

June 2002 Planning Conference

“It can’t happen here!” – F. Zappa (1969)

After many false starts and heady expectations, the new standards for providing special education services in Ohio were adopted and ready to be put into effect for the start of the 2002-2003 School Year. Bowie (1971) noted that we must, “Turn and face the strain. Ch-ch-changes” are inevitable and there are some significant, though not earth shattering changes that beg for preparation. So, in June, attendees of our planning conference were briefed on the new standards and then focused upon three major areas of interest (at least to me): the impact of removing a formula score calculation from identifying a Specific Learning Disability and its definition in the new standards; Cognitive Disability (aka Developmental Handicap/Educable Mental Retardation) guidelines moving to adopting a more “Federal” definition complete with a suggested lower IQ cutoff score; and how we continue to advocate best practices in our problem solving mode without nomenclature specific to Intervention Based Multifactorial Evaluations. These three areas potentially represent the greatest change to the role and function of School Psychology in Ohio.

Issues that were identified regarding the removal of a formula score calculation for determining the presence of a Specific Learning Disability included:

- Consistency in identification across districts and even schools;**
- Maintaining objectivity not subjectivity in team decisions;**
- Will there be an influx of newly identified students;**
- In an effort to fill the gap created by the changes in eligibility for Cognitive Disability (Developmental Handicap) services, there may be more pressure to identify lower functioning students so as to provide interventions of some kind through special education programming;**
- Defining “achievement commensurate with” as pertaining to the individual building, district, grade or age;**
- Will group ability estimates be employed with all their inherent problems with reliability and validity; and**
- How do we defensibly document “processing deficit”?**

Responses to SLD identification that were suggested included:

- **Assist with training to help us see we have the skills, knowledge, etc. to use processes at disposal to accomplish eligibility for SLD with the formula;**
- **Regular education staff inservice, especially targeting administrators;**
- **Educating parents with brochures, literature, web site content, parent section on the site; and**
- **Non-Verbal Learning Disability's current literature and documentation of processing disorder.**

Issues that were identified regarding the change in label to Cognitive Disability and the renewed emphasis on a psychometric definition with a lower IQ than was previously used in Ohio included:

- **How do we address objectivity in the face of a national movement away from using IQ tests;**
- **Reevaluations of students with IQ's below 75;**
- **What do we do for students (and their teachers) with IQs in 70's or 80's that are not eligible for any special education intervention;**
- **How do we reconcile "regular education" for more high 70 IQ's, with required state high stakes assessment and federal (Title 1) and state requirements for district level performance;**
- **What adaptive deficit behavior levels constitute eligibility; and**
- **How do we weed out racial/cultural bias in IQ tests? Nonverbal tests are not always without bias. This applies especially to students living in poverty.**

Suggested responses to this "newly defined" category of Cognitive Disability included:

- **Use blue book standards for those already identified;**
- **Have ODE Special Education work with ODE Regular Education to help Regular Education teachers learn strategies for differentiated instruction for students who are not eligible for special education intervention;**
- **No Child Left Behind emphasizes ALL students are Regular Education students first and foremost; and**
- **EARLY, INTENSIVE INTERVENTION**

The final area of concern regards the lack of wording in the standards rather than a specific change in eligibility or deletion of a process. Nowhere do the words, “Intervention Based” appear. Not for evaluations, eligibility, progress monitoring, or any aspect in the new standards. This seems to be at odds with our recent history and national trends emphasizing intervention based problem solving as best practice. So, concern focused upon the following:

- Lack of training and even interest in this process;
- Administrators, staff, parents must change from the status quo;
- How do we “formalize” interventions and measure outcomes with classroom teachers as partners in this process (ditto on “measurement”);
- Lack of “Intervention” police or any form of accountability;
- Monitoring integrity of intervention. When is an intervention good enough;
- Preschool eligibility and delaying service provisions to complete an intervention based evaluation; and
- Focus on defining disability as opposed to underachievement.

To address these issues, the attendees made the following suggestions:

- Advocate Curriculum Based Measurement and the “services” of proving intervention outcomes;
- DIBELS training and use for early reading instruction;
- Training in Regular Education on designing, implementing, collecting data and monitoring progress (DATA, DATA, DATA!!);
- “Specific ambiguity” like those interventions especially designed for preschool;
- In-service teachers by creating a cookbook (spoon fed) of interventions and measurement techniques;
- To ensure that teachers/staff provide intervention services to students, principals need to make these practices part of the teacher evaluation process (accountability). This assumes that training has been provided. Also includes differentiating instruction.

- **Money made available up front for staff development. Intensive general education interventions must be developed and put into use; and**
- **Maybe even start this process in a universal preschool for all toddlers, not differentiated for special education students.**

All told, the conference addressed the issues identified as the most pressing for psychologists, certainly not all the issues pertaining to our role and function. Parental requests for evaluation no longer trigger complete Multifactorial Evaluations. More emphasis on getting regular education teachers to IEP meetings and taking an active role in the decision making process are also included, as are provisions for doing away with high stakes testing waivers on the basis of having an IEP or handicapping condition. More work in brainstorming testing accommodations is a key.

So no Chicken Little, the sky is not really falling and, in the words of Somers (1981), “We will survive.” New standards, changing roles and functions, national trends, more intense advocacy, and even the dreaded prospect of new forms will not deter us from wading through the intent of bureaucratic change to get at how it is done to the benefit of Ohio’s children and families.