

## Special Education and Access Terminology

The following are terms frequently mentioned when talking about students with disabilities and special education. This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive, and some terms refer to concepts that are still evolving in the field. Included at the bottom of this list are additional glossaries and dictionaries of common special education terminology and related resources.

**504 Plan** see “Section 504”

**Accessing the General Education Curriculum** occurs when students with disabilities are actively engaged in learning the content and skills of the same curriculum that is being taught to general education students. This is our current perspective on access, which is more focused on curriculum access than access to a particular setting. Access is more likely to occur when instructional and learning goals are operationalized and monitored through appropriate assessments, research-based instructional practices and materials are utilized, and accommodations matched to the child’s individual needs are made available.

**Accommodations** are services or supports used to enable a student to fully access the subject matter and instruction. An accommodation does not alter the content or expectations; instead it is an adjustment to instructional methods. Accommodations should be specified in a student’s IEP. Examples include books on tape, content enhancements, and allowing additional time to take a test.

**Adaptation** involves an adjustment to the instructional content or performance expectations of students with disabilities from what is expected or taught to students in general education. Adaptations are usually included as part of a student’s IEP. Adaptations can include decreasing the number of exercises the student is expected to complete, assignment of different reading materials, or use of a calculator instead of working out problems by hand.

**Annual Goal** is a statement of reasonable expectations for a student with a disability to accomplish in the next 12 months. These goals are included in the student’s IEP and should help to direct the services and instruction the student will receive.

**Assistive Technology** is technology designed to be utilized in an assistive technology device or assistive technology service. An assistive technology device is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Examples include: Braille readers, motorized wheelchairs and specialized keyboards.

**Content Enhancements** are techniques that assist students in identifying, organizing, comprehending, and remembering content information. These enhancements are a type of accommodation. Examples include: advance organizers which help link prior knowledge to new knowledge, visual displays which display relationships between different types or sources of information, study guides, mnemonic devices, and peer-mediated instruction.

**Developmental Delay** occurs when a child's development progresses at a slower rate than most children. This is often seen as a delayed achievement of one or more of a child’s

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milestones. A developmental delay can affect a child's physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, or adaptive development.

**Disproportionality** is the over or under representation of minority students in special education. In other words, there is a disproportionate number, either a significantly larger or smaller percentage, of students from a specific minority background receiving special education services than the percentage of that minority in the population generally. Typically, African Americans and Hispanics are overrepresented and Asians are underrepresented. IDEA '97 specifies that disproportionality needs to be addressed by state and local districts.

**English Language Learners (ELL)** is the most current and appropriate term for students with limited English proficiency, which includes students who do not possess sufficient English language proficiency to participate fully in regular education classes.

**Extended Year Services (ESY)** refers to the special education and related services which meet the state standards that a student with disabilities receives beyond the school year as stipulated in the IEP. These services are provided at no charge to the family or student.

**FAPE** stands for "free appropriate public education." This right is guaranteed to students with disabilities by IDEA. The provision states that special education and related services, in accordance with the state's standards, are provided free of charge under public supervision and direction in compliance with the student's IEP. It includes preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education.

**Full Inclusion** refers to the movement that all students with disabilities, regardless of type or severity, are educated full time in a general education classroom and program. Any special education or related services are delivered in that setting.

**General Curriculum** is the established plan of instruction for all students in a Local Education Agency (LEA). It can be based on the LEA's or state's standards and benchmarks. It incorporates the core of what students learn – i.e., the mandated academic instruction. Social, communication, and life skills are sometimes also integrated.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** was first enacted in 1975 as the Education for all Handicapped Children Act. It is a comprehensive law that governs the education of students with disabilities. The current version of the law was amended in 1997 (referred to as IDEA '97), and it is currently up for reauthorization.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is a legal document designed by a team of educators, specialists, and the child's parent(s)/guardian(s) that outlines the child's learning/behavioral goals and objectives. This document must be updated at least every 12 months; however, an IEP team meeting can be called by any member of the team at anytime. The IEP includes a description of the child's present level of educational performance and identifies annual goals and objectives along with methods for assessing progress toward goals and objectives. In addition, the IEP includes any necessary supports, accommodations, adaptations, and/or related services.

**Inclusion** occurs when students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom/program to the extent possible. Any support services the student needs will be provided in this setting.

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**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)** refers to the concept that children with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent possible with children who are not disabled while meeting all their learning needs and physical requirements. The type of setting is stipulated in a child's IEP.

**Learning Disabled (LD)** As currently defined in IDEA '97, the term refers to a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (IDEA '97).

**Local Education Agency (LEA)** is a school district, board of education, or other public authority under the supervision of a state educational agency having administrative control and direction of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or political subdivision in a state.

**Mainstream** is the placement of a student with a disability into a general education classroom or any non-academic setting (such as physical education, lunch, etc.) for any part of the school day. This type of placement is often seen as being appropriate once it is determined that the child is able to keep up academically or interact appropriately with the other students.

**Modification** is often used instead of adaptation. See "adaptation".

**Occupational Therapy (OT)** are support services that focuses on developing functional skills related to sensory-motor integration, coordination of movement, fine motor skills, self-help skills (dressing, self-feeding, etc.), adaptive devices/equipment, and positioning for school work. Can also include improving, developing or restoring functions impaired or lost through illness, injury, or deprivation or preventing, through early intervention, initial or further impairment or loss of function.

**Paraeducator/Paraprofessional** is a person who works closely with a certified teacher during the school day with a student with a disability. Sometimes referred to as a one-on-one or an instructional assistant. Responsibilities usually include: providing direct and small group instruction, adapting and modifying curriculum, monitoring student behavior, communicating with parents and families (though many believe this should not reflect the role of paraeducators), performing clerical duties, and providing personal care.

**Physical Therapy (PT)** are supportive services that focuses on improving the use of bones, muscles, joints, and nerves. Physical therapy assists in maximizing a person's general fitness, sensorimotor development, neurobehavioral organization, neuro-skeletal-muscular function, and cardiopulmonary status.

**Related Services** are developmental, corrective, and other services required to assist a student with a disability to benefit from special education. May include transportation and support services such as speech pathology, audiology, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, early identification and assessment, counseling, interpreters

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for persons with hearing impairments, medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes, school health services, social work services in schools, and parent counseling and training.

**Section 504** is a component of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and protects the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education. Section 504 regulations require a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. This may be defined as regular or special education services. Section 504 does require development of a plan, usually referred to as a 504 plan, although this written document is not mandated. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) of IDEA may be used as the 504 plan. Typically, a student who needs 504 services needs accommodations and/or related services but does not need special placement or instruction from a special education teacher. For example, students with ADD or ADHD, who do not qualify under the disability categories of IDEA, often have 504 plans. General education teachers, resource teachers and speech and language therapists usually provide the additional services.

**Section 508** is a component of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and was strengthened in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which mandates that all electronic and information technology produced and disseminated by federal agencies be accessible to persons with disabilities. This includes software and web pages sponsored by the federal government.

**Speech and Language Services** are provided to a child who has a disability involving a communication disorder with the rhythm, articulation, vocal qualities, or the components of language. Services are usually provided by a speech and language pathologist and focus on identification, diagnosis, referral, and counseling. These can include articulation therapy, improving listening, comprehension, and receptive skills, increasing vocabulary and expressive language, and improving students' use of syntax and morphology in language.

**Transition** is the set of activities and services that assist students with disabilities to successfully move from the school environment to the post-school environment, such as employment, post-secondary education, or vocational training. These services can include adult education, independent living, and community participation.

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** is a framework for applying universal design principles to instructional materials, curricula, and educational activities so that they are achievable and challenging for students with a wide range of abilities and needs. The Center for Applied Special Technology developed and used UDL to design curricular materials and products, such as the *E-Reader* and flexible digital materials that can meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

**Universal Design (UD)** is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. This can include both physical and nonphysical features that provide benefit to all users, such as including wheelchair ramps in the design of buildings and captioning features on televisions.

The following sites are useful glossaries and dictionaries that define and explain many terms used in special education.

- <http://www.parentpals.com/2.0dictionary/dictnewsindex.html>
- <http://www.disabilityrights.org/glossary.htm>

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- <http://www.fetaweb.com/06/glossary.sped.legal.htm>
  - <http://www.usd.edu/cd/dictionary/>

Also very useful are these lists of acronyms that are often used in special education.

- <http://www.ericec.org/fact/acronyms.html>
- <http://www.cacse.org/acronyms.htm>

This helpful resource from NICHCY provides an overview of on disabilities including definitions of the 13 types of disabilities defined in IDEA.

- <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/genresc/gr3.htm>

These sites provide copies of the final Regulations of IDEA 2004 and other useful information pertaining to IDEA '04:

- <http://www.ideapartnership.org/whatsnew.cfm>
- <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html>

We hope this glossary of terms and websites is useful to you. Please let us know if you have comments or questions. Email us at [accesscenter@air.org](mailto:accesscenter@air.org).

For additional information on this or other topics,  
please contact The Access Center at [accesscenter@air.org](mailto:accesscenter@air.org).

**The Access Center: Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8**

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