

**Voices from the Classroom: A Statewide
Survey of Experienced Third-Grade English
Language Learner Teachers on the Impact
of Language and High-Stakes Testing
Policies in Arizona**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

This survey of third-grade teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Arizona regarding school language and accountability policies—Proposition 203 (a voter-initiative that restricts the use of bilingual education programs in Arizona schools), the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and Arizona LEARNS (the state’s high-stakes testing and accountability program)—reveals that (a) these policies have mostly resulted in confusion in schools throughout the state, (b) that there is little evidence that such policies have led to improvements in the education of ELL students, and (c) that these policies may be causing more harm than good.

The majority of teachers surveyed reported that Sheltered (or Structured) English Immersion (SEI)—the state’s mandated method for teaching ELLs since the passing of Proposition 203—is too restrictive and that this approach, as it is being implemented in Arizona, is inadequate for meeting the language and academic needs of ELL students. Teachers provided evidence that SEI differs little from mainstream sink-or-swim education, which is not a legal placement for ELLs under state and federal law. Furthermore, teachers reported that English-only high-stakes testing is driving instruction

for ELL students which fails to take into account students' current levels of English language proficiency and previous opportunities to learn grade-level academic content. Teachers reported that recent changes in language and accountability policies and the strong pressure to teach-to-the-test and raise ELL student scores—despite the students' lack of proficiency in the language of the test—have decreased the morale and career satisfaction of teachers, and have led to high teacher turnover in schools with large ELL student populations.

A representative sample of 40 third-grade ELL teachers from different school districts across the state in urban, rural, and reservation schools, provided researchers with a breadth and depth of insight that cannot be obtained through an analysis of the state's test score data, statistics, and school labels. The key findings from this study are:

- The overwhelming majority of teachers agreed that English is essential, that bilingual education can be an effective means to helping students learn English and achieve academic success, and that Proposition 203 is too restrictive and has resulted in less effective programs for ELL students.
- Teachers have received little to no direction from their school/district administrators or from the state in terms of how SEI differs from Mainstream sink-or-swim instruction. Many (35%) identified themselves as Mainstream teachers and even more (45%) reported that the majority of ELLs in their school are placed in Mainstream classrooms.
- Overwhelmingly, teachers are not opposed to accountability for ELL student achievement, but they see the need for different policies that (a) give ELL students time to learn English before taking the state test in English, (b)

provide ELLs with appropriate accommodations, and/or (c) provide an alternative assessment that ELLs can take until they attain a level of English proficiency sufficient for taking the regular state test in English.

- Twenty-seven of the 40 schools represented had bilingual education programs prior to Proposition 203, and currently only four of these schools continue to offer bilingual education programs (through the waiver provisions of Proposition 203). Even in these bilingual classrooms, however, most are serving students who have already attained English proficiency, rather than the newly arrived and lower-level ELL students for whom bilingual education was intended.
- Teachers reported that few pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) programs existed prior to Proposition 203, and fewer exist today, largely out of confusion over whether such programs are allowed under the new law.
- Despite the fact that many districts and schools have pushed teachers to complete an ESL endorsement, teachers report that there is little support for actual ESL instruction in the classroom, and few schools have ESL curricular programs or materials. Thus, the vast majority of ELL students are receiving little to no ESL instruction in either pull-out programs or within their own classrooms.
- Teachers report that they themselves and administrators are confused about what Proposition 203 allows with regard to primary language support in SEI classrooms. Practices vary widely from school to school. Many

administrators issued school policies that are more restrictive than Proposition 203 itself, and state education leaders have also contributed to the false notion that state law forbids all use of students' native language(s). In schools where primary language support is allowed, teachers are instructed to keep it to a minimum, only a few teachers make use of it, and many teachers feel pressure not to use it by administrators and their peers. Some described a climate of fear in their schools when it comes to providing this assistance to students who need it.

- The overwhelming majority of teachers reported increases in tested subject areas (reading, writing, and math), and a decrease in all other content areas (science, social studies, ESL, art, music, and P.E.).
- Nearly half of the teachers report that test preparation instruction begins before Christmas, often at the beginning of the school year. In the month before the tests, 60 percent are taking one or more hours out of their instructional day to prepare ELLs for the high-stakes tests (despite the fact that most ELL scores will be excluded from school accountability formulas).
- More than half of the teachers reported that ELL students in their schools did not receive the testing accommodations they are entitled to under NCLB. In the few schools that did provide them, practice varied widely due to the lack of a clearly articulated state accommodation policy, and only one teacher felt the accommodations provided were beneficial.

- During the administration of high-stakes tests, the overwhelming majority of teachers reported frequently or occasionally observing their students exhibit the following behaviors: complaining that they could not read the questions or answers, complaining that they could not understand the questions or answers, leaving entire sections of the test blank, randomly filling in bubbles without attempting to read the questions, becoming visibly frustrated or upset, crying, getting sick and/or asking to go to the nurse, and vomiting.
- There was 100 percent agreement among surveyed teachers that it is unfair to use school accountability labels (e.g., *Excelling*, *Performing*, *Underperforming*, *Failing*, etc.) for comparing schools with high numbers of ELLs and schools with low numbers of ELLs.
- Significant improvements in school accountability labels did not correspond with teacher's career satisfaction or with the morale of their fellow teachers.

Analyses of the data collected from this sample combined with existing research support two conclusions: (1) Proposition 203 and its mandates for English-only sheltered English immersion have not improved the education of ELL students as promised, and (2) English-only high-stakes tests have not improved the education of ELL students. In light of these conclusions, the authors offer the following recommendations:

- Proposition 203 should be repealed so that ELLs (and their parents) are afforded the flexibility allowed under federal law to choose from a wide range of quality language education instructional programs.

- Absent a full repeal of Proposition 203, school districts should be given greater flexibility in offering waivers to those parents who want their ELL children to learn English and academic content-area instruction through bilingual instructional programs, and the state should establish clear guidelines for providing quality bilingual education programs.
- The state must provide a clear definition of SEI making explicit how it differs from Mainstream sink-or-swim instruction, ensure that ELLs are not placed in Mainstream classrooms until they are fluent in English, and ensure that SEI classrooms are taught by trained certified teachers who have completed a full ESL Endorsement.
- The relationship between the SEI and ESL Endorsement must be clarified. The SEI Endorsement must not supplant the ESL Endorsement. Rather, the SEI Endorsement should be viewed as minimal professional development and a precursor to the full ESL Endorsement.
- Federal and state policies should be revised to allow the exclusion of ELL students from high-stakes tests in English until students have obtained enough proficiency in English to be tested in a valid and reliable manner.
- In the absence of exclusions, the state should make allowances for and provide clear guidelines in terms of the testing accommodations called for in the federal law. This includes the development and use of tests in the students' primary languages.

- The state should heed the federal law's allowances for alternative content-area assessments for ELLs until they attain enough proficiency in English to participate in the regular state test (with or without accommodations).
- The state should make explicit the fact that most ELL scores are excluded from school accountability formulas. The state should establish an alternative system for ELL impacted schools which tracks the progress of ELLs in various program types.
- At a minimum, the state should immediately make explicit to district- and school-level administrators and teachers which ELL students' tests scores will be excluded from federal and state accountability formulas.