



The Role of Speech-Language Pathologists in Wisconsin's Equitable Multi-Level Systems of Supports

[Wisconsin's Framework for Equitable Multi-Level Systems of Supports](#) has the vision of supporting students equitably based on their "individual responsiveness to instruction and intervention" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2017 p.7). All students fit within this framework, and special education services (including specially designed instruction and related services) are considered to be within the equitable multi-level systems of supports (Wisconsin DPI 2019).

Terminology and the philosophy underlying educational frameworks has evolved over time. Response to Intervention (RtI) is defined by Wisconsin DPI (2017) as "a multilevel system of behavioral and academic supports designed to increase success for every learner," while "Wisconsin's Equitable Multi-level Systems of Supports conveys the vision of an integrated system of behavioral, social, emotional, and academic support, includes all educators and all learners, considers the whole child and system, and attends to equitable access, opportunity, and outcomes" (p. 4). It is within this more integrated system that we are called to support students in Wisconsin. Although the role of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in supporting students receiving special education through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is clear, there are often questions about other roles SLPs may have in supporting all students within equitable multi-level systems of supports.

[The American Speech-Language Hearing Association \(ASHA\) Roles and Responsibilities of Speech-Language Pathologists in Schools \(2010\)](#) identifies prevention as "the efforts of schools to prevent academic failure" and includes this as a responsibility of school-based SLPs. SLPs are called to collaborate with staff and families and to provide parent training and professional development. In addition, there are unique contributions SLPs can make to support the foundations of language within the general curriculum (ASHA 2010). The need for differentiation of instruction is essential in order for all students to succeed and SLPs may partner with general education teachers in making that possible (Archibald 2017). The SLP role is limited if they choose to only focus on the needs of students on their caseload and not consider other opportunities to support the language underpinnings of the educational system. "Generally speaking, if all or most students need support in a given area, those skills should be addressed as a [universal] support" (Sylvan 2021, p.14-15).

What can schools do to support the speech, language, and communication needs of students who do not receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program?

There are many activities that school-based professionals can and should engage in at the universal level in the equitable multi-level systems of supports (MLSS) to ensure that all students ages 3-21 are able to receive speech, language, and communication support in their natural environments.

- **Professional Development and Information Sharing:** SLPs may provide information to teachers and caregivers regarding speech and language development. Informational handouts as well as training on use of effective strategies to use with students in fostering speech and language development (e.g., evidence-based instruction of vocabulary, direct instruction and modeling of effective speaking and listening strategies in classrooms) can support others in gaining awareness of the language underpinnings necessary for academic success in school. SLPs may also join a grade level or content area Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to consult with staff on “selecting, developing, and adapting academic material to support students” (Sylvan 2021, p. 16) and their language needs.
- **Partnering with Staff:** SLPs may coach or partner with general education teachers and other staff in determining how to embed speech and language structured supports into instruction and activities they already provide (e.g., incorporating a focus on story grammar into teaching story retells, embedding language activities into centers or curriculum, etc). Through collaboration and co-planning, SLPs may consult around the utilization of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in the general education environment, which may include putting scaffolds in place that benefit most learners (e.g., use of visuals and graphic organizers, provision of extra time, opportunities for choice in how students take in information and show what they have learned; Sylvan 2021, p. 51). In addition, SLPs partnering with other school staff gain a deeper knowledge of the classroom curricular demands and the language underpinnings that may come into play. The goal for all is to improve the quality of instructional practices related to language and literacy.
- **Consultation to equitable MLSS Leadership Teams:** School leadership teams may consult with SLPs or include SLPs on their leadership team to assist in the selection of curriculum and in identifying universal screening tools (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [DPI] 2013). These teams may support teachers in developing and adapting academic material to support students. Since communication is a foundational skill for learning in school, SLPs are uniquely positioned to make

recommendations around universal instructional practices that support all students and prevent gaps in language and literacy development. They may lead discussions at leadership teams that examine whether universal instruction is setting up the educational environment for student variability in language and literacy. Designing all lessons around a clearly articulated goal, modeling and explaining different ways for students to show what they've learned, and giving student choice in selecting the method in which they learn or take in information best can lead to more universal student success.

- **Active Engagement in equitable MLSS Teams: Leadership and Problem Solving** teams may include SLPs to observe classroom instruction, as well as to analyze student data (from benchmark assessments or classroom assessments) to help identify or help design interventions for students who are not meeting age or grade level academic or social and emotional grade level standards (Wisconsin DPI 2013). SLPs may not screen or provide services directly to students in Wisconsin unless they are identified as having a disability, but SLPs may assist teams in identifying, creating, and monitoring effectiveness of interventions for students within an equitable MLSS.
- **Incidental Benefit:** SLPs may provide incidental benefit to all students when working with students with IEPs in the general education classroom (e.g., students with and without IEPs may be in a small group in a general education classroom, SLPs may co-teach a lesson in a general education classroom). Services must be “in accordance with the student’s individualized education program (IEP), even if one or more nondisabled children benefit from these services” (United States Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services 2013). “The incidental benefit provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (CFR §300.208) permits one or more nondisabled students to benefit from the special education and related services, and supplementary aids and services provided to a student with a disability in accordance with the student’s IEP” (Wisconsin DPI 2013). By partnering with classroom teachers, more students benefit from supports and instruction put in place than only the students on the SLP’s caseload. The SLP may also meet the needs of students with disabilities in a more efficient and inclusive manner.

Additional Resources on how Special Education and Related Service Providers Support the Equitable Multi-Level Systems of Supports

- [Incidental Benefit Guidance: Guidance Related OSEP’s Letter to Couillard](#)

- [United States Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services “Letter to Coulliard”](#)
- [How SLPs Can Support within the MLSS Framework](#) (DPI presentation slides)

References

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