

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPER

**FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIVISION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS
BUREAU OF EDUCATION FOR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS**

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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

PURPOSE

The purpose of this technical assistance paper is to provide guidance to school district personnel and respond to questions related to the process and content of written psychological reports. Where appropriate, state and federal rules are cited to support responses. Answers reflect recommendations based on best practices, with the interests of the referred student being paramount.

This paper represents a consensus of input from practitioners, trainers, supervisors, and other educators knowledgeable in the area of school psychology services. Although it may not mirror the report writing practices in all of Florida's 67 school districts, it may be used as a guide for developing district standards for written documentation of psychological services.

An attempt has been made to address at least two types of psychological reports: first, those with the primary intent of offering information for determining exceptional education program eligibility under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); and second, those that report prevention and early intervention activities within an integrated services delivery model. In many instances, psychological reports can be and are written to accommodate both of those intentions, especially where a full range of psychological services is being provided in the district or school.

1. What is the primary purpose of a written psychological report in the school setting?

Psychological reports, written by a certified school psychologist or licensed psychologist in the school setting, provide a response to specific questions about a student's academic and/or behavioral progress. The primary purpose of the report is to help school personnel and parents understand the relationship between the problem for which the student was referred, the cause(s) of that problem and why the student has not learned the desired behaviors. This problem analysis is the basis for the development of appropriate interventions and is applicable to all psychological reports whether generated to address exceptional education questions, Section 504 accommodations, counseling and consultation services, or any of a variety of education service questions.

2. Who determines the questions that form the basis for the psychological report?

A team at the student's school develops the questions to be answered by the psychological report. These descriptive questions or statements are often termed "Reason for Referral." If the student is being considered for an exceptional education program, the questions that are asked must cover all areas of the child's suspected disability (Rule 6A-6.0331 (1)(a), FAC, and 34 CFR 300.532(f)). When the case is not an ESE referral, the school psychologist, teacher, and other involved persons develop the referral questions.

3. Who should be included on the team developing the referral questions?

As a general rule, the team developing the referral questions should be composed of individuals who have knowledge about the student's strengths, difficulties, and needs as well as special expertise in consultation, problem clarification, and assessment. Teams may include classroom teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, intervention specialists, administrators, parents/caretakers and, when appropriate, the student. The makeup of the team can vary from case to case, depending on the unique characteristics of the student under study.

4. What steps are followed by the team to develop appropriate referral questions for the psychological evaluation and written report?

First, at least one member of the team should undertake a thorough review of the student's past school record. This includes a summary of information contained within the student's cumulative file along with focused interviews with the student's teacher(s) and parent/caretaker.

With the student's school history in hand, the team should then analyze the many factors that may be contributing to the student's successes and problems. These include curriculum materials, teaching style/learning style issues, characteristics of the classroom environment, home and community variables, peer relationships, specific characteristics of the student, and educational programs and services offered by the district. The social and instructional conditions under which the student is successful should also be identified by the team.

Finally, after addressing each of the factors that are likely to be contributing to the student's behaviors, team members collaborate on the focus and wording of the evaluation questions(s). The most effective method for developing evaluation questions is through a collaborative, problem-solving process.

5. What is meant by a collaborative, problem-solving process?

This process requires the following steps by the team:

- a. Develop a clear, specific, and agreed-upon statement of the problem(s).
- b. Develop logical, informed reasons or hypotheses for why the problem is occurring and why preferred behavior (the replacement behavior) is not developing.
- c. Review existing data to confirm or support some or all of the hypotheses.

- d. Discuss interventions that are suggested by these data.
- e. Identify data that are needed before hypotheses can be supported or rejected.
- f. Write referral questions that will supply the missing data.
- g. Determine how best to obtain the missing data, and request a psychological assessment when it is indicated.

6. What are examples of evaluation questions (Reason for Referral) that might result from a team utilizing the problem-solving process?

Example 1:

Mary's first grade classroom teacher and mother report that she is having difficulty in all academic areas. In addition, she has very immature social behaviors, often needing adult support in resolving minor conflicts with same-age peers. Although she repeated kindergarten, Mary still does not know all the letters of the alphabet. The referral questions are as follows:

- a. How do Mary's cognitive and social skills relate to the referral problem and to behaviors that are desired by school personnel and her family?
- b. Does Mary's learning rate require modified instruction and/or curriculum? If so, what modifications are appropriate given her current strengths and weaknesses?
- c. What specific social and academic skills has Mary mastered? What critical skills has she not mastered that should be addressed immediately? What instructional format is suggested by her past successful learning experiences?
- d. What strategies are recommended to Mary's mother to support her independent functioning in the home and community settings?

Example 2:

John, a third grader at Main Street School, was referred for psychological evaluation by his teachers and parents because of verbal and physical aggression toward peers. These behaviors include hitting, swearing, and verbal taunts and occur even when an adult authority figure is present. John exhibits no remorse for his behaviors even when confronted with the consequences of his acts. The Child Assistance Team at John's school have requested information to answer the following questions:

- a. Under what conditions is John most likely to aggress against his peers; and under what conditions is he least likely to aggress?
- b. What is the relationship between John's behavior difficulties and his academic progress: Is he less likely to perform well on academic tasks on those days when he is aggressive?

- c. Does John have the social skills to handle provocation without the use of aggression? If not, what specific skills must he learn to handle behavior in more socially appropriate ways?
- d. What skills must the school staff and his parents learn in order to teach John more appropriate behavior and to prompt his use of more appropriate behavior?

Example 3:

Paul is a fourth grade student who has a history of reading difficulties. Paul's mother reports that he had a history of ear infections as a young child and had difficulty with his speech. Paul is currently receiving speech therapy at this school. He has shown satisfactory progress, and services will probably be discontinued at the end of this school year. Paul's teacher reports that he has difficulty with sound blending and has a slow rate of reading with numerous errors. He has been placed in a reading group that is working on third grade level materials, but he is still struggling. The following questions were referred for response through a psychological evaluation:

- a. What change, if any, has occurred with Paul's academic skill acquisition as his speech/hearing problems have lessened?
- b. What is the relationship between Paul's hearing/speech problems and his current difficulty with sound blending?
- c. Were sound-symbol associations taught at a time when Paul was experiencing speech/hearing problems, and did this prevent him from learning these skills?
- d. Is Paul being taught at his instructional level, and does his rate of learning vary depending on the instructional level at which he is being taught?

7. What is the format for a psychological report?

In writing a psychological report, the school psychologist provides demographic and identifying information on the student since reports are placed in the student's cumulative record. The questions posed by the referral team are identified, previous evaluation and intervention history is reviewed, and background information pertinent to the referral question is summarized. The school psychologist integrates, analyzes, and summarizes the results of the evaluation and/or services that were provided in response to the referral questions. These assessment data may include, but are not limited to observations, social/family history, interview information, intervention monitoring information, performance assessment, and norm-referenced testing. Finally, the school psychologist presents suggestions and recommendations for consideration by the classroom teacher, the parent or caretaker, and/or a multidisciplinary team charged with the task of making decisions related to special education or alternative educational programs.

8. Should a psychologist make a recommendation about the student’s eligibility for an exceptional education program?

No. A recommendation for eligibility for an exceptional education program is made by the staffing committee (Rule 6A-6.0331 (2) (b), FAC). This team recommendation is made to the administrator of special programs. The administrator of special programs is responsible for approving or disapproving the recommendation made by the staffing committee.

9. Are recommendations and opinions an appropriate part of a psychological report?

Yes. Recommendations and opinions are an appropriate part of a psychological report so long as they reflect the training and expertise of the school psychologist who authors the report. Psychological reports are written, in part, to suggest interventions for educators and parents or caretakers. Qualifying statements or opinions about the reliability and validity of the data are not only appropriate but are essential to an accurate “reading” of the report. Recommendations should focus on interventions. ESE program eligibility/placement statements should not be made in a psychological report.

10. What types of recommendations are appropriate for inclusion in a psychological report?

The psychological report may recommend, for example, a particular classroom environment, curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and support services to assist the student in achieving academic and social success. Specific academic and/or social strategies may be recommended that have been suggested by the assessment and problem-solving process to be effective in improving the progress of the student. Also, the psychologist can recommend the level of supervision or assistance that may be required in order to ensure that the strategies are effective. Finally, specific resources may be identified if they need to ensure that the interventions will be successful (for example, teacher or parent training, classroom demonstrations, mentors).

11. Is the district responsible for paying for services that are recommended in a psychological report?

School districts are responsible for providing special education and related services that are required to assist a child with a disability (34 CFR 300.16). The IEP committee considers each of the recommendations contained within the psychological report or given verbally and determines whether they should be included in the IEP as related services. Those that may be recommended but not required to assist the student in benefiting from special or regular education may be offered to teachers and parents for informational purposes.

12. How should a school psychologist deal with sensitive issues that might be uncovered during the course of a psychological evaluation?

The school psychologist should address only those issues that are relevant to the referral questions in the psychological report. For example, child abuse history, medical trauma, family

lifestyles, etc., would be included in the psychological report only if they were clearly contributing factors to the student's difficulties or if they are potential targets for intervention. Information that is given simply to provide a recognizable description of the student is unnecessary. If physical features, dress, grooming and the like are used to infer psychological or social strengths or needs of the student, the inference should be clearly stated along with the relationship that they have with potential interventions. School psychologists should be reluctant to include material in the report which they believe would cause damage to the child and/or cast aspersions on parents or school personnel.

13. What is an appropriate method for avoiding staff/supervisor differences of opinion about the content of psychological reports?

It is important that clear guidelines are developed as a collaborative venture between school psychology practitioners and school psychology administrators. These guidelines must be ethically defensible, reflecting the best practices and standards of school psychology. Many districts utilize a peer review process to ensure high standards of psychological report writing. This model permits the supervisor or an oversight team of school psychologists (when the supervisor is not a school psychologist) to serve as a mediator when differences arise between the report writer and the peer reviewer.

14. When differences of opinion cannot be resolved through a collaborative effort, what recourse do the school psychologist and supervisor have?

School psychologists may choose to refrain from signing a report if they believe that it does not accurately represent their evaluation of the student. Or they may file a minority report to explain exceptions that they take to the report content. The supervisor, acting as the district administrator responsible for the educational welfare of the student, may choose to reassign the referral to another school psychologist in order to respond in a timely manner to the evaluation questions. Any options that are developed should be included in the written guidelines referred to in item #13 above.