated.

- ▶ **Philosophical differences**
 - There may be a reluctance to label children, particularly young children.
 - Teachers differ in their practice with regard to when and why they refer students for further assessment.

Facilitating Detection and Identification

The following suggestions will contribute to effective processes for detecting and identifying learning disabilities.

- ▶ **Set up a Student Support Team to respond to teachers' concerns about students.**
 - The team could promote professional development to increase teachers' awareness of indicators across the school years. (For more on indicators of trouble, see Appendix 4, pages 78–79.) Remember, there may be many reasons for student difficulties and they need to be explored carefully.
 - The team could develop classroom assessment practices to identify when students are not making progress toward curriculum expectations.
 - The team could develop efficient pre-referral steps that draw on expertise at the school level to assist with problem solving, and provide suggestions for understanding and addressing the needs of students.
 - The team could encourage the involvement of parents early in the planning process. If parents have meaningful involvement, they will know action is being taken.

- The team could promote collaboration to maximize flexibility in organizing for instruction so that additional assistance is provided to students encountering difficulties.
 - The team could implement preliminary interventions, monitor their success and hold follow-up meetings to review students' progress.
 - The team could arrange for the involvement of professionals with expertise in the problem-solving process before obtaining referrals for specialized assessment. For example, a psychologist or speech-language pathologist could participate in brainstorming preliminary intervention strategies. Access to such professionals varies and Student Support Teams are organized flexibly.
 - The team could arrange for appropriate referrals to other professionals for further specialized assessment and possible diagnosis of a learning disability.
- ▶ **Organize an assessment process that encompasses multiple sources of information and a team approach.**
- No single method of assessment will provide educators with “the answer.” However, strong support exists for an assessment approach that encompasses multiple sources of formal and informal assessment information.
 - A team approach is most effective. The diagnosis of a learning disability is made by a qualified professional on the basis of multiple sources of information. The information from the classroom (particularly with regard to the student's response to various interventions), the parents' input, the student's input, and data from various methods of informal, formal and specialized assessment contribute to the identification of a learning disability. These multiple sources of assessment information guide program planning for the student.
- ▶ **Organize a team approach to the development, implementation and monitoring of individualized program plans (IPPs).**
(See Section on IPPs, pages 29–33.)

Outcomes

The outcomes below describe potential results from implementing the strategies, activities and practices in this section.

- Students with learning disabilities receive the services and supports they need when they encounter difficulties.
- Teachers are aware of the characteristics of students with learning disabilities.
- Students are referred, when appropriate, for further specialized assessment.
- Parents have input into the identification and assessment of their children's needs.
- Procedures are in place for the early, ongoing identification of learning disabilities.
- Multiple sources of assessment information are used in the identification and diagnosis of learning disabilities.
- A team approach is used in the identification and diagnosis of learning disabilities.

Connections to Other Alberta Learning Resources

See Identification and Program Planning, pages LD.47–LD.72 in *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 6 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.

