



NEWS RELEASE

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Report Highlights Challenges for English Language Learners On Arizona's High School Exit Exams

Educators struggle to raise passing rates for English language learners

PHOENIX—November 13, 2007—On the first try, about three-quarters of all Arizona students pass the state's high school exit exam in reading/language arts. Meanwhile, about two-thirds of all students pass the exit exams in writing and math. And while the pass rates are not as high as some would like, they're not atypical when compared to other states with exit exams.

But Arizona's English language learners (ELL)—a wide-ranging group of students whose native language is not English—pass these tests in far fewer numbers. Only about 12 percent of ELLs pass the state's reading and writing exit exams on the first try, while 20 percent pass the math exam, making ELLs the student group most likely to fail the exit exams on their first try.

As a result of the poor performance of ELL students and other student groups that have struggled with exit exams, Arizona has joined many other states in launching supports and interventions designed to help students fare better on the tests.

But a new report from the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy finds that while these interventions may be paying off for some students, their impact on ELLs' test scores is largely unknown.

The report—*Caught in the Middle: Arizona's English Language Learners and the High School Exit Exam*—is based on case studies from five high schools in southern Arizona and interviews with nearly 400 educators, students, parents and state and local officials on their experience with the state exit exam program, known as Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards or AIMS.

The report finds that while most high schools are implementing some kind of intervention to raise overall pass rates on AIMS, few have employed strategies designed specifically to raise pass rates for ELL students. And some school staff have questioned the practicality and effectiveness of the few ELL-specific strategies that are in use.

Meanwhile, district officials report that a lack of funding is seriously impeding their ability to adequately prepare ELL students to pass the AIMS tests. School officials also report that preparation for ELLs is hampered by overcrowding, a lack of teachers of English as a second language and English immersion, a lack of paraprofessionals and translators, inadequate materials, and too little time available to work directly with ELL students or collaborate with other teachers.

"English language learners are failing exit exams in droves in Arizona and in other states, and the consequences are dire," said Jack Jennings, President of the Center on Education Policy. "Without a diploma, these students may be unable to go to college or get a good job. And the problem is not going away. Arizona must work much harder to find effective ways to help ELL students pass the exit exam—they deserve a much better effort than they have seen so far."

Communication Breakdown

English language learners currently make up about 15 percent of Arizona's public school enrollment, with the large majority enrolled in grades K-7. The ELL population is also growing fast, having increased by nearly 60 percent since 1994-95, greater than the 34 percent growth in the state's overall student population during the same time. And the report notes that limited English proficiency was seen by most interviewees as the single biggest obstacle to passing the exit exams for ELLs.

But beyond the language barrier, Arizona's ELLs vary widely in terms of their educational skills and needs. For example, many are literate in their native language and have excellent educational backgrounds. Others are not literate or have limited literacy, and have experienced breaks in formal schooling or educational failure. Additionally, some ELLs are refugees who may have emotional and social needs that must be addressed for them to succeed academically.

This diversity highlights the need for educators to have specialized support and training in order to address the particular learning needs of their ELL students. Meanwhile, administrators report difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified and effective teachers for ELL students.

The report also finds that many ELL students and their parents are uninformed or lacked consistent information about some of the fundamental aspects of the AIMS tests. For example, many did not know that the exams are a graduation requirement, that students have multiple opportunities to pass them, and that students can still retake the tests after completing 12th-grade.

Additionally, none of the students or parents interviewed for the report were familiar with the state policy of augmentation, which allows students who fail an exit exam to "augment" their scores with points derived from passing grades in their courses. Further, only a few students suspected that they could graduate without passing AIMS.

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy has been studying state high school exit exams in every state that currently uses them. "The Arizona experience is relevant for many other states and districts that have experienced rapid growth in enrollments of English language learners and are struggling to help them achieve at higher levels on exit exams," said Jennings.

In its report, CEP offers a number of recommendations for state policymakers to help better prepare ELL students to pass the exit exams, including:

- The Arizona Department of Education and school districts should **provide more teacher training and support**, and should **ensure accurate information about AIMS** for ELLs and their parents.
- **The state should increase funding for ELL programs**, and acknowledge that it will take substantially more resources to afford ELL students with an opportunity to succeed on AIMS.
- The Arizona legislature should **make augmentation a permanent option** for all students or give school districts flexibility to consider the circumstances of ELL students.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995 and founded by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.