

LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

Response to **Learning for All, K – 12**

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO), which represents the largest group of students with special education needs, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft **Learning for All, K – 12**. This document, like its predecessor, **Education for All, K – 6**, presents many useful ideas for the classroom teacher. While we agree that “classroom teachers are the key educators for a student’s literacy and numeracy development”, many students with learning disabilities will require specialized teaching from a special education teacher in order to achieve their literacy and numeracy goals.

LDAO supports the *usefulness* of Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction for all students, including those with learning disabilities. However, universal design and differentiated instruction are not *sufficient* for meeting the learning needs of all students with learning disabilities, without specialized, intensive instruction.

Learning for All, K – 12 (L4All) describes a tiered approach to educational intervention on page 13. The tiered approach (Tier 1 and 2) is embodied in the Web-based Teaching Tool, an early screening and intervention program administered by LDAO on behalf of the Ministry of Education. The Web-based Teaching Tool is a non-categorical program that screens students who are at risk for academic failure, and applies interventions early. For many students at risk, this may be all that they need. However, most students who have learning disabilities will need Tier 3 supports that are outside the scope of **Learning for All, K – 12**.

LDAO supports the use of diagnostic and formative assessments by educators in order to guide educational goals. It is important to “understand each student’s strengths, learning styles, preferences, needs, interests, and readiness to learn” (p.31). Parents are one important source of such information. We particularly support the **L4All** recommendations to gather information from parents, students and community partners, to build on student strengths, and to consider accommodations that would help individual students demonstrate their learning. Of course for students who have IEPs, the accommodations that they are *entitled* to will be listed in their IEPs.

Diagnostic assessment is the basis of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), and as noted in Figure 5 on page 28, may include professional assessments. It is LDAO’s position that professional psychological assessment is essential for educational planning for students with learning disabilities.

On page 43 it states “There may be times when the teacher needs to consult with members of the in-school team(s) who may recommend other strategies, refer the student for further educational and/or professional assessments, or when appropriate, address special education needs through the development of an IEP.” This statement makes it clear that **Learning for All, K - 12** is not really about special education, but rather about good teaching. As such LDAO supports it, but with the qualification that the methods outlined are *beneficial but not sufficient* for students with learning disabilities.

Education for All, K - 6, contained a good discussion and description of assistive technology that can be used in the classroom. Assistive technologies are used increasingly in intermediate and secondary grades, and as demonstrated at last summer’s symposium, AT4ALL, there is a

trend to use of technologies for all students, in the model of Universal Design. All teachers need this knowledge. Therefore: **LDAO recommends that Learning for All, K - 12** include a chapter on assistive technology.

In Summary

LDAO recommends that Learning for All, K - 12 explicitly state that the methods described are *useful* for all students, including those who have special education needs, but may not be *sufficient* for all students with special education needs. References to other documents that outline evidence-based special education teaching techniques should be included in **Learning for All, K – 12**.

For students with learning disabilities, instruction needs to be specifically differentiated to their profile of abilities and needs, as documented in a psychological assessment, and to be based on current research findings. Research on education for students with learning disabilities demonstrates the importance of intensity, specificity and individualization in teaching approaches that are effective.

In the conclusions from their comprehensive review of research on learning disabilities, **Learning Disabilities: from Identification to Intervention**, The Guilford Press, 2007, Jack Fletcher and colleagues summarized the findings on evidence-based approaches.

The authors' strongest point is that students with LDs need to have "intensive specialized remediation" whereas "remedial instruction is frequently carried out in larger groups that make it difficult to ensure the level of intensity needed to accelerate growth in academic skills." (p. 264). The authors also point out that students with LDs often have complex, multifaceted problems that affect more than one academic domain, so classroom-based programs, even those that research has shown to be effective, may not be enough (p.265).

The authors conclude that "students with LDs require an instructional approach that is explicit, well organized, and routinely provides opportunity for cumulative review of previously mastered content." (p. 272) They point out that academic content needs to be explicitly taught in each academic domain, since little transfer occurs (p.273), but also that foundational skills can be taught simultaneously with higher level skills (e.g. decoding skills at the same time as text comprehension strategies).

In their article, **Creating Opportunities for Intensive Intervention for Students with Learning Disabilities**, in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Nov./Dec. 2009, pp. 60 – 62, Lynn S. Fuchs and Douglas Fuchs of Vanderbilt University state the following: "When we use the term *intensive intervention*, we refer to two kinds of practices. The first involves tutoring programs that rely on complicated instructional routines and many hours of teaching over long periods of time. The second type of practice is the use of ongoing progress monitoring to systematically experiment with different instructional components, using the resulting progress monitoring data to inductively tailor individualized programs. Research shows that both kinds of instructional intensity can reduce severe academic failure dramatically, in some studies to as low as 2% of the general population."

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