The Continuum of Difficulty in Reading Difficulties

- Researchers have a very good understanding of the nature and cause of reading difficulties
- Reading-related skills and sub skills fall along a continuum of severity with no natural "cut off" between those with reading "disabilities" and those with milder reading problems
- Educational professionals and policymakers (state level, school district level) must decide on the "cut offs"
- There exist not definitive answers-only relevant factors to consider
    - The goal is making sensible, informed decisions

SLD in Reading Should be Much Less Common

- RTI/MTSS was prompted by research findings showing that most reading difficulties could be prevented, and for those that could not, weak readers could achieve better than they do
- Implementation of RTI/MTSS has not taken account of the actual Tier 1 instructional practices or Tiers 2 or 3 intervention approaches that yielded such great results
- Thus, we have far more students identified with SLD than would be the case if those best practices were used

Questions to Consider When Pursuing an SLD Diagnosis

- What will be different for a student once identified with SLD?
    - More instructional time? Different types of instruction?
    - Research on special education reading help has been discouraging
- Has an SLD candidate had the best practice Tier 1 instruction and Tier 2 or 3 intervention?
    - Or have they received ineffective approaches?
- Are best practices available to validly use the student's response to intervention to help identify an SLD?
- Is the student unable to function without additional support?
    - The practical reality is that IEPs afford more than just more intensive instruction

Problems with Traditional SLD Diagnostic Approaches

- The IQ/Achievement Discrepancy had many technical issues
    - Failed to recognize that the reasons a student with a 114 IQ struggled in word reading were identical to the reasons a student with a 90 IQ struggle
    - Developed before researchers came to understand reading disabilities
- The Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses approach has not interacted with reading research and has generally focused on scatter within a student's cognitive testing profile
    - This approach as also had numerous technical problems with its validity
- Identification through RTI presumes students get best practices instruction and intervention, which is almost never the case
    - No clear answers on length and intensity of instruction prior to identification

○ This is particularly a problem when best practices are absent

Considerations When Diagnosing SLD in Basic Reading

- If best practices are genuinely present, response to intervention is an excellent guide (but specifics of length are lacking)
- How severe is the phonological-core deficit?
    - How low is the time and untimed single word reading skills?
    - How low are the timed and untimed nonsense word reading skills?
    - How low are the phonological-core skills (i.e., PA, WM, Ran, etc.)
    - Are they at the 10th percentile, 15th or at the 1st through 5th?
    - Best practices yield a 14–17-point improvement regardless of starting point, thus if normalization is not likely with best practices. SLD may seem warranted
    - How many of the phonological-core skills are affected?

Considerations When Diagnosing SLD in Reading Fluency

- Many of the same considerations apply from identifying and SLD in basic reading
- Recall that fluency is a by-product of the size of the sight vocabulary and not a separate and independent reading skill
- Adding to the basic reading considerations would be the percentile level on fluency tests

Diagnosing SLD in Reading Comprehension (RC)

- The issues of response to intervention and severity of the skills and subskills applies here as well
- How are word reading skills? Do they interfere with RC?
- How are student's oral language comprehension skills?
    - Would SLD be a better determination?
- How is the student's working memory? Attention?

Conclusions Regarding Diagnosing an SLD in Reading

- Not an exact science, clinical judgment will be needed
- Evaluation teams should encourage schools to use best practices to limit the number of struggling readers and to assure more valid diagnoses