

**Lauren Clouser [00:00:06]:**

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here today with Dr. Monica McHale Small, LDA's Director of Education. Monica is also an adjunct associate professor at the School of Psychology at Temple University, a retired school psychologist and school district administrator, and also a member of the writing group of LDA's SLD Principles and Standards. So Monica, thanks so much for being on today to talk about the standards.

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:00:46]:**

Well, thank you for having me, Lauren.

**Lauren Clouser [00:00:49]:**

So before we get too far in, what are LDA's specific learning disabilities principles and standards?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:00:56]:**

Well the principles and standards are really, the overview is a set of guidelines that LDA is endorsing for the assessment, evaluation, and identification of students who have or are suspected to have a specific learning disability. So our hope is that by outlining the history of SLD evaluation and identification and summarizing the current research on best practices as far as what we know and understand about specific learning disabilities and how they manifest, and also what we know about best practices in evaluation and assessment. We have developed a framework that professionals who are involved with the evaluation and identification and diagnosis of specific learning disabilities can use to inform their practice in order to better serve students.

**Lauren Clouser [00:02:08]:**

So why did LDA create these standards? What need did we see that needed to be filled?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:02:15]:**

So at LDA we have a professional advisory board, and our board is made up of a number of individuals who are researchers, who are professionals in the field or fields related to specific learning disabilities. And they come from a variety of different backgrounds. And this has been a subject that our professional advisory board has been discussing for quite some time, either as individuals or as the group as a whole. And it was actually one of our PAB members, who was at the time, I believe, he was living in Egypt, Gad Elbeheri, was talking about how, internationally, we really do need some guidelines and standards because people are looking to the United States around the globe and wanting to make sure that their practices are aligned with best practice. So we started to have that conversation with others, and we realized that that need is not just an international need, but it really is a need right here in the United States. And, when we started talking about this, a small group of our professional advisory board, one of the things

that really kind of rose to the top and became a real priority for the people who ended up becoming the working group, was real dissatisfaction with what they see in practices around assessment and evaluation, that we were seeing far too often. An evaluation is just simply focused on: does this kid show that they meet the criteria for eligibility for services or not? And not really trying to get at: who is this child as a learner? What are their strengths? What are their needs? What has already been done as far as instruction and intervention for this child, and what are some meaningful recommendations we can make going forward to improve outcomes for the child.

The members of our writing group really believe that, you know, this is not a matter of does the child qualify for services under the IDEA or section 504. But when a child is referred for an evaluation, whether it's by a teacher or a parent or another school team member, somebody is concerned about that child's progress. And, therefore, the evaluation has to really be focused on gathering important data that's relevant to instruction. As you know, Lauren, LDA has been around for over 60 years now. We've been in this conversation and supporting individuals with learning disabilities and their families since 1963. And who better to have the expertise and the information to write these standards than us? So we decided we're going to do it, and we did. And it took us a while, but we published these standards back in August of 2023.

**Lauren Clouser [00:05:45]:**

Absolutely. So it sounds like something that's a lot more comprehensive, and that's gonna help a student a lot more later down the line as well. Something that's a lot more tailored to them.

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:05:54]:**

That's our goal.

**Lauren Clouser [00:05:56]:**

So could you touch on why early and accurate identification for learning disabilities is so important?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:06:02]:**

Yeah. I can. So there's a lot of research that's out there. Now in full disclosure, most of the research on learning disabilities and effective intervention is focused on children with dyslexia and other reading disabilities. We know a whole lot more about SLDs in reading than we do about SLDs in written language and in mathematics. But, you know, one of the things we do at LDA is advocate for increased research. But from the research around reading and acquisition of reading skills for students with and without disabilities, the data is really pretty substantial that the earlier we identify risk and the earlier that we intervene, the better the outcomes for the child long term. And there is a study at the National Center For Improving Literacy that actually references a study by Dr. Maureen Lovett.

And she found that outcomes were almost twice as good for children with reading difficulties and potential reading disabilities when the interventions are delivered in 1st and 2nd grade versus

3rd grade. And then other researchers like Nadine Gabb, she's worked very hard with her team to identify risk factors for children as young as preschool age and to promote different types of interventions that can be put in place as early as preschool so that children have better long term academic outcomes. And I think that speaks to another point of our standards. Our goal in developing these standards again is to really increase the best practices that are in place to evaluate and assess students who are struggling who may be at risk or have learning disabilities. And it's not focused on slapping a label or determining eligibility. It's really focused on understanding the child and their individual needs. So, when we talk about early intervention and screening early on, we are not necessarily promoting that we evaluate children and give them a diagnosis or classification of having a specific learning disability when they're 3.

Rather, our standards, no matter what the age of the child, are really focused on what is this child's individual needs, what are interventions and instructional practices that can be put in place for this child to improve outcomes. We know that if we address children who have risk very early on, that we can hopefully sometimes eliminate the need to actually develop an IEP and to classify them. And that's an important point that I wanna stress as somebody who was a former public school psychologist and administrator and also a strong advocate for individuals with learning disabilities. What I advocate for, and our writing team is all very united in our approach to this, is that we get the right instruction and intervention to the children as quickly as possible. And that doesn't necessarily mean that they need to be in special education or have a diagnosis. We want assessment and evaluation to be looking at what's best for that child. And from being in public schools, I know that the capacity of schools to deliver services to children varies greatly. And there is a whole lot that we can do in the regular education environment in both a preschool setting and an early elementary setting to meet the needs of kids who have or who are at risk for developing learning disabilities, and therefore, you know, kind of lessening the long term impact and need for specially designed instruction.

**Lauren Clouser [00:10:33]:**

So right now, is it true that there's no set evaluation standards for learning disabilities across the states and even internationally as well?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:10:43]:**

That is correct. So in the United States, most of the time when we're talking about specific learning disabilities, we are thinking about eligibility under IDEA and that definition that we have in IDEA of what a specific learning disability is. There's also the DSM V-TR, which is a diagnostic manual that is used by people like licensed psychiatrists and psychologists who may also be involved in diagnosing what's called in the DSM a specific learning disorder. And both the criteria and the focus of the IDEA and the DSM are different. Right? So there's that difference already. And then within the IDEA, the definition that all states are supposed to be using on what is a learning disability is uniform because that is in the IDEA. But what is not uniform is the method of evaluation and identification that states are able to use. There are 3 methods that can be used when evaluating students for eligibility under the IDEA criteria of SLD.

There's an ability achievement discrepancy. There is response to intervention. And then there's a third evidence-based or alternative manner, which has come to be known as patterns of strengths and weakness. All of this is spelled out and gone into great detail in our paper. So if you need more explanation, I would suggest you read even just that part. States can choose which of those procedures or methods or a combination of those methods they can use. And what has resulted is that from state to state and then even sometimes from school district to school district or school to school, the way even if a state has selected 1 or a combination of methods, the way that those methods are operationalized within school districts and schools can vary as well. So back a few years ago, I forget the exact year, it may have been 2019, but the Congressional Government and Accountability Office did look into this issue of varying criteria from state to state and find that indeed, children can move from 1 district to another district, one state to another state, and either qualify or no longer qualify as a student with a specific learning disability. So the standards that we have developed, we are hoping, we understand that policy doesn't change right away.

But our hope is that by influencing best practice among individual professionals who are involved with the evaluation of specific learning disabilities, school psychologists, diagnosticians, reading specialists, speech and language pathologists, if we can get these standards out into the profession and influence best practice, that can be a way that we begin to standardize what an evaluation looks like. Yes criteria and eligibility, not criteria per se, but eligibility evaluation methods change from state to state, but there's a lot in our standards that can absolutely be applied no matter what evaluation method a state is using.

**Lauren Clouser [00:14:53]:**

Definitely. Well, we definitely encourage everybody to read the standards on our website. We'll include a link in the bio. There's also a great webinar on this as well. But, Monica, would you also be able to give us just a bit of what went into creating the standards? I know that was a long process. What were some of the main points that everybody considered and really wanted to focus on?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:15:15]:**

Yeah. So the people who are involved in writing our standards, I'll just tell you who those folks are. Dr. David Allsopp is a professor of special education at the University of South Florida. His colleague, Dr. Sarah Van Ingen Lauer is a teacher, educator, and math educator also at the University of South Florida. There's Dr. Gad Elbeheri that I mentioned who was in Egypt when we started our work and is now living in Kuwait. He has taught at various universities, and he works directly in a clinic setting with students with specific learning disabilities.

We have Elsa Cardenas-Hagan, who is an expert on dyslexia and literacy, but even more importantly on multi language learners and how to best meet the needs of multi language learners who also are at risk for or who have specific learning disabilities, especially dyslexia. Dr. Kristina Scott Quinlan, who is a professor of special education in Massachusetts, and

myself. I think that's our whole writing team. I don't think I've left anyone out. But we originally...oh, I did leave somebody very important now. Dr. Eric Tridas, who is a developmental pediatrician, now retired, but who has been very involved in the field of dyslexia and the work of the International Dyslexia Association, as well as LDA.

Early on, the conversations were between Dr. Eric Tridas and Dr. Elbeheri and myself. And then we broadened the inclusion as we started to think about what really needed to be addressed in these standards. We thought we were going to bang this out in like 6 months. It ended up really pushing 2 years of work where in the last year we met consistently on a weekly basis and then worked on and researched these standards on our own and then came back each week and tweaked the paper. And once we had a final draft, we vetted it with our professional advisory board, other outside professionals, made some more tweaks, and finally had that out there. What went into it is that what we realized, and we realized this the more we worked together, is that an evaluation of a suspected learning disability really has to be multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary in nature. And, you know, our backgrounds were different.

Dr. Cardenas Hagen is a speech and language pathologist. We had special educators, regular educators, developmental pediatricians, myself, who's a school psychologist. Then we had it vetted by people who are also in the field of cognitive neuroscience and other types of professions related to SLD. And we realized that we had a lot to learn from one another, and that what we could learn from one another and what we brought to the table as far as our perspective and understanding on SLD was really important to best meet the needs of the child. Human beings are multifaceted. There's a whole lot to us. And if you take a time to look at our standards, you will see that we are really advocating for, yes, we have to understand the academic functioning and difficulties that a child is having, and children are much bigger than just their academic manifestations. We need to understand their cognitive strengths and areas where they are having some difficulty.

We need to understand their attention and executive functioning skills. We need to understand their language skills and the impact of being a second or third or learn language learner when it comes to English. We need to understand how learning disabilities impact children's emotional functioning. And many times when children aren't identified early, so this goes back to early identification, by the time we start to address their learning disabilities they might be in 3rd or 4th grade. And by this time their self esteem has really suffered. The children judge their worth and how smart they are by looking at how they compare to their peers in the classroom. And when other kids are learning how to read or write or do math very quickly and they are not, they start to believe that they are less than that they are not as smart, and it can really take a toll, emotionally and socially.

So that is another big piece of the focus of our standards to really look at all of those things. And the other thing, a big point that we all decided was very important and was captured in the principles that go along with the standards, is that evaluation is not once and done. If we're really going to meet the needs of children with SLD, this evaluative process has to be ongoing

and at how they're making progress or not making progress and making changes. We need to be looking again at that whole child to see if their social emotional functioning is still intact? Are there things that we need to add to the planning for this child to make sure that we're addressing all their needs? And we have to understand that the question of eligibility services that are available through the regular education program, a child may not have eligibility early on, but that doesn't mean that that's the end of the discussion. We have to really understand that the child functions in a context. And as that context changes, and the children's needs change, we have to revisit those decisions about eligibility ongoing to make sure the child is getting everything that they need.

**Lauren Clouser [00:21:59]:**

Absolutely. I think those are all really great points. So to wrap up, I know that getting the word out about these standards has been a major part of eventually getting them hopefully implemented or to inspire some more standardized evaluations. And I know that the standards have been presented at some major conferences and summits. But do you have any ideas of how listeners could help to promote the standards?

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:22:26]:**

Yeah. Absolutely. You know, like I said, it would be nice if we could just take these to Washington DC and deliver them to Valerie Williams at OSERS and everything would change and we would have some consistency. That's not going to happen. So what we really believe can happen is, again, to go back to that idea that we want to influence best practice, is for people to share them. So if you happen to be listening and you're an educational diagnostician or a reading specialist or a school psychologist, share them. Take a look at the standards. Share them with your colleagues.

At LDA, we're always happy to answer questions. Our plan is to continue to curate resources to help practitioners put these standards into practice. So we have some individual work groups right now working around each standard to identify resources that practitioners can use. So keep watching our website because I think as we get more resources out there for practitioners, the standards will become even more useful. But back to how we spread the word, also parents. Parents take a look at it. Look at the evaluation that was done for your child. What are the things that maybe the school or the clinician who evaluated your child seem to be definitely addressing and say, you know, I have some concerns about my child's functioning in this area or this area.

How can we make sure that this is addressed? Because I'm not seeing it here in the evaluation. That's another way. You can always share the standards with your school district folks. And, again, asking questions. If you have a group of people who are interested in these standards and learning more, reach out to LDA. We are more than happy to jump on a Zoom and answer questions, not just me, but other members of our writing team as well. So, those are the things that come to mind right now. But if you have suggestions for how we might do that, I know one person in Pennsylvania reached out to me and suggested that I reach out to our local right to education task force where she and I both live and see if I can maybe present the standards to

the task force. So that's another way we could get them out.

So if you have ideas on how we should be doing that, please share them with us, because that's our goal is to get these shared widely and to really start to shape best practices when it comes to students with learning disabilities.

**Lauren Clouser [00:25:27]:**

Definitely. Well, and we definitely recommend everybody read the standards, check out the resources on our website connected with them, and the webinar as well. We'll include a link in our show notes for that. Monica, thank you so much for being on and for explaining the standards and why they're so important.

**Dr. Monica McHale-Small [00:25:25]:**

Great. Thanks, Lauren.

**Lauren Clouser [00:25:53]:**

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