

Speech-Language Pathology Eligibility Guidelines in Texas

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An open meeting was held at the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA) Annual Convention in 1999 for professionals concerned with high caseloads and the use of inconsistent methods of identifying students with speech impairment resulting in over-identification of students for services. The consensus of those in attendance was that there was a need statewide for appropriate and consistent identification of children who are speech impaired. Ten speech-language pathologists volunteered to serve on a TSHA Task Force to develop eligibility guidelines in the four areas recognized in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – articulation, language, voice, and fluency.

Three templates were developed between 2000 and 2003. These included Articulation, Language, and Language with Other Disabilities. Work on Voice and Fluency Templates began in 2003 and was completed in 2005. Since that time, a Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) Companion to the Articulation Eligibility Template has been completed. In addition, manuals have been developed to facilitate and extend eligibility determinations. The manuals are only provided to speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who complete template training.

The TSHA Public School Vacancies Committee completed a survey of Directors of Special Education in the State in 2003 regarding the personnel shortage and ASHA facilitated focus groups consisting of a director from each of the 20 Region Education Service Centers (ESCs) in Texas. Information gathered indicated that directors were very much in favor of statewide Eligibility Guidelines. The Joint Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA) / Texas Council of Administrators in Special Education (TCASE) Committee approached the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in 2005 to provide information regarding the Guidelines. The Agency chose not to endorse the Guidelines but agreed to support the endeavors of TSHA and provided access to the 20 Region ESCs and district level Directors of Special Education through the Texas Education Television Network. The Joint Committee provided an overview of the Eligibility Guidelines and encouraged participation of the ESCs and school districts. Additionally, basic presentations on the principles of the Guidelines and their value have been provided for Directors of Special Education at the TCASE conference twice a year and at regional meetings as requested by an ESC or district. The Joint TSHA/TCASE Committee has also provided overview sessions at statewide conferences for elementary principals.

The developers of the six templates felt very strongly that training in the templates was critical to proper implementation. Therefore, TSHA developed a Training of Trainers (TOT) system to provide statewide access to the information. Trainer applicants were solicited from each of the 20 ESC areas. The goal was to provide intensive training to at

least one trainer for each of the six templates from each of the 20 regions. The training of the regional Template trainers, who are referred to as the TOTs, was conducted during TSHA conventions over the past 4 years. There are currently 18 Articulation Template trainers, 18 Language trainers, 16 Fluency trainers, 8 Voice trainers, 18 Language with Other Disabilities trainers, and 22 CLD Companion to the Articulation Template trainers across the State. Each template has at least one Lead Trainer who was a developer of the template. The design of the system is that TOTs provide training at ESCs or in Districts upon invitation and continue to provide ongoing support to SLPs in districts who have participated in the training. School districts have two options for training: They may elect to have all of their SLPs trained in a template or have a representative trained, who then becomes responsible for training other SLPs in that district. TOTs are also responsible for providing feedback to the TOT Coordinator. TOTs maintain contact and receive updated training via an annual meeting at the TSHA Convention and statewide videoconference meetings, as scheduled. TSHA has employed a part-time professional who was instrumental in the development of the templates to collect data from districts that have received training and have implemented the Guidelines.

To date, the following percentages of Districts/Cooperatives/Shared Service Arrangements (SSAs) in Texas have received training: 63% for Articulation, 65% for Language, 25% for Language with Other Disabilities, 11% for Fluency, and 8% for Voice.

A survey regarding implementation of the Articulation Guidelines was conducted by TSHA in May 2008. Respondents included 100 SLPs representing 81 districts and 16 SSAs in 17 of the 20 Region Education Service Center areas who had participated in training. Results indicated that 100% of those responding had put articulation guidelines in place in their respective districts/SSAs, and 96% reported that the guidelines implemented were based on the TSHA Articulation Eligibility Template.

Ninety-six percent of the respondents reported that implementation of the Articulation Guidelines had resulted in more consistency in the identification of children with articulation disorders, 78% indicated a decrease in the number of children identified as having an articulation disorder, 92% reported better identification of children with articulation disorders, and 70% indicated that they had received more support from special education staff in their districts following implementation.

Regarding the process of training of SLPs in their respective districts, 54% reported a problem with limited time to train the SLPs in their districts, 47% reported resistance to change, and 11% reported lack of administrative support. Additionally, 53% of the SLPs indicated that upon implementation of the Articulation Guidelines, some children whom they felt should qualify did not meet the criteria. Only 9% indicated that some children whom they felt should not qualify actually did qualify based on the criteria.

Anecdotal feedback from Directors of Special Education and SLPs has been positive. SLPs report that the teacher/parent training segments of the manuals have been helpful in providing the information needed to ensure more appropriate referrals, thereby resulting

in fewer unnecessary evaluations. Results of the survey indicated that 52% of the districts/SSAs who responded are using the TSHA Articulation Parent-Teacher Articulation Observation form with teachers, and 49% indicated that they are using the form with parents. In addition, pre-referral intervention suggestions presented to student support teams are consistent with providing classroom intervention prior to a special education referral (e.g., Response to Intervention) for some students.

Implementation of Eligibility Guidelines in the public schools of Texas is a huge endeavor, as there are 1,035 school districts in the State. Because implementation is not required by the State Education Agency, participation by districts in the training provided by TSHA is voluntary. Those Directors of Special Education who are truly interested in improving the appropriate and consistent identification of and services to students who qualify and ultimately addressing the shortage of SLPs in their districts are realizing the benefits of the Eligibility Guidelines.