

Inclusive & Interdependent

Language Initiative

Say This, Not This!

A Systems Level Guide to The Language We Use When We Speak About Students with IEPs and the Programs and Services They Receive

The following glossary is designed to promote equity, interdependence, and belonging by providing a systems-level resource to ground us in language that celebrates and accurately describes the students we serve. This glossary will be developed by consensus among many stakeholders, including students, families, staff, and community members, and will challenge convention and regulatory language when necessary and possible in service of transformational equity.

We acknowledge, though, that it is impossible for any one document, no matter how comprehensive, to capture every single viewpoint on an issue, so the glossary should be construed not as an end, but as an entry point. It will be revised as stakeholders' perspectives change, and it is critical to remember that the ultimate authority on language and terminology is the person that the language describes, so we should always defer to individual preference. When unsure what terminology to use, ask! If you are uncomfortable with the way a term is used, or sense that someone else is, assume positive intent, afford grace, and make space for discussion. We are all constantly learning!

*Terms marked with an asterisk (*) are used in special education regulations and case law and cannot be changed without approval from the relevant authority (often state or federal laws and agencies). Alternatives are explained in the explanatory notes of selected terms.

If you would like to request a revision to this glossary, please fill out this form. Submissions are reviewed quarterly. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us!

Comprehensive Table of Terms

Say This	Not This
Students with IEPs *or* Students with Disabilities	*Special Education Students/Special Needs Students or Student with Special Needs*
Students with Emotional Disabilities	*ED Students / Emotionally Disturbed Students/ students with emotional disturbance*
Students without IEPs	*General Education Students/Non-disabled Peers/Typically Developing Peers*
Language-based learning disability	*Print-based disability (when referring to dyslexia)*
Students receiving D75 Special Education Inclusive Services	*Inclusion Students*
Special Education, Accessible Education, Specialized Instruction	*SPED*
Special Class	*Self-contained Class*
Student who is eligible for standard assessments *or* student who is eligible for alternate assessments	*Standard Student, Alternate Assessment Student, NYSAA student*
Student who uses a wheelchair	*Wheelchair-Bound, Confined to a Wheelchair*
Student who receives home instruction	*Homebound Students*
Discuss whether the student can access grade level content with minimal academic support, or whether the student is participating in standard or alternate assessments.	*High/Low Functioning* *Typically Developing*
More inclusive settings	*LRE*
More specialized settings	*MRE*
Special Education Programs *or* delivery/provision of programs or IEP recommended Programs	*Program Services*
In class or separate location ***As an alternative:*** **for primary instruction** ***or* supplementary instruction**	*Push-in/Pull-out*
Autistic students, Students on the autism spectrum	*students with autism*, students afflicted with autism, ASD (autism spectrum disorder)*
Deaf or Hard of Hearing	*Hearing Impaired*
Nonspeaking	*Nonverbal*

Terms by Category

I. Regulatory

Say This	Not This	Explanatory Notes
Students with IEPs or Students with Disabilities	*Special Education Students/special needs students or student with special needs*	"Students with disabilities" is a broader term that includes: students with IEPs students with 504 plans students for whom we are "deemed to know" about the potential presence of a disability "Students with IEPs" specifically refer to students who have Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) that specifically outline programs, services, and accommodations that schools are required to provide We choose to use person-first language when talking about students with disabilities at a higher level so that we don't separate them from other students. We want to treat everyone equally and not make anyone feel different because of their disabilities. Remember, having a disability does not mean there is anything wrong with a person. When speaking about students with specific disabilities for whom we know identity first language is often preferred (e.g., autistic students and deaf students) we will use identity first language.
Most inclusive environment	*LRE**	This term shifts the tone away from battling restrictions toward celebrating inclusion.
More specialized settings	*MRE*	Like the last term, this term shifts focus away from restriction and towards what is happening in these settings: students are getting extra help that they need to succeed that might not work in a more inclusive setting.
Language-based learning disability	*Print-based disability (when referring to dyslexia)*	Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), dyslexia is classified as a specific learning disability (SLD) that originates from a deficit in the phonological component of language.

Say This	Not This	Explanatory Notes
		Using the comprehensive “language-based” learning disability term is both acceptable and accurate, as it describes that the challenge typically manifests in reading fluency or word reading accuracy, spelling, and decoding.
d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing	*hearing impaired**	This is inconsistent with regulatory language but consistent with feedback from the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities.
Students with emotional disabilities	*ED Students / emotionally disturbed students/ students with emotional disturbance*	In summer 2022, New York State, along with about twenty-seven other states, changed the term they use from “emotional disturbance” to “emotional disability.”
Student who is eligible for standard assessments or student who is eligible for alternate assessments	*Standard student, alternate assessment student, NYSAA student*	These negative terms make it sound like type of assessment is a part of identity.
Students without IEPs	*General Education Students*/nondisabled peers*/typically developing peers*	The term 'Students without IEPs' is a more neutral way to talk about students who do not get special education services. It recognizes that there is no one right way to grow and learn. The phrase 'Typically developing peers' is a way of saying that some students are seen as more normal. But everyone has different strengths, weaknesses, and needs support in different ways. Using this phrase makes some students feel left out and not included. It can make them feel like they do not belong in the group. This way of talking can make them feel left out in social activities and schoolwork. *As in the following example, special education regulation uses the term “general education” to describe curriculum, not the students who receive it.
Student who receives home instruction	*Homebound students**	It is important not to use words that limit or restrict, like 'bound.' Today, with technology like Zoom, students who cannot physically come to school are not always stuck at home all the time. They might just not be well enough to be there in person. *Special education regulations use “homebound” to describe the curriculum of home instruction, not the students who receive it.

II. Programmatic

Say This	Not This	Explanatory Notes
Students receiving D75 Special Education inclusive services	*Inclusion students*	The inclusive services program is not a core part of who a student is, it is a service that they get. Therefore, it is important to put “students” first.
Discuss whether the student can access grade level content with minimal academic support, or whether the student is participating in standard or alternate assessments.	*high/low functioning* *typically developing*	These negative terms are based on opinions and can vary depending on the person. They do not consider the fact that students have different things they are good at, as well as areas where they might struggle.
In class or separate location **As an alternative:** **For primary instruction** **or supplementary instruction**	*push in/pull out*	Using the words "in class" or "separate location" is better because it does not make students feel like they are being pulled away from their peers or that therapists are outsiders. Instead, it shows that therapists and other helpers are part of the community and belong in the classroom.
More specialized settings	*MRE*	Like the last term, this term shifts focus away from restriction and towards what is happening in these settings: students are getting extra help that they need to succeed that might not work in a more inclusive setting.
Special Class*	*Self-contained class**	The term “self-contained class” implies that the students in this group need to be, and in fact are, entirely separated from their grade-level peers, which is both not true and creates an unnecessary difference that can lead to othering. * *Both “special class and “self-contained class” are used in regulations and IEPs, making them difficult to change, but we believe that “self-contained class” needs to be changed more urgently.
Autistic students, students on the autism spectrum	*students with autism*, students afflicted with*	*”Students with autism” is used in regulations.

Say This	Not This	Explanatory Notes
	autism, ASD (autism spectrum disorder)	
Special Education Programs or delivery/provision of programs or IEP recommended Programs	*program services*	The term 'program services' is unclear and can mean many different services that New York City Public Schools offers to all its students, not just the ones suggested by the IEP for that specific student.

III. General Terms

Say This	Not This	Explanatory Notes
Student who uses a wheelchair	*Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair*	
Nonspeaking	*Nonverbal*	
"People with Down syndrome" / "Child with Down syndrome"	*"Down syndrome child" / "Down's syndrome"/ "Down's"*	People with Down syndrome should always be referred to as people first. While Down syndrome is listed in many dictionaries with different spellings (with or without an apostrophe "s"), the preferred usage in the United States is Down syndrome.

Resources

Sources for Positive Term

Students with IEPs or Students with Disabilities

Disability advocates, experts implore you to stop saying "special needs."

Employer Assistance and Resource Network explains that person first or identify first language is equally appropriate depending on personal preference. When in doubt, ask the person which they prefer.

This Cerebral Palsy org article specifically explains why we shouldn't say "special education students."

Deaf or hard of hearing

This information from the National Association of The Deaf talks about the importance of community and culture for deaf people. It explains that being deaf is not something that needs to be fixed or cured, as an "impairment" suggests. Instead, being deaf is seen as something to be proud of, an important part of who they are. It is a way to connect with others who are deaf and share a special culture.

Language-based learning disability

NIH offers that Language-based learning disabilities (LBLD) describes a range of neurodevelopmental conditions marked by differences in how individuals understand, process, and use spoken and/or written language, reflected in both cognitive and behavioral patterns. LBLD includes dyslexia (reading), dysgraphia (writing), and dyscalculia (math-related language processing).

Autistic students, students on the autism spectrum

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network says that using person first language in this situation can make it seem like autism is something that needs to be cured and taken away from a person's identity. But many people see autism as a part of who they are and something they are proud of. It is not something separate from them. It is a way for them to connect with others and be part of a special culture.

Additionally, the NEST program, a partnership between New York City Public Schools and New York University, recently sent an open letter to the American Psychological Association, the national organization that sets intellectual disability definitions to ask them to officially stop using the term “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)” as the word “disorder” reinforces the false, ableist need to find a cure.

Student who uses a wheelchair

The NIH style guide says that "Assistive technologies and services should be portrayed as helping and accommodating a person rather than making them 'correct' or emphasizing limitation."

Nonspeaking

The Guild for Human Services says that some people prefer the term "nonspeaking" instead of "nonverbal" because "nonverbal" might make it seem like these people can't use or understand any words at all. In reality they can use and understand words, they just have difficulty speaking them.

Sources for Negative Term

Students with IEPs or Students with Disabilities

This study predicted and observed that persons are viewed more negatively when described as having "special needs" than when described as having a "disability" or having a "certain disability," indicating that special needs is an ineffective euphemism.

Most inclusive environment

The federal government defines least restrictive environment (LRE) in a way that is relative to each student's need which is different from the static and literal application of the term that is used colloquially.

Students with emotional disabilities

This Chalkbeat article highlights advocates and stakeholders' views on the label of 'emotional disturbance, stating that the classification "stigmatizes children with certain behavior differences and is disproportionately applied to children of color."