

# Washington State Association of School Psychologists

## Professional Practice Standards Guidelines in Evaluation and Identification of Students with Intellectual Disability

### Background

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disability (AAIDD), formerly the AAMR, is the nation's oldest and largest professional organization concerned with individuals who have intellectual disability. The AAIDD originally defined intellectual disability in 1921. At the time, the disability was termed "mental retardation." The definition has been revised several times, in 1959, 1961, 1973, 1983 and again in 2010. While the definition was retained in the Organization's 2010 manual on terminology, the term "mental retardation" was replaced with intellectual disability: "Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical skills, which are apparent prior to the age of 18." However, IDEA (2004) relies on the 1983 AAIDD definition and specifically defines intellectual disability relative to a student's educational performance: *"Intellectual disability refers to significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior, and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance"* (34 CFR Section 300.309(a)(3)(ii)).

### WAC 392-172A-01035

The definition of intellectual disability in WAC 392-172A-01035, with a significant addition, uses the exact language found in the Federal Regulations that define each federally identified disabling condition for children: *"Intellectual disability refers to significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior, and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance and requires specially designed instruction"*. The added component is that the student *"requires specially designed instruction"*. Under WAC Rules and Regulations a student with intellectual disability will meet the Federal definition and requires specially designed instruction. Thus a student who may have significantly subaverage general intelligence and concurrent deficits in adaptive behavior that have arisen during the developmental period, but does not require specially designed instruction would not be eligible under WAC Rules and Regulations. This definition does not reference etiology but refers to a level of behavioral performance. The key phrases in the definition will be expanded upon below.

### Specific Eligibility Criteria

*Significantly subaverage* refers to performance that is 2 or more standard deviations below the population mean. This has been the AAIDD standard since 1973, is the standard in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 4th Edition (DSM: IV) and the standard accepted by Sattler in Assessment of Children, 5th Edition.

*General intellectual functioning* refers to performance on a standardized intelligence test that measures general cognitive ability, as opposed to a more specific ability such as receptive vocabulary or spatial ability. The intelligence test must have a significant loading on the “g” factor in order to meet this standard. The “g” is defined as the factor that accounts for the largest portion of the variance on an intelligence test.

*Adaptive behavior* refers to “the effectiveness or degree with which the individual meets the standards of personal independence and social responsibility expected of his age and social group” (Grossman, 1983, p. 157). Adaptive behavior is considered to be developmental in that as individuals grow older the adaptive skills required increase in number and complexity. Adaptive behavior is composed of several specific domains, including self-help skills, interpersonal/socialization skills, physical and motor skills, communication, cognitive/pre-academic/academic skills, domestic skills, vocational/occupational skills and responsibility. For eligibility under the intellectually disabled category, a student must demonstrate delays in adaptive behavior.

*The developmental period* is noted as the period between birth and 18 years of age.

*Adverse education affects* refers to how the intellectual disability affects the student's performance in his or her current educational environment. Significant deficits must be identified in all core academic areas (math, reading, and language arts). Classroom performance data must demonstrate significant differences between the student's performance and the performance of same-age peers from the same cultural background.

*Requiring specially designed instruction* refers to ability of the general education program to meet the needs of a student with intellectual disability. If the student were successful in general education, then under WAC, the student would not be eligible for special education. To meet this standard, documentation must exist of unresponsiveness to direct general education interventions. The above definition indicates that levels of general intelligence and levels of adaptive behavior must be jointly considered prior to determining eligibility under the intellectually disabled category. For eligibility under the intellectually disabled category, a student's performance must fall 2 or more standard deviations below the mean in both general intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Intelligence is assessed through objective measurement, adaptive behavior is typically assessed by means of an objective scale. The definition also indicates that the deficits in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior must occur during the developmental period (birth to 18) to distinguish intellectual disability from other disabilities (e.g. impaired ability by an older adolescent due to traumatic brain injury).

## **Recommended Measures and Procedures for General Intelligence**

The following are recommended instruments for evaluation of intellectual disability, but not required. The most recent edition of published tests should be used. The list includes measures that have been well developed, empirically validated and have been widely used in evaluations for intellectual disability. This list is not exhaustive and interested professionals should consult additional resources for reviews of the listed instruments. Measures of intellectual ability must

meet the following standards: normed on a representative, national sample, have adequate reliability and validity, and measure general intelligence: *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Differential Abilities Scale, Stanford-Binet, Kaufmann Assessment Battery for Children, and Leiter International Performance Scale*. These measures should only be administered, scored and interpreted by qualified professionals who have formal training in the administration, scoring and interpretation of cognitive test batteries for children and adolescents.

### **Recommended Measures and Procedures for Adaptive Behavior**

Adaptive behavior measures, while normed on representative, national samples, which have extensive reliability and validity information, are heavily dependent upon the informant's ability to give reliable and valid information. Several of the more widely used adaptive behavior instruments include: *Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Scales of Independent Behavior, and the Adaptive Behavior Assessment System*. AAIDD recommends that information about a student's adaptive behavior should come from a variety of sources and that strengths as well as weaknesses be considered when developing an intervention plan. It is also important to note that students with intellectual disabilities often display strengths in their adaptive skills, particularly following participation in a functional life skills program. In addition both in-school and out-of-school adaptive behavior should be addressed prior to making a determination of special education eligibility.

### **Evaluation of Bilingual/Bicultural Students**

It should be noted that significant concerns have been raised over the validity of intellectual assessment with students from bilingual or bicultural environments. The concern has been that many of the more typically administered measures of intelligence fail to fairly assess intellectual functioning. What is assessed is the student's bilingual language ability and level of acculturation. For bilingual students it would be helpful to administer several different measures, at least one of which is a nonverbal measure. While nonverbal measures are helpful, it is important to recognize that most nonverbal measures are not entirely free from the influence of language and cultural factors. Spanish versions of the WISC, WAIS, and DAS are also available. If a bilingual student performs in the low to average range on these subtests, a determination of intellectual disability should not be made. For further information see the 2013 WSASP Position Paper on Best Practices for Bilingual/Bicultural Assessment. (This document has not been formally adopted at this time).

### **Supplementary Information**

Although not adopted by the Federal Rules and Regulations it is interesting to note that in 2010, AAIDD published a new definition: "Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18." At the time of the drafting of this paper, the definition of intellectual disability outlined in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual is undergoing potential revision. Readers are referred to the APA's website for updates on any proposed changes in the DSM-V ([www.dsm5.org](http://www.dsm5.org)).

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