

K12 ACADEMICS — REFERENCE SERIES

The Education **Acronyms** Handbook

IEP, FAFSA, ESSA, IDEA, NAEP, EL, Title I — the alphabet soup of American education, decoded in plain English.

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2026 EDITION

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WHY THIS HANDBOOK?

Education runs on acronyms. A single IEP meeting can involve FAPE, LRE, RTI, and an FBA before lunch. This handbook gathers the terms families, students, and new educators meet most often — what they stand for, and what they actually mean.

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CATEGORY

Laws & Federal Policy

ESEA Elementary & Secondary Education Act

The 1965 law that is the foundation of federal K-12 education funding and policy.

ESSA Every Student Succeeds Act

The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA; sets today's accountability and testing rules, giving states more flexibility.

NCLB No Child Left Behind

The 2001–15 version of ESEA, known for annual testing and adequate-yearly-progress mandates.

IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Guarantees eligible students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education and an IEP.

FERPA Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act

Protects the privacy of student education records and gives parents rights over them.

CONTINUED

Laws & Federal Policy

Title I Title I of ESEA

Federal funding for schools with high percentages of students from low-income families.

Title IX Title IX of the Education Amendments

Prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded education programs.

Section 504 Section 504, Rehabilitation Act

Civil-rights law requiring accommodations (a "504 Plan") for students with disabilities.

McKinney-Vento McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Protects the school-enrollment rights of students experiencing homelessness.

ESSER Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief

Federal COVID-19 relief funds sent to schools (2020–24).

CATEGORY

Special Education

IEP Individualized Education Program

The legal plan of services and goals for a student receiving special education.

504 Plan Section 504 Plan

Accommodations plan for students with a disability who don't need specialized instruction.

FAPE Free Appropriate Public Education

The core IDEA guarantee for students with disabilities, at no cost to families.

LRE Least Restrictive Environment

The IDEA principle of educating students with disabilities alongside peers when possible.

RTI Response to Intervention

A tiered approach to identifying and helping struggling learners early.

Special Education

MTSS Multi-Tiered System of Supports

A broader framework combining academic (RTI) and behavioral supports.

FBA Functional Behavioral Assessment

A process to understand why a behavior occurs, informing a BIP.

BIP Behavior Intervention Plan

A plan to teach and reinforce positive behavior based on an FBA.

SLD Specific Learning Disability

A disorder affecting one or more basic learning processes (e.g., dyslexia).

SLP / OT / PT Related Service Providers

Speech-Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist.

CATEGORY

Assessment & Accountability

NAEP National Assessment of Educational Progress

"The Nation's Report Card" — the only test comparable across all states.

ACGR Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

The standard 4-year high-school graduation-rate measure.

AP Advanced Placement

College-level courses and exams (scored 1–5) offered in high school.

IB International Baccalaureate

A rigorous international diploma program and curriculum.

SAT / ACT College-Entrance Exams

Standardized tests widely used in U.S. college admissions.

CONTINUED

Assessment & Accountability

PSAT / NMSQT Preliminary SAT

Practice SAT that also qualifies students for National Merit Scholarships.

EOC End-of-Course Exam

Subject tests some states require to earn credit or graduate.

SEL Social-Emotional Learning

Instruction in self-awareness, relationships, and responsible decision-making.

SES Socioeconomic Status

A measure of family income/education, strongly linked to outcomes.

CATEGORY

English Learners

EL / ELL English Learner / English Language Learner

A student developing proficiency in English (EL is the current federal term).

ESL / ESOL English as a Second Language

Instructional programs for English learners (ESOL = “for Speakers of Other Languages”).

LEP Limited English Proficient

An older federal term for English learners.

ELP English Language Proficiency

The assessed level of a student’s English skills.

WIDA World-Class Instructional Design & Assessment

A consortium whose ACCESS test measures English-learner proficiency in many states.

Dual Language Dual-Language / Bilingual Education

Programs that build literacy in English and another language.

Students & Demographics

FRPL / FRL Free & Reduced-Price Lunch

A common proxy for student poverty, tied to federal income thresholds.

SWD Students with Disabilities

Students receiving special-education services under IDEA.

G&T Gifted & Talented

Programs for students identified as high-ability or high-achieving.

CEP Community Eligibility Provision

Lets high-poverty schools offer free meals to all students.

ADA / ADM Average Daily Attendance / Membership

Enrollment counts used for funding formulas.

CATEGORY

Agencies & Organizations

ED / USED U.S. Department of Education

The federal agency overseeing national education policy and funding.

NCES National Center for Education Statistics

The federal statistical agency for education data.

SEA / LEA State / Local Education Agency

A state department of education (SEA) or a school district (LEA).

CCD Common Core of Data

NCES's annual database of public schools, districts, and finances.

IPEDS Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

The federal data system for colleges and universities.

NEA / AFT Teacher Unions

National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers.

PTA / PTO Parent-Teacher Association / Organization

Parent groups supporting schools.

CCSS Common Core State Standards

Shared K-12 English and math standards adopted by many states.

CATEGORY

Higher Ed & Financial Aid

FAFSA Free Application for Federal Student Aid

The form families file to access federal (and most state) college aid.

SAI Student Aid Index

The figure (replacing the EFC) that determines federal aid eligibility.

COA Cost of Attendance

A college's total yearly cost: tuition, fees, room, board, and expenses.

Pell Grant Federal Pell Grant

Need-based federal grant aid that does not have to be repaid.

PLUS Loan Parent/Grad PLUS Loan

Federal loans for parents of undergraduates or for graduate students.

529 Plan 529 College Savings Plan

A tax-advantaged account for education savings.

GPA Grade Point Average

A numeric summary of academic grades, usually on a 4.0 scale.

CTE Career & Technical Education

Programs preparing students for skilled careers and industry credentials.

GED General Educational Development

A high-school-equivalency credential.

CATEGORY

Teaching, Instruction & Choice

PD / PLC Professional Development / Learning Community
Ongoing teacher training and collaborative improvement groups.

PBL Project- (or Problem-) Based Learning
Learning driven by extended, real-world projects.

UDL Universal Design for Learning
Designing instruction to be accessible and flexible for all learners.

STEM / STEAM Science, Tech, Engineering, (Arts) & Math
Integrated instruction in these fields (STEAM adds the arts).

ESA Education Savings Account
A school-choice program giving families public funds for approved expenses.

Charter / Voucher School-Choice Options
Publicly funded independent schools (charter) or public funds for private tuition (voucher).

International Terms

Baccalauréat France

The exam and diploma marking the end of secondary school (the “bac”).

Abitur Germany

The secondary-leaving exam qualifying students for university.

Gaokao China

The intensely competitive national college-entrance examination.

ENEM Brazil

The national secondary exam used for university admission.

ATAR Australia

The rank used for university admission (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank).

Matura Central/Eastern Europe

The secondary-school maturity/leaving examination.

A-Levels / GCSE United Kingdom

Advanced-level and general-certificate secondary qualifications.

CXC / CSEC Caribbean

Caribbean Examinations Council secondary certificates.

KEEP LEARNING

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Every term here connects to a deeper guide. Explore special education, financial aid, testing & more — plus a full glossary — among **1,297 free guides** at our resource library.

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