

## ***A Call for Access: Championing Professional Assessments for Learners with Special Educational Needs***

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Learners with special educational needs (LSENs) face complex challenges in accessing appropriate and responsive education. A crucial factor in addressing these challenges is the status of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral health—elements that must be understood through professional assessments. Initial and periodic evaluations conducted by qualified professionals such as developmental pediatricians, psychometricians, and psychologists are essential in developing individualized and effective educational plans (McLeskey et al., 2017).

However, a significant number of LSENs in the Philippines are not assessed professionally due to financial limitations and the lack of access to developmental clinics and diagnostic centers, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Cruz et al., 2020). Many parents cannot afford the cost of professional assessments, and for those who can, travel distance to the nearest clinic poses another considerable barrier. As a result, learners are often deprived of the opportunity to have their developmental needs properly identified and addressed. The discrepancy between a learner's chronological age and mental age goes unchecked, leading to instructional approaches that do not align with the learner's actual capabilities. Consequently, strengths remain underutilized and developmental needs unaddressed—further widening the gaps in learning achievement and social inclusion.

This assessment gap contradicts the goals of Republic Act No. 11650, or the Inclusive Education Act of 2022, which mandates the establishment of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) across the country to support the assessment and intervention needs of LSENs. International frameworks, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), also emphasize the necessity of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), wherein professional assessments serve as foundational elements of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These laws are not merely legal mandates—they are ethical imperatives to ensure that all learners receive the support necessary for meaningful learning.

In the absence of professional evaluations, teachers often rely on informal tools such as checklists, anecdotal records, and classroom observations. While these instruments can provide preliminary insights, they lack the diagnostic accuracy, objectivity, and clinical validity that professional assessments offer (Salend, 2016). Informal assessments, though helpful in daily classroom decisions, cannot replace standardized psychological and developmental evaluations that identify specific learning disabilities or behavioral conditions. Research indicates that early and reliable identification of disabilities significantly enhances intervention outcomes and long-term academic success (Wang, Rubie-Davies, & Meissel, 2018). Without accurate assessments, educational planning becomes reactive rather than proactive, often leading to ineffective, trial-and-error teaching methods that result in frustration for both educators and learners.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2011) underscores the importance of early identification and intervention in mitigating long-term developmental delays and promoting inclusive education. According to the WHO, children with disabilities—especially in low-resource environments—frequently fall through the cracks due to a lack of continuous and accessible assessments. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education’s Order No. 72, s. 2009, supports the strengthening of special education through diagnostic and placement services. However, implementation remains uneven, primarily due to resource limitations and a shortage of trained professionals.

In light of these realities, the absence of professional assessments for LSEs represents a serious barrier to their growth, development, and equitable access to education. While teacher-generated tools may offer temporary or situational insights, they are insufficient substitutes for professionally administered evaluations. As educators, institutions, and communities, there is an urgent need to advocate for the full realization of RA 11650, including the operationalization of ILRCs in every municipality. Collaboration with policymakers, healthcare professionals, and educational stakeholders is essential to bridging this gap.

Ensuring access to timely, professional assessments is not just a matter of educational policy—it is a matter of equity, dignity, and justice. Every learner, regardless of ability or socioeconomic status, deserves an equal opportunity to reach their full potential. Investing in comprehensive assessment systems is an investment in a more inclusive, responsive, and just educational future.

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