Learning Disabilities

Strategies that make a difference

Students with learning disabilities have many patterns of strengths and weaknesses in receiving, processing and expressing information. These individuals are of average or above average intelligence but they experience unexpected academic difficulties as a result of processing difficulties. Areas of processing that may be affected include phonological, language, visual (visual spatial, visual-motor), attention, memory, speed of processing and executive functioning. Learning disabilities are more common in some medical populations, including individuals born prematurely and those with epilepsy. These students may experience a higher incidence of ear infections and allergies, and hearing may be affected intermittently. Learning disabilities are lifelong and can affect individuals in nonacademic ways in their daily lives, including their social interactions, self-esteem and employment.

Implications for Planning and Awareness

☐ Meet with the student and parents early in the school year to discuss how the school can support this student's needs related to learning disabilities. This could include finding out about:
  – the student's specific strengths and needs
  – successful strategies used at home or in the community that could be used at school.

☐ Collaborate with the parents and the student to consider if, and how, they would like to share specific information on learning disabilities with peers. If they wish to do this, consultation with external health care providers, such as school or community health nurses, may be helpful.

☐ Learn as much as you can about how this disability may affect learning and social and emotional well-being. Reading, asking questions and talking to qualified professionals will build your understanding and help you make decisions to support the student's success at school.

☐ Collaborate with the school and/or jurisdictional team to identify and coordinate any needed consultation and supports.

☐ Develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about the student's condition and successful strategies.

> Your awareness needs to begin with conversations with the student's parents.

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Implications for Instruction

☐ Provide explicit instruction with clear, detailed explanations and demonstrations outlining concepts, steps and rationales.

☐ Use graphic organizers and visuals to help the student organize and remember information (e.g., semantic map of a topic or concept, pictures of steps for problem solving, a planning board with the sequence of activities for the day).

☐ Provide multisensory presentations, whenever possible. Pair written instructions with oral instructions. Provide visual or hands-on prompts, if needed.

☐ Provide "scaffolded" instruction (e.g., build on what the student knows by providing assistance, modelling, guidance and collaboration to move the student toward working independently.

☐ Explicitly teach strategies on how to approach tasks, how to use knowledge to solve problems and how to plan, perform and evaluate performance, as well as how to use strategies for listening, organization, studying and test-taking. Model and demonstrate each step of a strategy, and provide guided practice and feedback and cues for implementing the strategy.

☐ Actively demonstrate and encourage the use of memory strategies. Present information to maximize storage and retrieval (e.g., graphic organizers). Review and preview concepts to assist the student in making connections between what the student knows or has learned and new learning.

☐ Allow extra time for the student to process and respond to verbal information.

☐ Encourage the student to ask for help when he or she does not understand. Watch for and respond to signs of confusion or inattention.

☐ Break down tasks into steps and provide step-by-step prompts. Provide feedback for each step.

☐ Provide extra time to complete assignments or tests, or reduce the amount of work to complete.

☐ Provide a range of opportunities for the student to demonstrate learning.

☐ Provide more intensive, direct and ongoing instruction in reading and writing, including:
  – phonics and word decoding
  – vocabulary
  – reading comprehension
  – written language, including planning.

☐ Provide explicit strategies, models and exemplars for writing and math.

☐ Provide access to assistive technology, such as speech-to-text and text-to-voice programs.

☐ Support the use of assistive technology (e.g., develop keyboarding skills).

☐ Teach strategies for self-monitoring, such as making daily lists and personal checklists for areas of difficulty.

☐ Help the student to organize belongings and work (e.g., label school supplies, colour code subject notebooks).

Implications for Social and Emotional Well-being

☐ Engage the student and parents in planning for the transition to high school, post-secondary and the world-of-work.

☐ Involve the student in the selection and monitoring of supports and strategies (e.g., Are they working? What changes are needed?).

☐ Create a clear structure and schedule for the classroom and ensure students are familiar with this routine. Establish consistent procedures for turning in assignments and homework.

- ☐ Foster an atmosphere in which all students feel it is safe to make mistakes.
- ☐ Provide explicit and specific feedback when the student demonstrates positive social skills. Follow the "I FEED" (Immediate, Frequent, Enthusiastic, Eye Contact, Describe) principle.
- ☐ Monitor for signs of anxiety, such as restlessness, distractibility, physical tension and avoidance.
- ☐ Be aware of student–peer relationships and provide support and guidance, when necessary. Some students may be unaware or misunderstand incidental information and social nuances.
- ☐ Help students become aware of their strengths and what helps them learn best so that they can begin to develop self-advocacy skills.
- ☐ Provide support/coaching to develop self-advocacy skills (e.g., knowing and communicating, learning strengths and needs and what helps them be successful learners.

Parents know their children well and can offer insights on how to support their social and emotional well-being. There is strength in collaborating on strategies that could be used at home, at school and in the community.

As you consider the implications for this disability, think about the following questions:

1. Do I need further conversations with the parents   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
to better understand this student's strengths and needs?

2. Do I need targeted professional learning?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
If yes, what specific topics and strategies would I explore?

3. Is consultation with jurisdictional staff required?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?

4. Is consultation with external service providers required   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
(e.g., Regional Educational Consulting Services,
Student Health Partnership, Alberta Children's Hospital,
Glenrose Hospital)?
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?

5. Are further assessments required to assist with planning   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
for this student?
If yes, what questions do I need answered?

6. Is service to the student from an external provider required? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
If yes, what outcomes would be anticipated?

Links for further information:

Alberta Education. *Unlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities*. https://education.alberta.ca/media/385144/unlocking-potential-programming-for-students-learning-disabilities-2002.pdf

National Center for Learning Disabilities – Personalized Learning
https://www.ncld.org/personalized-learning

Learning Disabilities Association of America. "Supports and Resources for Educators."
https://ldaamerica.org/educators/

Please note:

These websites are for information only and the user is responsible for evaluating the content and appropriate uses of the information.

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