A Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Model for SLD Eligibility: School Psychologist Perceptions and Comparison of Eligibility Rates under the Discrepancy vs. PSW Model

Natasha D. Limones, PhD; Lee A. Hoffman, MaEd; Kieu T. Tang, EdS
1San Francisco Unified School District, 2Sweetwater Union High School District

Introduction

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, local education agencies (LEAs) were no longer required to use the ability-achievement discrepancy model to assess eligibility for specific learning disabilities (SLD). Alternate models for SLD eligibility have been proposed, including the Response to Intervention (RTI) model (e.g., Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) and the Pattern of Strengths and Weakness (PSW) model (e.g., Flanagan, Fiorello, & Ortiz, 2010; Hale et al., 2010). The PSW model has been increasingly promoted by researchers and has gained the support of the California Association of School Psychologists (Christo & Jones, 2014), but there is no known research to date evaluating the implementation of PSW within a specific LEA.

This poster shares data collected from psychologists at San Francisco Unified School District, a large urban school district. The objectives of this study were twofold. First, the study examined school psychologists’ perceptions throughout the 2015-2016 school year regarding their competency in implementing the PSW model, the utility of PSW versus the discrepancy model for SLD assessments, and their support of switching from the discrepancy to the PSW model. Second, the study compared eligibility rates for all SLD initial assessments under the discrepancy model during the 2014-2015 school year versus under the PSW model during the 2015-2016 school year.

Measures and Procedures

Preparation for the roll-out of the PSW model at SFUSD began during the 2014-2015 school year with training on Cattell-Horn- Carroll (CHC) theory (Newton & McGrew, 2010) and the PSW framework, holding focus groups, and piloting the model. During Summer 2015 a report template and internal procedural manual were created. The model was fully rolled out during the 2015-2016 school year, and several training sessions were held throughout the year.

All credentialed school psychologists and school psychology interns at San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) during the 2015-2016 school year (N = 60) participated in the survey portion of the study. Psychologist experience was the field included 10% interns, 35% 0-5 years, 32% 6-10 years, 11% 11-15 years, and 12% 16 or more years.

Participants completed an eight-item survey that asked about their perceptions regarding various aspects of the PSW model. The survey was administered immediately prior to and after training before the first day of academic instruction and was also administered intermittently throughout the 2015-2016 school year at department meetings.

In addition, eligibility rates for initial SLD psychoeducational evaluations were calculated for the 2014-2015 school year (under the discrepancy model; N = 572) and for the 2015-2016 school year (under the PSW model; N = 650).

Results

Psychologists’ confidence regarding implementation of the PSW model, interpretation of assessment results, and SLD eligibility determination increased throughout the school year. Psychologists indicating they felt confident they could fully implement the PSW model increased from 13% at the beginning of the school year to 78% at the end of the school year. Psychologists indicating they felt very confident they could interpret assessment results based on CHC theory increased from 20% to 71% from the beginning to the end of the school year, and psychologists indicating they felt very confident they could determine SLD eligibility under the PSW model increased from 17% to 76% from the beginning to the end of the school year.

Psychologists indicating that the PSW model was significantly more useful than the discrepancy model for identifying student strengths and weaknesses, relating assessment results to classroom performance, and making recommendations for interventions increased from 35-41% at the beginning of the school year to 73-76% at the end of the school year. In addition, psychologists indicating they were fully in favor of switching from the discrepancy model to the PSW model increased from 65% at the beginning of the school year to 88% at the end of the school year.

A chi-squared test of independence indicated no significant difference between eligibility rates for initial SLD evaluations under each model (χ² = 0.976, p = 0.323).

Discussion

This study was the first known study to share PSW implementation data from a specific LEA. Throughout the year-long implementation of PSW at SFUSD, psychologists felt increasingly confident that they could implement the model, interpret results, and determine SLD eligibility. Psychologist buy-in regarding changing eligibility models also increased, such that by the end of the school year almost 90% of psychologists were fully in favor of the switch to the PSW model. There are several factors that likely promoted psychologists’ confidence and buy-in regarding PSW. These include involving several psychologists during preparation for implementation, having an internal manual with clear procedures, tutorials, and frequently asked questions, and providing ongoing training and consultation. With regards to eligibility rates, there was no statistical difference in the percent of students who qualified for SLD under the discrepancy versus the PSW model.

It should be noted that the PSW implementation procedures used at SFUSD are not standardized, so it is unknown whether implementing another version of the PSW model would yield similar results and which elements of the roll-out process are most useful for implementation. However, this study suggests that school psychologists trained in the PSW model have a favorable view of this model and can develop the necessary skills to implement the model within a relatively short time frame. Additionally, students who meet criteria for SLD under the discrepancy model are likely to still meet criteria under the PSW model without resulting in a significant increase in eligibility rates.

Contact

Natasha D. Limones, PhD
San Francisco Unified School District
ndlimeson@gmail.com

References


Table 1. Comparison of SLD eligibility rates under the discrepancy vs. PSW Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLD Category</th>
<th>Discrepancy Model (N, %)</th>
<th>PSW Model (N, %)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualified under SLD</td>
<td>289 (50.5%)</td>
<td>310 (47.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not qualify under SLD</td>
<td>283 (49.5%)</td>
<td>340 (52.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not qualify under any other criteria</td>
<td>107 (18.7%)</td>
<td>90 (29.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SLD Initials</td>
<td>572 (100%)</td>
<td>650 (100%)</td>
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Figure 1. Summary of psychologists’ confidence regarding the PSW model.

Figure 2. Psychologists’ perceived utility of the PSW model vs. the discrepancy model.

Figure 3. Percent of psychologists being fully in favor of switching to the PSW model.