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Language Policy Research Unit

*****NEWS RELEASE*****

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THIRD-GRADE TEACHERS QUESTION EFFECTIVENESS OF ARIZONA'S LANGUAGE, ACCOUNTABILITY POLICIES, STUDY SAYS

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TEMPE, Ariz. (Wednesday, December 14, 2005) — Arizona's English Language Learners are being left behind academically and a survey of the state's third-grade teachers reveals that the state's Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) program and high-stakes testing policy could be the reasons why.

The survey, "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" was released by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University. The survey questioned a representative sample of 40 third-grade English Language Learner (ELL) teachers in urban, rural, and reservation schools in different school districts across the state about the education programs implemented since the passing of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), Arizona LEARNS (the state school accountability program), and Proposition 203 (a voter-initiated policy that restricts bilingual education and requires Sheltered English Immersion).

The key findings from the survey are:

- The overwhelming majority of teachers agreed that English is essential, that bilingual education can be an effective means of 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 what SEI is, and provided evidence

that in practice SEI differs little from mainstream sink-or-swim education, which is not a legal placement for ELLs under state and federal law.

- Overwhelmingly, ELL students are receiving little to no English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction in either pull-out programs or within their own classrooms.
- Teachers reported confusion in their schools about what Proposition 203 allows with regard to primary language support (i.e. providing assistance to a student in his or her native language to help them understand content taught in English). Practices vary widely from school to school. According to the teachers surveyed, 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 reported that they 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 real climate of fear in their schools when it comes to providing this assistance to students who need it.
- 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.
- The overwhelming majority of teachers reported increases of instructional time in tested subject areas (reading, writing, and math), and decreases of instructional time 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 test scores will be excluded from school accountability formulas).
- More than half of the teachers reported that ELLs were not provided with 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.
- During the administration of high-stakes tests, the overwhelming majority of teachers reported frequently or occasionally observing their ELL 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.

Authors Wayne E. Wright, from University of Texas, San Antonio, and Daniel Choi, from Arizona State University, concluded that Proposition 203 and the state's high-stakes testing policy have not improved education for English Language Learners. They offer several recommendations, including:

- School districts should be given greater flexibility in offering waivers to those parents who want their ELL children to learn English and receive content-area instruction through bilingual programs.
- The state should provide a clear definition of SEI, making explicit how it differs from Mainstream sink-or-swim instruction, and ensure these classes are taught by qualified teachers who have completed the full ESL endorsement.
- The state must ensure that ELLs are not placed in Mainstream classrooms until they are fluent in English.
- 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 it explicit to administrators and teachers which ELL students' test scores will be 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.

Find this document on the web at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSSL-0512-104-LPRU.pdf>

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