"Childhood is a time for learning. A child who delays breaking the phonetic code will miss much of the reading practice that is essential to building fluency and vocabulary; as a consequence, he will fall further and further behind in acquiring comprehension skills and knowledge of the world around him. To see this happen to a child is sad, all the more because it is preventable."

Sally Shaywitz, M.D.
Overcoming Dyslexia

What is a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)?

A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. This term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of vision, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic differences, or limited English language proficiency.

All Michigan schools must apply the definition of a specific learning disability from our Federal and State special education laws. The follow is the federal definition of a specific learning disability:

300.309 Determining the existence of a specific learning disability

(a) The group described in 300.306 may determine that a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 300.8(c)(10), if-

    (1)   The child does not achieve adequately for the child's age or to meet State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the child's age or State-approved grade-level standards:

(i)	Oral expression
(ii)	Listening comprehension
(iii)	Written expression
(iv)	Basic reading skills
(v)	Reading fluency skills
(vi)	Reading comprehension
(vii)	Mathematics calculation
(viii)	Mathematics problem solving

    (2)(i) The child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or State approved grade-level standards in one or more of the areas identified in paragraph (a)(1) of this sections when using a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based interventions; or

(ii)   The child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State-approved grade level standards, or intellectual development, that is determined by the group to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments, consistent with 300.304 and 300.305

    (2)   The group determines that its findings under paragraphs (a)(1) and (2) result of—

        (i)A visual, hearing, or motor disability;
        (ii)Mental retardation;
        (iii)Emotional disturbance;
        (iv)Cultural factors;
        (v)Environmental or economic disadvantage; or
        (vi)Limited English Proficiency

(b) To ensure that underachievement in a child suspect of having a specific learning disability is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math, the group must consider, a part of the evaluation described in 300.304 through 300.306—

    (1) Data that demonstrate that prior to, or as a part of, the referral process, the child was provided appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by qualified personnel; and

    (2) Data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable intervals, reflecting formal assessment of student progress during instruction, which was provided to the child's parents.

Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities

The laws and rules regarding the identification of students with specific learning disabilities have changed since the passage of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) in 2004. Prior to this legislation, diagnostic teams were required to utilize the "Severe Discrepancy" approach in the identification of a specific learning disability. Under this model, the students suspected of having a specific learning disability were administered an IQ test and a test of academic achievement. Students who demonstrated a discrepancy of 15 points between these measures were determined to have a specific learning disability. This approach is not the best way to identify a specific learning disability for numerous reasons. One of the most important objections to this method is that by the time a student shows a "severe discrepancy" in academic achievement, they have experienced so much failure in school, that it is difficult to put in place interventions to close the performance gap between the student and his/her classmates. This model has appropriately been deemed the "Wait to Fail" model of identification.

In response to the changes in the Federal definition of Specific Learning Disability, the Michigan Department of Education amended Michigan's Administrative Rule 340.1713, Specific Learning Disability Defined Determination on September 11, 2008. A clarification memo dated January 22, 2009 from the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (OSE-EIS) allows "the use of three options for determining specific learning disability (SLD) eligibility. The three options are as follows:

1) Continuation of the "'Severe Discrepancy' as one part of a full and individual evaluation. Severe Discrepancy may never be used alone to determine a student eligible as a student with a SLD."

2) "the option (that) a school district may use a process that is based on a student's response to scientific, research-based intervention." This process is commonly referred to as "RtSRBI".

3) "identify a 'pattern of strengths and weakness' in determining SLD eligibility"

Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities within the WMISD

Several committees within the Wexford-Missaukee Intermediate School District have been operating since 2003 with the focus of implementing Response to Intervention within its constituent Local Education Agencies (LEA). The intent of the committees was to put in place a system of prevention as well as a method of identification of specific learning disabilities which can be applied consistently within the seven local school districts. Following Michigan's interpretation of IDEA 2004 regarding SLD identification, a focus on utilizing RtSRBI as well as a model for determining 'pattern of strengths and weaknesses' was placed. In order to comply with Federal and State rules and recommendations, which is consistent with current research in the area of learning disabilities, it was determined that when conducting initial evaluations of students with suspect SLD.

1) The practice of applying the severe discrepancy definition of specific learning disability is no appropriate. No longer will a determination of SLD be made solely on the existence of a discrepancy between performance on an IQ test and achievement test.

2) The Response to Scientific Research Based Intervention (RtSRBI) is the preferred method to be utilized in the identification of SLD. The decision to use RtSRBI will be made by each school's problem solving team for each grade and content area where the school meets the criteria set forth by the WMISD RtI Professional Learning Community in the document "Response to Intervention (RtI): A Multi-Tiered System of Student Support".

3) In the case where a school, grade level or content area does not meet the criteria to use RtSRBI as an option for identification, the diagnostic team will utilize the "pattern of strengths and weaknesses" model. Data obtained during the RtSRBI process will be considered within the evaluation; however, the team will use the "Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Decision Rule Grid" when making the decision for eligibility.

All schools within the WMISD are implementing RtSRBI to some extent in specific grade levels and in specific content areas. In the case where a student is suspected as having a SLD in a content area where the school meets the criteria to utilize RtSRBI as a method as identification and in a content area where the school does not meet the criteria, a hybrid approach to identification will be implemented. For example, for a student who is struggling in both reading and math, the RtSRBI may be used to determine eligibility for reading and the PSW model in math. If a school is using RtSRBI as a means of identification in a specific area, and if the criteria under RtSRBI is not met for a specific student, the team will use PSW as a means of identification. For example, a parent requests a comprehensive evaluation prior to the student completing intervention criteria at Tier 2 and Tier 3. In all circumstances, the diagnostic team will determine the method used for each area of suspect disability prior to the evaluation.

In the areas of written expression, mathematics calculations, mathematics problem solving, oral expression, and listening comprehension all WMISD schools will utilize the "Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses" model.

Eligibility methodology per school and grade level in the areas of basic reading skills, reading fluency skills and reading comprehension skills are as follows:

	k-3	3-5	6-8	9-12
Lincoln	RtI	RtI		
McKinley	RtI	RtI		
Franklin	PSW	PSW		
Forest View	PSW	PSW		
Kenwood	PSW	PSW		
Mackinaw Trail Middle School			PSW	
Cadillac Junior High			PSW	
Cadillac High School				PSW
Manton	PSW	PSW	PSW	PSW
Mesick	PSW	PSW	PSW	PSW
Marion	PSW	PSW	PSW	PSW
McBain	RtI	RtI	PSW	PSW
Lake City	PSW	PSW	PSW	PSW
Pine River	PSW	PSW	PSW	PSW