

Educational Jargon Defined

School reform: A generic term encompassing all kinds of efforts that are taking place to improve schools. Reform efforts focus on all aspects of schooling, from how schools are governed to what curriculum is taught in the classroom.

Curriculum: The subject matter that a teacher presents to students.

Instruction: The ways in which a teacher teaches in the classroom.

Assessment: All of the many different ways (such as a written test, a portfolio of student work, an experiment, or teacher observation) that seek to measure a student's skills or knowledge in a subject area. Assessment can be both formal (students know it is a test) or informal (providing ongoing information to the teacher).

Performance-based assessment: Assessment tasks that require students to perform hands-on tasks, such as writing an essay or conducting a science experiment. Such assessments are seen as alternatives to multiple-choice, machine-scored tests. Also known as authentic assessment.

Alternative assessment: Any form of measuring what students know and are able to do, other than traditional standardized tests. Alternative forms of assessment include portfolios, performance-based assessments, and other means of testing students.

Standardized tests: General achievement tests designed to measure how well a student has learned basic knowledge and skills, in such areas as reading and mathematics. Popular standardized tests include: the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS), and the Stanford Achievement Test Series (SAT-8, SAT-9 etc.— the number refers to which test it is in the series).

Classroom tests/assessment: Classroom tests or assessments are generally devised by the teacher and given in the classroom often at the end of a curriculum unit. Formats may include: multiple-choice, true/false, short answer, essay, performance, exhibits, portfolios, etc.

Large-scale testing: Tests that take place on a larger platform than a classroom or single school. These are usually standardized tests, predominantly multiple choice, designed by large testing companies or textbook publishers for use on a large scale.

IQ test: IQ is shorthand for "intelligence quotient," which is considered to be a person's mental capacity. IQ tests are increasingly controversial because critics claim they measure only a narrow band of intellectual strengths, primarily "school smarts." Others claim the tests are biased against members of some minority groups or problematic in other ways.

Norm-referenced scoring: When tests are scored by comparing one student's work with other students' work.

Criterion-reference scoring: When tests are scored by comparing students' work with specific criteria, or standards.

Rubric: A scoring guide for a test or other assessment task.

Standards: "Content" standards are subject-matter benchmarks designed to guide what students learn and when they should learn it. Most agree that the academic standards of public schools need to be raised—however, there is national debate over how to implement such standards—how prescriptive they should be, and whether they should be national or local, voluntary or mandated.

Standards-based reform: When standards drive reform at a school. For instance, when a school's assessment, curriculum and instruction are aligned with standards.

Systemic reform: A plan for changes that seeks to change the major components of the entire educational system in a district, state, or the nation.