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Language Policy Research Unit

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**Improvements in School Labels Fail to Convey English Language Learner Test Score Decline, Study Says**

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TEMPE, Ariz. (Thursday, September 15, 2005) —Fewer public elementary schools received an Arizona LEARNS accountability label of “Underperforming” in 2004 than in 2002, but test data reveal English Language Learner (ELL) scores declined during that time and that serious achievement gaps between ELLs and their counterparts still exist, according to “Academic Achievement of English Language Learners in Post Proposition 203 Arizona,” a policy brief released by the Language Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University.

This brief, authored by Wayne E. Wright and Chang Pu of the University of Texas, San Antonio, explores the impact of Structured English Immersion (SEI)—the state’s mandated method for teaching ELLs after the passage of Proposition 203—on elementary ELL standardized test performance. Using the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) and Stanford 9 test data from 2002 through 2004, Wright and Pu found (1) the overwhelming majority of third grade ELLs failed the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test and ELLs scored well below the 50th percentile on the Stanford 9, and (2) the few instances of narrowing achievement gaps between ELLs and their counterparts were a function of test scores from Category 1 students—all students minus ELLs that have been enrolled in public education system for less than four years—declining at a faster rate than ELL scores.

“There is no evidence that ELL students are experiencing greater academic success,” Wright and Pu said in the brief. “Positive-looking improvements in school accountability labels mask test-score decline in a large number of elementary schools, particularly those with the greatest number of ELL students”

The brief says state education officials base the claim that English Language Learners are achieving academically on the increase of schools labeled “Performing” or better under the state’s accountability system (Arizona LEARNS). Wright and Pu point out that the

accountability labels were changed in 2003, and that the state allowed schools and districts to exclude the test scores of ELLs who had not been enrolled in the public education system for four years from Category 1. Only Category 1 scores are used for determining accountability labels.

The brief's key findings are:

- There is a general pattern of higher test scores on AIMS in 2003, followed by decline in 2004 for both Category 1 and ELL students on the Reading and Math subtests.
- ELL student percentile rankings on the Stanford 9 rose slightly in 2003 followed by a decline in 2004 while Category 1 student rankings remained relatively stable.
- Improvement in test scores in 2003 corresponds with a period of greater flexibility for schools in offering ESL and bilingual education, while the decline of scores in 2004 corresponds to a period of strict enforcement of Proposition 203 and mandates for English-only instruction.
- The sudden increase in 2004 of ELLs passing the AIMS Writing subtest is questionable, as there was decline or no significant growth on all other subtests for both the AIMS and Stanford 9, and as similar gains were not evident for Category 1 students.
- In terms of the percent passing the AIMS test, ELL students trailed behind Category 1 students by an average of 33 percentage points in Math, 40 points in Reading, and 30 points in Writing.
- On the Stanford 9, ELL students trailed behind Category 1 students by an average of 28 percentile points in Language, 26 points in Math, and 33 points in Reading. The gap increased for all Stanford 9 subtests between 2003 and 2004.
- Category 1 students score lower on the AIMS and Stanford 9 in ELL-Impacted elementary schools (schools that test 30 or more ELL students in third grade) than they do in other elementary schools.
- Due to the lack of reliable data, there are discrepancies in the number of Category 1 and ELL students tested on the AIMS and Stanford 9 within each year and across the three years that are inconsistent with the rapidly growing student population of Arizona. This raises questions on whether some student scores are missing from the data reported to the public, or if students were systematically excluded from taking specific tests.
- There were increases in the number of "Performing" and "Excelling" schools in 2004 despite the general trend of flat or declining AIMS and Stanford 9 scores.

"We encourage state policy makers to reconsider the narrow requirements and current enforcement rules of Proposition 203," Wright and Pu conclude. "In addition, rather than forcing ELLs to take high-stakes English-only tests only to exclude many of their scores from state and federal accountability formulas, we encourage state policy makers to advocate for changes in the requirements of NCLB, or at the very least, heed NCLB's requirement to test ELLs in the *language* and *form* most likely to yield valid and reliable information about what students know and can do."

Find this document on the web at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSTL-0509-103-LPRU.pdf>

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The Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU), co-directed by Dr. Terrence G. Wiley and Dr. Wayne E. Wright, promotes research and policy analysis on the challenges and opportunities posed by global multiculturalism. LPRU activities are intended to inform public discussion and policymaking in state, national, and international contexts.

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