

Before determining whether a student's learning difficulties are caused by a lack of language or by a disability, should educators wait a period of time and if so, how long?

As soon as educators or family members observe that the student is having difficulties in school, it is important to begin the collaborative process of problem solving. Whether the student's school utilizes Student Support Teams (SST) model, Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT) model or Response to Intervention (RtI) Model, a collaborative systematic approach, commencing by articulating the student's strengths, needs to be initiated.

Student variables, including the student's medical history as well as experiential background, culture, language proficiency, learning style, and motivational influences, need to be understood. School attendance, opportunities to learn, program placement and quality of instruction all influence a student's performance. The family's lifestyle, length of time in the United States, and stress factors including poverty, trauma, and culture shock are examples of important factors to consider.

In addition, other specific historical information needs to be ascertained such as:

- 1.) Length of time the student has been in the United states;
- 2.) Years of schooling the student has had in the United States as well as in other countries;
- 3.) Number and types of schools the student has attended;
- 4.) Language(s) used in the home and the family's attitude(s) to each language(s);
- 5.) The language(s) of instruction used in the different classroom(s);
- 6.) Type(s) of educational programs and instruction the student has received;
- 7.) Student's level of language proficiency in both his/her native language and English;
- 8.) Qualifications of the student's teachers; and
- 9.) Instructional approaches used to teach ESL and literacy.

Student characteristics, teacher variables, types of instruction the student has received, and the student's exposure to the curriculum are all important factors that need to be understood in order to determine the possible cause(s) of the student's difficulties.

After gathering and interpreting the available information, the Team hypothesizes possible causes, establishes an action plan addressing extrinsic factors in the classroom, implements appropriate specific strategies, monitors and evaluates specific behavioral progress and makes changes accordingly. If minimal or no progress is made after a determined period of time, a referral for a special education evaluation is warranted.

However, when an ELL is reported to have a disability that is sensory, neurological, intellectual or physical in nature, s/he must be referred to special education as soon as it is reasonable in order to provide appropriate services as expeditiously as possible.