
GLOSSARY OF TERMS: Education Policy

This glossary defines terms and jargon used frequently in education policy conversations. It is designed to help education advocates and parents better understand what education policy professionals mean when they use these terms.

1 percent cap

The maximum percentage of all students that can take the alternate assessment, instead of the general assessment, under the Every Student Succeeds Act. One percent of all students is estimated to be slightly more than the share of the population with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This cap is designed to ensure that all students with disabilities have access to the general, core curriculum and are not unjustly held to lower academic standards. *See also: alternate assessment, assessment, general assessment, accommodations*

504 plan

A plan developed by a school to accommodate the needs of a student with a disability, including learning, physical, emotional, transportation, and spatial needs. Schools are required under federal law to create 504 plans for parents of students with disabilities identified under law who are eligible. A broader range of students qualify under 504 plans than those who qualify for IEPs. “504” is a reference to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, one of the civil rights laws protecting people with disabilities. *See also: individualized educational plan (IEP)*

academic standards

A set of benchmarks for what all students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade level in order to advance to (and be ready for) the next grade level. States are required to have standards in reading/language arts, math and science. They may also have standards in other subjects including social studies or physical education.

accommodations

Changes made to classroom instruction or assessment as required by law for students with disabilities or English learners. These changes allow a student to participate in class and demonstrate their knowledge on assessments just as their peers do who are not English learners or who do not have a disability. Some examples are extended time to take a test, larger print on a classroom assignment, or a seat closer to the teacher. Generally, students with disabilities who have an IEP under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) or those who have a 504 plan under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 may be eligible to receive accommodations.

accountability

The policies and procedures states use to set goals for how well all students (and groups of students) should be doing academically, measure and identify how well schools do in meeting those goals, and support and improve schools and districts that are failing to meet the state goals.

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additional targeted support and improvement schools

In the Every Student Succeeds Act, these are schools that have been identified for additional targeted support and improvement from the state because one or more groups of students in the school are performing at the same level as the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in the state. These schools put together an improvement plan that is approved by the district. *See also: summative rating, comprehensive support schools, targeted support schools, support and improvement plan, state school rating system*

adjusted cohort graduation rate

The percent of students who graduate from a high school with a diploma four years after entering, excludes those who transferred to another school.

alternate assessment

The annual statewide assessment that some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may take in place of the general statewide assessment that all other students take. These assessments are still based on the academic standards for each grade level. Unlike the general assessment with accommodation, this assessment is a greatly simplified version of the assessment. This assessment may also be called the Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards, or the AA-AAS. *See also: 1 percent cap, assessment, accommodations, general assessment, alternate achievement standards*

assessment

Another word for “test.” In the federal education policy context, the term “assessment” refers to the *one standardized annual test required under federal law* in every grade between 3-8 and at least once in high school (grade 9-12). These measure student achievement, what a student knows and can do, and do not measure intelligence, a student’s underlying ability and potential. *See also: alternate assessment*

comment period

A period of time following the release of draft regulations or guidance when any person, organization, or group of organizations can send in comments and concerns to influence what is included in the final regulation or guidance. Comment periods are often open for thirty (30), sixty (60), or ninety (90) days. *See also: Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM)*

comprehensive support and improvement schools

Schools in which a large share of students are not meeting state goals. These include schools in the bottom 5 percent of all schools in the state, schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, and additional targeted support and improvement schools that have not improved. These schools must design and implement a support and improvement plan which is comprehensive and designed to raise achievement for all students in the school. *See also: additional targeted support*

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schools, targeted support schools, support and improvement plan, summative rating, state school rating system

cut score

The lowest possible score on annual statewide assessments where students can be considered “proficient.” Cut scores are typically set by the test developers, but states have sometimes set their own as well.

disaggregated data

In the education policy context, disaggregated data refers to data that can be broken down to see information about different groups of students. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, data must be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, family income, disability status, English learner status, gender, migrant status, status as a child in foster care, homelessness status or military connected status.

English-language proficiency (or fluency)

The ability to speak, listen to, read and write English accurately and quickly. Students who are learning English as a second language are typically called “English learners” until they master the language. This is different from proficiency in English/language arts, which is mastering the state’s academic content standards for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and using language. *See also: English learner, academic standards*

English learner (EL)

A student between the ages of 3-21 in elementary or secondary school who was not born in the U.S. or whose native language is a language other than English. These students can also be a migrant, Native American or Alaska Native student or a student who has difficulty in speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language. *See also: English-language proficiency (or fluency)*

general assessment

This is the assessment taken by all students except those who take the alternate assessment. Students with disabilities or English learners may use accommodations when they take this assessment so that they can accurately represent their knowledge on the assessment. *See also: alternate assessment, accommodations*

guidance (federal)

Recommendations by federal agencies for complying with areas of the law that may be unclear or open to interpretation. Unlike federal regulations, guidance does not carry the force of law and policies that do not comply with them are not necessarily in violation of federal law. *See also: regulation (federal)*

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indicators

In the education policy context, indicators are measurements of different aspects of the education system that – taken together – create a picture of a school’s effectiveness at educating all students (e.g. graduation rates, expulsion rates, assessment scores). *See also: state school rating system, summative rating*

individualized educational program (IEP)

A plan or program developed by a team, including teachers, specialists and a student’s parent, that is designed to meet the educational needs of a student with a disability who qualifies for specialized instruction. Schools are required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to create IEPs for students with disabilities who qualify for specialized instruction. *See also: 504 plan*

local educational agency (LEA)

The formal name for governmental bodies that are legally sanctioned by the state to administer elementary or secondary schools (e.g. school district, charter school that is also a district) in a community.

long-term English learner

A student who has not attained English proficiency within five years of identification as an English learner. *See also: English learner*

n-size

The minimum number of students in a subgroup (e.g. Black students, English learners) that must be present in a school to trigger specific reporting and accountability requirements under federal law. N-size is necessary to ensure data are not reported on so few students as to make identifiable personal information (e.g. reporting that all Latino students are advanced in math when there is only one Latino student means knowing the proficiency of a specific student, which is a violation of that child’s privacy). *See also: subgroup*

needs assessment

The analysis of the needs of a school that has been identified for comprehensive support and improvement. This analysis forms the basis of a school’s comprehensive support and improvement plan. *See also: summative rating, comprehensive support schools, targeted support schools, additional targeted support schools, support and improvement plan, state school rating system*

Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM)

A draft regulation of a federal law that clarifies the law and informs various stakeholders of their responsibilities under the law. These draft regulations are not enforceable yet and are subject to a comment period where people, organizations and groups of organizations can weigh in with the

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federal agency that drafted the regulation before the rule goes into effect. *See also: comment period, regulation (federal)*

regulation (federal)

Rules administered by federal agencies that clarify the law and inform various stakeholders of their responsibilities under the law. Regulations carry the force of law and any violation of them is illegal. *See also: guidance (federal)*

state educational agency (SEA)

The formal name for governmental bodies that are legally sanctioned by the state to provide information, resources, and technical assistance to schools, districts, and people in the community served by schools (e.g. state department of education).

state school rating system

An indication of how well schools and districts are educating all students and groups of students. These ratings are based on a standard set of criteria identified by the state. The system must also identify schools that are in the bottom 5 percent of schools, schools that have graduation rates of less than 67 percent, schools that have a subgroup of students who are consistently underperforming, and schools that have a subgroup of students whose performance is so low that it is comparable to the performance of schools in the bottom 5 percent of schools. *See also: summative rating, comprehensive support schools, targeted support schools, additional targeted support schools, support and improvement plan*

subgroup

A group of students identified by their race, ethnicity, family income, English proficiency, or disability status (e.g. Black students, students who qualify for free or reduced lunch). Under federal law, states are required to set performance goals for all subgroups of students as part of their accountability systems. *See also: super-subgroup*

summative rating

A single rating for a whole school that reflects the performance of each group of students on all indicators within the state school rating system (e.g. a letter grade, color code or index points). These ratings are meant to clearly communicate whether a school is meeting (or missing) goals for groups of students collectively and individually. They differ from a dashboard, which presents data on multiple measures and doesn't combine the data into a single mark for the school as a whole. *See also: state school rating system*

super-subgroup

When two or more subgroups are combined into one large group (e.g. all students of color vs. Black students and Asian American students). Use of super-subgroups in state accountability

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systems is a violation of federal law because it enables schools to hide how each individual subgroup is doing. *See also: subgroup*

support and improvement plan

The plan a school designs and implements to raise student achievement on either a comprehensive (meaning for all the students in the school) or targeted basis (meaning for a subgroup of students in a school) once the school has been identified through the ratings system. The plan must be informed by an assessment of the needs of the particular school, be developed with stakeholder input (e.g. parents, teachers and principals) and implement research-based strategies. *See also: state school rating system, needs assessment, comprehensive support and improvement schools, targeted support and improvement schools, additional targeted support and improvement schools*

targeted support and improvement schools

Schools that are identified through the state rating system because they have one or more groups of students who are consistently underperforming. These schools must design and implement a targeted support and improvement plan which is approved by the district and is designed to raise achievement for the group(s) of students that is(are) consistently underperforming. *See also: comprehensive support and improvement schools, additional targeted support and improvement schools*