

# ed•speak

## Understanding Words Educators Use

Parents, teachers, and the general public don't always speak the same language. But, even when we do, what we mean by a word or phrase is not always the same.

On the following pages NCEA offers explanations for some terms used by educators and/or social change activists. This list is not complete. Not everyone will agree on every definition. We hope, however, that EdSpeak will be a useful starting point as we look for ways to work together for better and more equitable schools.

NCEA owes many thanks to the work others are doing to build understanding. The groups whose definitions we borrowed from are listed on page 11.

*EdSpeak is an ongoing project. Your comments and suggestions will improve future versions. Please send definitions you like or words and phrases you want explained to NCEA, PO Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572 or rfbs@aol.com.*

### ASSESSMENTS, TESTS, AND STANDARDS

**Accountability** refers to federal, state, and district policies developed to hold districts, school staff, and/or students responsible for academic performance. Test scores are often used as the measure of success or failure.

**Alignment** is the process of making **content standards, performance standards, assessment, and instruction** consistent so they are most effective in helping students reach state standards. See **standards**, page 6, and **instruction**, page 7.

**Assessments** are ways to find out what students know and to show teachers and schools areas where they need to improve. Parents, community activists, students, and educators should understand, review, and help improve assessment systems. Paper tests are most common,

but there are many other methods. See **standardized tests**, page 6.

□ **Alternative assessments** are ways, other than standardized tests, to get information about what students know and where they may need help. For example oral reports or discussions, written reports, projects, portfolios or collections of work, demonstrations, performances, and experiments.

**High-stakes tests** determine what may happen to a student. For example a test score may decide promotions, tracking, graduation, or entrance into special programs or higher education. Many activists and educators believe scores alone do not provide enough information to make such important decisions.

**Rubrics** are guides for grading tests or student work. Rubrics describe what work must include to be considered excellent or satisfactory. Rubrics should be given to students when they begin the work so they know what is expected.

**Standards** define what students are expected to know and be able to do. They should be clear, measurable, and rigorous but not too detailed. Education activists should ask: Do our standards demand too much? Too little? Do they give parents enough information to understand what schools expect of their children? Can teachers use them to improve instruction? Do students have a realistic view of classroom requirements?

The standards most often used in school districts today were developed at the state level. However, there are also standards developed by groups of teachers in particular fields and various national groups. Standards are most likely to represent a community's needs and values if parents, teachers, civic and business leaders, and others are involved in developing them.

- ❑ **Content standards** are the information, ideas, and facts students are supposed to learn in a particular grade.
- ❑ **Performance standards** are what a student is supposed to be able to do by the end of a particular grade. For instance, at the end of third grade, students may be expected to know how to multiply numbers.

**Standardized tests** are given to large numbers of students under similar conditions. Most questions on these tests are multiple choice with only one "correct" answer though some ask for written answers. Most standardized tests are scored by computer. One criticism of these tests is that they don't tell whether a student can use information in a real-world situation. There are several kinds of standardized tests, including:

- ❑ **Criterion-referenced tests (CRTs)** measure how well a stu-

dent has learned a specific skill or subject.

- ❑ **Performance exams** are CRTs that measure students' ability to do something. For instance on a math test students might be asked to explain in words how they solved a problem.
- ❑ **Standards-based assessments or tests** are CRTs based on what a state's standards say students in particular grades should know and be able to do. Newer tests often combine multiple choice questions with others requiring written answers.
- ❑ **Norm-referenced tests (NRTs)** compare each student's score to the scores of students who took the same exam before. Questions are usually based on the content of nationally-used textbooks, not what is taught locally, so students may be tested on things local schools do not to teach.

NRTs include the California Achievement Test (CAT), Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT), and Stanford Achievement Test. IQ, cognitive ability, school readiness, and developmental screening tests are usually NRTs too.

## INSTRUCTIONAL TERMS AND PRACTICES

**Ability grouping** clusters students according to past performance so teachers can instruct them at the same level. If there is a plan to help students catch up this may be helpful. If it leads to permanent divisions at grade level, it is harmful. See **grouping, tracking**.

**Cooperative learning** is an approach through which students learn in



Photo: Human Issues Collaborative

small, self-instructing groups and share responsibility for each other's learning.

**Critical thinking** is the ability to find information and use it to reach a logical conclusion or solve a problem. Increasingly, educators believe that schools should focus more on critical thinking than on memorization of facts.

**Curriculum** is subject matter that teachers and students cover in class. These days, the best curriculums focus on how and why as well as what. Curricula is sometimes used as the plural.

**De-tracking** is doing away with tracking based on powerful evidence that nearly every child is capable of achieving worthwhile educational goals. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing or able to teach mixed groups and this makes de-tracking very difficult. See **ability grouping** and **tracking**.

**Direct instruction** presents new content and skills in strict order. Students practice the content and skills in class exercises and homework and are evaluated by tests similar to practice exercises. Critics say this approach does not develop **higher order skills** because it depends too heavily on memorization and repetitive drills.

**Grouping** puts students together for a specific reason and amount of time. For example students who read at about the same level might meet together for a certain number of minutes each day; the rest of the day they are in a class of students with differing abilities. See **ability grouping**, **de-tracking**, **tracking**.

**Higher order thinking skills** include gathering, evaluating, managing, and mixing information to solve

problems and reach conclusions. These skills are needed for **critical thinking**.

**Instruction** refers to the methods teachers use. Common methods are lecture, discussion, exercise, experiment, role play, small group, and writing assignments. The most effective teachers use many methods because not all are effective with all students.

**Pedagogy** is an approach to or view of teaching that influences how teachers teach. See **instruction**.

**Peer tutors** are students who have mastered certain skills or information and then help others at the same grade-level learn those skills or materials.

**Remedial services** or **Remediation** provides extra support and instruction to students identified as performing below grade-level in reading, writing, or mathematics.

**Social promotion** moves students to the next grade regardless of their academic progress. While no one believes students who aren't learning should just be passed along, many activists and educators believe children should not be blamed for a school's failure. They say students should stay with their peers and get extra help so they can catch up.

**Tracking** groups students based on past performance, often described as "ability." For example, all below-grade-level readers are placed in one classroom where they also learn math, science, and other subjects. Tracking often leads to missed opportunities and segregation by race, class or gender.

Students who are tracked often get "stuck" in basic or remedial classes for the rest of their school years making it difficult to get into college. In some places, parents and

educators have worked to de-track completely. At a minimum, parents who believe their child has been tracked should demand a plan for moving the student into a grade-level class and ask how they can help their child succeed.

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION

**Bilingualism** is the ability to read, speak, understand, and write well in two languages.

**Bilingual education** serves students whose first language is not English or whose English skills are limited. English and other subjects are taught in the student's native language if necessary. The goal is for the child to gain knowledge and be literate in two languages.

**English as a Second Language (ESL)** and **English Language Development (ELD)** programs take children whose first language is not English out of regular classrooms to study English. Some experts believe children learn English more quickly this way. Others say they will fall behind in subject areas if they are out of the classroom. Studies show that children in ESL/ELD programs are less likely to maintain their home language.

**English-only movement** aims to make English the only official language of the United States and to end bilingual education. These efforts encourage racism and anti-immigrant hysteria.

**English mainstreaming** places students with limited English in regular classrooms with no plan for translation or extra help.

**Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English Language Learners (ELL)** refers to students who are not at grade-level in reading and writing English and for whom English is a second language.

**Maintenance programs** help bilingual students continue developing their native language after becoming fluent in English. The goal is for students to be fully literate in two languages.

**Primary language instruction** offers LEP students grade-level instruction in math, social studies, and other subjects in the student's first language.

**Redesignation** is the process used to document that a student has mastered enough English to be successful in his/her grade level. It should cover speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills.

**Sheltered English immersion** features instruction in English for learners who are at least intermediate speakers of English. Teachers use specific techniques to make the subject matter understandable to those still learning English.

**Structured English immersion** offers instruction in English only regardless of a student's English language skills.

**Transitional bilingual education** uses the child's native language only to the extent necessary to help him/her learn English and subject matter. **Bilingualism** is not a goal and little or no effort is made to develop or maintain the child's home language.

**Two-way (dual) bilingual instruction or bilingual immersion** happens in a classroom with a mix of

native English speakers and English learners. English learners share the same home language. Sometimes the teacher speaks both languages well; other times there are two teachers. Such classes aim to help all students master two languages while also meeting high academic standards.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Inclusion** is the practice of placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms. This is also known as **mainstreaming**.

**IDEA** is the basic federal law covering special education. In the 1970s Congress guaranteed children with physical and mental disabilities a "free and appropriate public education." In 1990 the law was renamed the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** or IDEA. It describes when a student is entitled to **special education services** and supports and what they are.

**IEP or Individualized Education Program** is a detailed plan describing a child's educational goals and objectives and the services the school will provide to help the child reach those goals and learn the general curriculum.

**IEP team** develops the IEP. By law, the team should include parent(s), regular teacher (if the child takes or may be able to take regular classes), special education teacher or services provider, school district representative, person knowledgeable about evaluating the child's disability, others invited by the parents or school district, and, in some cases, the student.

**Initial evaluation** determines whether a student is eligible to receive **special education services** and needs an **IEP**.

**Independent evaluation** is testing done by someone who doesn't work for the school system.

**Least restrictive environment** is a legal term from **IDEA**. It means that children with disabilities should be taught with children who do not have disabilities in a setting that is as much like a regular classroom as possible. School districts may place children with disabilities in separate classrooms or schools only when supports and services are not enough to help the child learn in a regular classroom.

**Mainstreaming** see **inclusion** above and **English mainstreaming**, page 7.

**Pull-out programs** remove a child from the regular classroom for part of the school day for **remedial services** or enrichment. A growing number of schools provide extra help in the regular classroom. This can be better for the student if it reduces teasing or other negative responses.

**Special education services** are supports school districts must provide to students with IEPs. Such services may involve personnel, equipment such as a special computer, support such as tutoring, or other help. For instance, a student with a severe physical disability may be entitled to a full- or part-time assistant at school to help him/her use the bathroom, playground equipment, and so on.

**Transition plans** must be included in the IEP once students turn 14. Transition plans describe how the school will help students prepare

for life after high school in college, employment, and/or independent living. Students have a right, under IDEA, to be involved in creating this plan.

## DIFFERENCES AND FAIRNESS

**Achievement gap** is the difference in academic performance between students of different racial-ethnic groups and income levels. In the U.S. white students tend to outperform children of color and wealthier students often do better than poorer ones. See **opportunity gap** and **opportunity to learn**.

**Anti-racist** describes intentional actions, practices, and language aimed at eliminating racism and its effects.

**Anti-racist education** equips students, parents, and teachers with tools to combat institutional racism and ethnic discrimination.

**Class** is sometimes used to describe a person's or family's level of wealth and/or education. Also called socio-economic status.

**Demographics** describe the make-up of a student population and may include information on enrollment, attendance, ethnicity, gender, parent's education, family income and structure, and language. All demographic data kept by schools is supposed to be available to the public

**Equity in education** or an **equitable education** means that students and schools in poor neighborhoods or rural areas have as much opportunity to succeed as those in wealthy suburbs. To accomplish

this means some schools need more resources, including the most talented and skilled staff. The failure to meet the needs of students and schools is a form of **institutional racism**.

**Institutional or structural racism** refers to established arrangements, laws, practices, and customs that support and maintain racism. Institutional racism takes many forms and may not be intentional. Examples include tracking and textbooks that distort or ignore the histories of people of color.

**Multicultural education** began as a way to celebrate diversity in schools. Those who started it believed schools could start with dances, dress, dialect, dinners, and other cultural expressions. However, they wanted to move on from there to explore, values, opportunities, stereotypes, and power relationships within and among groups. Sadly, few schools have done so.

**Opportunity gap** is a major cause of the **achievement gap**. It refers to differences in buildings, budgets, teacher preparation, and other resources available to schools. School districts in wealthier communities usually have more resources than those in mixed or poor communities.

**Opportunity to learn** would help abolish the achievement gap by making sure students and school staff have what they need to be successful at high levels. In the broadest sense it means making up the difference between what the most and least privileged of children have to encourage learning and development.

**Racism** is the systematic mistreatment and/or oppression of mem-

bers of particular racial or ethnic groups. Members of these groups may be denied the best education, jobs, and services and excluded from most significant decision making roles in private and public organizations. Racism is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and institutional structures and practices. See **institutional racism**.

**Socio-economic status** see **class**.

**Title One** provides federal funding for schools to help students who are behind academically or "at-risk" of falling behind. Funding is based on the number of low-income children in a school, generally those eligible for free lunch. It is intended to supplement not replace state and district funds. Schools receiving Title One monies are supposed to involve parents in deciding how these funds are spent and in reviewing progress. Title One used to be called Chapter One.

## MORE WORDS

**Charter schools** are independent public schools that receive money from a school district or a state department of education but are not governed by the local school board and do not have to meet the same requirements. Regulations vary from state to state, but in many states districts and/or schools lose money for each child enrolled in a charter.

**Cohort** is a group sharing the same experience at the same time. For example all kindergartners who started school at the same time form a cohort.

**Community organizing** mobilizes people and resources to find ways to improve their lives. Those involved in a community organizing effort often start by figuring out who has the power to improve a situation they are concerned about. Next, they propose a solution and look for ways to get decision makers to adopt that solution.

If they can't persuade decision makers to resolve the problem in a way they like, they may try to replace the decisionmakers with others who will be more supportive. Many education activists use community-organizing techniques to improve schools.

**Early childhood education** usually covers children from birth through eight years of age. The best programs address children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development by focusing on school readiness, health and nutrition, and appropriate environments.

**Full-service schools** unite home and community supports to encourage students' full development. Such schools may house or be related to medical, employment, recreation, social, and human services programs for students and families. They are also known as beacon, community, and lighthouse schools.

**Governance councils or committees, advisory councils, building teams, school-based management, and site-based committees** are all names for the same thing. The idea is to improve schools by involving all parts of the school community in making decisions and managing schools. Representatives of teachers, parents, staff, community, and students sit on these committees.

They seem to work best when the members are truly accountable to those they represent. Some districts elect their representatives; in others, organizations (staff and teachers' unions, PTAs, student council, etc.) appoint people to represent them.

**Privatization** is the effort to bring the marketplace into public education. Some school districts are experimenting with hiring private companies to run particular schools or programs. Opponents say this will not work because for-profit companies will always put money before kids and employees. See **vouchers**.

**Proficiency** means mastery or the ability to do something at grade-level. For instance, by the end of third grade, students should be able to add and subtract fractions. If they can do so they have achieved proficiency or are proficient; they have mastered that skill.

**Public school choice** means students are not limited to a neighborhood school but may apply to any district school including specialized, alternative, and charter schools. School choice (without "public") often is used to describe **vouchers** and **privatization**.

**Reconstitution** means replacing all or most of the staff in a school or district. Most often this action is taken by a district or state due to a failure to raise student achievement.

**School reform** describes efforts to improve schools by making fundamental or sweeping changes. These changes include teacher training, increasing parent involvement, adopting new approaches or philosophies, and more. There are many different

models for school reform. See **whole school reform**.

**School-based budgeting** gives each school more control over how its share of a school district's money will be spent. Parents, school staff, and community members involved say it requires many hours of investigation, meetings, and discussion to make it work.

**Small schools** are usually elementary schools with no more than 350 students and high schools with no more than 500. These schools tend to have a united and self-selected faculty, substantial teacher and/or parent involvement in decision-making, and a clear curriculum that ensures children have a continuous educational experience from grade to grade.

**Social justice unionism** argues that education unions should see themselves as part of a broader movement for social justice rather than focusing on the self-interest of their members. It calls for participatory union membership, education reform to serve all children, collaboration with community organizations, and a concern for equity.

**Student mobility** refers to the number or percentage of students in a district who move to another school during a school year. Students who move a lot may require extra help so as not to fall behind.

**Teacher mobility** usually refers to the number or percentage of teachers who leave a school or district during a school year. High teacher mobility rates are often a sign that a school or district is a difficult place to work and administrators should take steps to improve conditions so as to retain good teachers.

**Vouchers** use taxpayer dollars to help students attend private and religious schools that are exempt from most rules governing public schools. Vouchers generally are funded by money that would otherwise go to public schools.

**Whole school or district-wide reform** tries to make many changes at the same time. These may include improving the school facilities and providing additional training for teachers and administrators. The idea behind whole school reform is that if a large number of students are not doing well academically there needs to be an overhaul that addresses almost every aspect of how the school works.

## Sources

Some definitions used in “EdSpeak” were borrowed, sometimes directly, from other sources, including:

- Applied Research Center’s ERASE initiative, [www.arc.org](http://www.arc.org)
- *Education Week*, [www.edweek.org/context/glossary](http://www.edweek.org/context/glossary)
- Fairtest, [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)
- Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University, [www.nyu.edu/iesp](http://www.nyu.edu/iesp)
- *The Multilingual Educator*, [www.bilingualeducation.org](http://www.bilingualeducation.org)
- NCEA members and steering committee

- Nyack Partners in Education, [ziwolff@optonline.net](mailto:ziwolff@optonline.net)
- Partnership for Kentucky Schools, [www.pfks.org](http://www.pfks.org)
- Political Research Associates, [www.political-research.org](http://www.political-research.org)
- Poverty & Race Research Action Council, [www.prrac.org](http://www.prrac.org)
- *Rethinking Schools*, [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

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