

TSHA Proposed Statewide Eligibility Guidelines for Texas Public Schools 1999 – 2007

In 1999 Judy Erwin, TSHA V.P. for Professional Services and the Texas State Education Advocacy Leader (SEAL) appointee to ASHA offered an open meeting at the TSHA Convention for all professionals concerned about the high caseloads and shortage of speech-language pathologists in the schools. The meeting drew more than 40 interested SLPs. The consensus of those in attendance was that the first point of attack needed to be that of appropriate identification of those children truly needing the services of a speech-language pathologist. Ten speech-language pathologists (SLPs) volunteered to serve on a TSHA task force to develop eligibility guidelines in the four areas recognized in IDEA: articulation, language, voice and fluency.

Initially the task force developed four guideline documents over the course of three years: Articulation, SI Language Only, Language with Other Disabilities, and Language for Children Severely Communicatively Impaired. The last two documents have since been condensed into Language with Other Disabilities. In 2003, two new task forces began work on Voice and Fluency which were completed in 2005. In addition, a manual has been developed to facilitate and extend eligibility determinations in the area of Articulation and a manual for SI Language Only is in the final stages of development.

Because it was determined that the guidelines require training to properly implement, TSHA developed a ‘train the trainer’ (TOT) system to provide statewide access to the information. Applicants were solicited from each region across the state (consistent with the geographical boundaries set by the 20 Texas Education Service Centers) from which one (sometimes two) SLPs were chosen to receive intensive training in each of the six guidelines developed. Ideally this would translate to a total of 120 TOTs. However, applications were not received from all regions, so a TOT from a neighboring region may be called upon to provide training.

To date, TOTs have received training in four of the five eligibility guidelines – the last group of TOTs (for Fluency) will be trained at the March 2007 TSHA Convention in Houston. TOTs provide ongoing support to SLPs and districts trained and are responsible for providing feedback (data) to the TOT coordinator. TOTs maintain contact with the original core trainers via an annual meeting at TSHA Convention and statewide videoconference meetings, as scheduled. Additionally, basic presentations on the principles of all five documents and highlights of their value are offered for special education administrators at the conferences of the Texas Council of Administrators for Special Education (TCASE) twice a year as well as regional meetings as requested by a region or a district. Recently the TSHA SLP Vacancy Task Force and members of the TSHA/TCASE Joint Committee have offered similar sessions at conferences for elementary principals, Human Resource Directors and school administrators.

According to reported data, training on one or more of the eligibility guidelines has been provided in all 20 regions of the state, reaching over 200 school districts, and more than 600 speech-language pathologists in the state of Texas. Securing feedback and data from

districts trained has been and continues to be a challenge. The Eligibility Guidelines Advisory Committee is studying more efficient systems of data retrieval. In an effort to provide on-going training and effective data collection, the TSHA/TCASE Joint Committee submitted a grant proposal to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in April of 2006 for discretionary funding to facilitate meeting this need. A response from TEA is pending.

Plano ISD implemented the Articulation Eligibility Guidelines four years ago and the process was recognized by the Texas Education Agency as a 2005 Promising Practice. Anecdotal feedback from special education directors, district administrators and SLPs has been positive. Although districts implementing the proposed guidelines are evidencing lower caseloads (initially perceived to be our only/main goal), the feedback also suggests that children are being more 'appropriately' identified (a fact greatly appreciated by SLPs). SLPs report the teacher/parent training segments of the manuals have been very helpful in providing the information needed to ensure more appropriate referrals, therefore fewer unnecessary evaluations. In addition, pre-referral intervention suggestions presented to student support teams is consistent with providing classroom intervention prior to a special education referral for some students.

In an effort to address the growing cultural diversity in our state, the TSHA Task Force on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Issues developed a document that was approved by the TSHA Executive Board in November of 2005. The content of this document will be infused into the five eligibility guideline documents mentioned above in order to guide appropriate identification for those individuals who are considered to be English Language Learners. The Articulation Eligibility Guideline "companion" is expected to be completed by the spring of 2008, with additions to the remaining Eligibility Guidelines to follow shortly thereafter.

The need for special/additional guidelines for preschool age children is currently under discussion. It is expected that this information would also be infused into the existing five eligibility guidelines documents.