

## *A Clinician's View of the Center For School Success Learning Assessment*

*Working at the Center for School Success (CSS) has changed the way I administer and interpret testing data. It has provided me with the opportunity to be a member of a knowledgeable and skilled inter-disciplinary assessment team (clinical psychologist, developmental pediatrician and learning specialist) which takes into account the "whole" student rather than looking at specific, unconnected testing results. The focus of a CSS assessment is on describing a student's learning profile and his/her unique way of learning. Instead of giving the student a "label" (e.g., ADHD), CSS considers how certain learning strengths and weaknesses link specifically to academic performance. This is a very different experience than working in private practice, in a school or as a consultant. I'd like to share with you my thoughts on two of the different hats I wear here at CSS – Clinical Psychologist and Family Liaison.*

When I serve as the Family Liaison on the assessment team, I sit with the student's parents behind a one-way mirror. The role of the Family Liaison is to describe each part of the assessment as it is administered and to provide immediate feedback about the student's learning profile related to his/her performance on a task. As a Family Liaison, I have come to appreciate the value of having parents observe an assessment – a practice that is not common in most evaluation settings. Having the Family Liaison available to parents throughout the assessment to clarify what they are witnessing, answer any questions as they arise, help make connections to previous experiences with their child and provide explanations, can be an intervention all its own for parents. "While Sean was working with one of the CSS experts, it was helpful for me to be able to talk with the other two in the observation room. I liked knowing the purpose of the tests he was taking, and getting immediate feedback about what he was doing and how he was approaching the questions. Our conversations also gave me ideas about other things that CSS should know about Sean that I hadn't thought of before. I think it enabled me to convey a more well-rounded picture of Sean."

Observing a child's CSS assessment can be an incredible impetus for growth for a family. Many times, I have had the pleasure of watching parents' lifelong perceptions of their child change right in front of me. Having the opportunity to observe their child's assessment can foster strong realizations; a child's strengths parents may have taken for granted or a learning behavior which may have been labeled as negative are suddenly understood in a refreshing, positive way.

When I am in the role of the CSS psychologist, I first review a student's paperwork, including questionnaires and any previous assessments. Then, based on the referral questions and the individual needs of the child, I determine the most appropriate assessment tools. As the CSS psychologist, I have the honor of working collaboratively with a student to better understand his/her unique and distinctive learning style.

I view a CSS assessment as collaborative because it is more of a shared process than the standard type of diagnostic testing I have provided in the past. A CSS assessment is not used to establish eligibility for special services and doesn't use diagnostic "labels" in its reports or discussions with students. Even though I often begin my session in the more traditional manner of testing, I have the luxury to change how I am presenting tasks in order to determine if a student may be more successful with alternative formats or presentation. For example, if upon completion of an auditory memory subtest a student does poorly, I can "re-do" parts of it by adding pictures or images to determine if visual cues improve performance. I also am able to have conversations with students about how they approach a task, what strategies they used, and can offer immediate feedback on what I am noticing about how they learn

The best part of a CSS assessment day, for everyone involved, is the "demystification" meeting with each student. The meeting takes place after a lunch break for the family when they have a chance to reconnect and share their collective experience. One or two of the clinicians meet with the student and talk about what the team has learned about his/her strengths and challenges. We

all love to watch a student beam with pride at the notion that s/he has strengths. Believe it or not some students have never considered the value of their strengths. We can see them visibly relax because someone finally *understands* how they learn. And it gets even better! When we receive written feedback from parents about how the assessment day went (often within a week), it is not uncommon to read that they have noticed dramatic changes in their child either with regard to learning or self-esteem. “Sam feels more confident and doesn't seem to have his typical past melt downs when it comes to his homework. There are still a few kinks to work out but we are all extremely hopeful. The testing that was done at CSS has really helped us and him understand how Sam's mind works. He also doesn't feel like he's hiding anything. We can't tell you how happy this makes all of us.”

*Demetra LaCrosse, Psy.D.*