

# CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## ARIZONA'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND THE HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM





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## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) has been studying state high school exit examinations—tests that students must pass to receive a high school diploma. Each year, we have published a national report with findings about the 26 states that have or will soon implement exit exams.<sup>1</sup> In addition, we have published occasional reports describing our case study research about the effects of exit exams in specific high schools and school districts. An important focus of our national, state, and local research has been the impact of exit exam policies on special populations of students, such as students of color and English language learners.

This report, part of our broader work on exit exams, describes the results of CEP's case study research in five high schools in southern Arizona that enroll significant numbers of English language learners (ELLs). As described in more detail in the Study Methods section, these case studies encompassed interviews with 378 stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, district and school administrators, postsecondary education officials, and state-level officials.

In this report, we present a portrait of how some Arizona educators, students, and families are faring with the state exit exam, known as Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards or AIMS. In particular, we examine how Arizona's exit exam policy is influencing the education of English language learners—a group of students that is caught in the middle of the challenges and controversy about exit exams and education in Arizona. This report also attempts to identify the effects of the exit exam on ELLs in Arizona and to understand why districts and high schools in Arizona continue to struggle to raise pass rates for ELLs.

The lessons learned in Arizona hold relevance for many other states and districts that have experienced rapid growth in enrollments of English language learners and are struggling to help this group of students achieve at higher levels and pass exit exams.

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<sup>1</sup> CEP defines mandatory exit exams as exams that students are required to pass, not just take, to receive a high school diploma, even if students have completed the necessary coursework with satisfactory grades. Further, the exit exam must be a state mandate rather than a local option. For more information on exit exams in general, see CEP's 2007 national report on exit exams, *State High School Exit Exams: Working to Raise Test Scores*, at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

## KEY FINDINGS

Several findings emerged from our Arizona research that cut across the five schools studied:

- ***Differences among ELLs in skills and needs.*** English language learners are not a homogenous group, although many state, district, and school policies treat them as such. Some ELLs are literate in their native language and have an excellent educational background, while others are not literate or have limited literacy, have breaks in formal schooling, or have experienced educational failure. Some ELLs are refugee students who may have emotional and social needs that must be addressed for them to succeed academically. Teachers who work with ELLs need specialized support and training to help them address the particular learning needs of their ELL students and help them pass AIMS.
- ***Limited intervention and remediation strategies for ELLs.*** While most of the high schools we studied have implemented intervention and remediation strategies to raise overall pass rates on the exit-level AIMS, only three high schools had strategies aimed specifically at raising pass rates for ELLs. In some high schools, staff raised concerns about the practicality and effectiveness of the strategies being implemented for ELLs. Further, schools and districts studied were unable to provide evidence that they formally evaluate the effectiveness of these intervention and remediation efforts.
- ***Lack of resources for ELLs.*** District administrators reported that a lack of funding for ELLs is seriously impeding their ability to adequately prepare these students to pass the exit exam. School administrators and teachers stressed that exam preparation for ELLs was also hampered by other resource inadequacies, such as insufficient numbers of teachers of English as a second language (ESL) or structured English immersion (SEI), overcrowding, too few support personnel such as paraprofessionals and translators, inadequate materials, and too little time in the school day to collaborate with their peers or directly work with ELLs. Since many districts have not been implementing mandatory four-hour blocks of structured English immersion instruction (Arizona Department of Education, 2007a), increased state enforcement of this policy may exacerbate funding and resource inadequacies.
- ***English proficiency and test performance.*** Limited proficiency in academic English was seen by almost all participants as the single greatest obstacle to passing the exit exam for ELLs.
- ***Lack of information among students and parents.*** Most students and parents appeared uninformed or lacked consistent information about the exit-level AIMS. While some knew basic information about the exam, such as the subjects tested, many students and parents did not know or were not sure that the exam was a graduation requirement, that students have multiple opportunities to pass it, and that students may continue to retake it after completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade. None of the students or parents we interviewed 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, and only a few students suspected that they could graduate without passing AIMS. Interviews with teachers and staff members revealed that in some high schools, information about augmentation was purposefully withheld from or not made accessible to ELL students and their parents.
- ***Benefit from augmentation.*** According to district and high school officials, many ELLs have benefited from augmentation. Educators expressed concern about whether graduation rates for all students will decline if the policy expires as planned in January 2008.



- ***Unclear impact on ELL graduation rates and postsecondary options.*** The study yielded no clear evidence that the exit exam requirement alone is influencing graduation rates, dropout rates or postsecondary opportunities for ELLs. This is in part due to the lack of longitudinal, disaggregated data for ELLs. Many educators interviewed said, however, that it is too soon to judge the impact of the exam.
- ***Effect on motivation.*** Many teachers and administrators reported that making AIMS a graduation requirement has motivated students to take the exam more seriously and pay more attention in their academic classes. While very few students said that the exam motivates them to try harder, most students did report being concerned about passing the AIMS.
- ***Effect of repeated retakes.*** Students, parents and teachers report that repeatedly taking and failing AIMS causes stress and frustration for ELL students. Interview data confirm that many ELLs have to take the exit exam repeatedly to obtain either passing scores or higher scores for augmentation.
- ***Suggested changes.*** Educators in the five high schools studied suggested many changes that could be made to improve pass rates for ELL students. These include (a) providing alternative educational programs and flexible pathways to graduation for ELLs; (b) increasing collaboration of educators within and between departments and among schools; (c) providing high schools and teachers with additional resources; (d) creating and using a better language assessment and including a diagnostic inventory of a student's academic skills; and (e) creating transitional classes or supports for ELLs who exit language classes and enter mainstream English classes.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center on Education Policy offers the following recommendations for policymakers to help better prepare English language learners to pass the exit exam in Arizona. These recommendations grow out of our own observations during our Arizona case study research, suggestions by interviewees, and knowledge gained from our broader research on exit exams. More detail about each of these recommendations can be found in the final section of this report.

1. ***Provide more training to and support for teachers.*** The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) and Arizona school districts should consider the challenges that educators report in trying to adequately prepare ELLs for AIMS and should craft policies and implement practices that specifically address those challenges.
2. ***Increase funding for ELLs.*** The state should acknowledge that it will take substantially more resources than districts currently have to adequately educate ELLs to afford them the opportunity to succeed on the exit-level AIMS. This will be particularly important as districts begin to implement the mandate for four hours of SEI instruction and reduce class size.
3. ***Make augmentation permanent for all students or give school districts flexibility to consider the circumstances of ELL students.*** The Arizona legislature should either extend the augmentation policy permanently for all students or amend existing legislation to allow flexibility in considering the circumstances of ELLs.
4. ***Ensure accurate information about AIMS is accessible to ELLs and their parents.*** The ADE and school districts should take steps to evaluate the effectiveness of communication with ELLs and their families about the role of AIMS in high school graduation.

5. ***Craft SEI models informed by research.*** The state’s structured English immersion models should be rethought to require school districts to implement instructional models that are truly research-based.
6. ***Use data to guide policies and instruction for ELLs.*** The state and districts should collect and make available data that can be used to guide policies and instruction for ELLs.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

The next two sections of this report provide background information in three main areas:

- The CEP study, including its rationale, study questions, and study methods
- State policies and legal actions in Arizona affecting the exit exam and education for English language learners
- Findings from prior research about learning needs of ELLs and effectiveness of various programs to prepare these students for academic success

The central sections of the report present findings from our research in Arizona about the following issues:

- Influence of Arizona’s exit exam on various aspects of education for ELLs
- Major challenges facing educators in preparing ELLs to pass the exit exam
- Communications by schools with students and parents
- Varying approaches for helping ELLs to acquire English so they can pass the exit exam
- The role of English language learners’ culture in their schooling and exam performance

The final sections consider ideas for improving exit exam policies related to English language learners from two sources:

- Suggestions from Arizona’s educators, students, and parents
- Conclusions and more detailed explanations of recommendations from CEP

## Box A. Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations Used in This Report

**Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA):** An exam published by Harcourt in 2006 that assesses students' general acquisition of English by measuring listening, speaking, reading, writing, and writing conventions.

**Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS):** A standards-based exam, aligned to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, that assesses reading, writing, and mathematics. High school students in Arizona are expected to achieve passing scores on all three subjects tested by AIMS to receive a state-validated high school diploma.

**English language learner (ELL):** A student whose native language is something other than English and who is learning English as a second language.

**Fluent English proficient (FEP):** A term used to describe a student who scores at the proficient level on the state-mandated English language proficiency assessment.

**Limited English proficient (LEP):** A term used to describe a student whose English proficiency is still developing.

**Bilingual education:** The use of two or more languages for instruction. In the United States, students in most bilingual classes or programs are those who have not acquired full proficiency in the English language and are taught academic content in their native language (usually Spanish) while continuing to learn English. In bilingual models, academic content is also taught in English (often using sheltered English instruction techniques); the amount of English instruction in subject area content increases and the amount of native language instruction in content decreases as students move up in grade level and get closer to transitioning to mainstream classrooms.

**Dual language:** A program that provides literacy and content instruction to all students through two languages and that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy, grade-level academic achievement, and multicultural competence for all students.

**English as a second language (ESL):** The teaching of English to non-English-speaking or limited-English-proficient students to help them learn and succeed in school.

**English language development (ELD):** The teaching of English language skills to students who are learning English. ELD is distinguished from other types of instruction (such as math, science, or social studies) in that its content emphasizes the English language itself. ELD instruction focuses on phonology (the sound system of language), morphology (the internal structure and forms of words), syntax (English word order rules), lexicon (vocabulary), and semantics (how to use English in different situations and contexts).

**Structured English immersion (SEI):** An English language acquisition process for limited English proficient children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. Books and instructional materials are in English and all reading, writing, and subject matter are taught in English. Although teachers may use a minimal amount of the child's native language when necessary, no subject matter should be taught in any language other than English, and children in this program learn to read and write solely in English.

*Sources: Arizona Revised Statutes, § 15-75; Arizona Department of Education, 2007; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007; and Howard et al., 2007.*

## Background on the CEP Study

The story told in this report is not just about schools and students in Arizona. For a variety of reasons, decisions about how best to educate English language learners have resonance across the nation. Schools today are paying more attention than ever before to increasing achievement for English language learners. Both the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and high school exit exam policies are holding districts accountable for the educational progress of ELLs and forcing states to acknowledge the inequities that have long existed between ELLs and native English-speaking students. Lackluster test scores and alarming dropout rates among ELLs are fueling concerns in the education and business community. At the same time, enrollments of ELLs are soaring in many states and school districts, and policymakers at the federal and state level are hastening to respond to these changing demographics.

### DEMOGRAPHIC RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction, more than 5.1 million English language learners were enrolled in K-12 public schools in 2004-05, an increase of almost 61% since 1994-95. Six states enroll more than 100,000 ELLs—California, Arizona, Texas, Illinois, Florida, and New York. Only one of these states, Illinois, does not have a mandatory exit exam that students must pass to receive a high school diploma. Further, many states have experienced tremendous growth in numbers of ELLs. **Figure 1** displays the percentage of states' K-12 enrollments comprised of ELLs. **Figure 2** shows the rate of growth of the ELL population in each state from 1994 to 2005. Both states with significant numbers of ELLs and those experiencing recent surges in ELLs face many challenges in educating and preparing these students to pass mandatory high school exit exams.

Like many states, Arizona has experienced steady growth over the past decade in its population of English language learners, who make up about 15% of the state's public school enrollment. Arizona law defines an English language learner as "a child who does not speak English or whose native language is not English, and who is not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English" (Arizona Revised Statutes, § 15-751(5)). Almost 175,000 ELLs were enrolled in Arizona public schools in 2005—a 20% increase since school year 2000-01. Further, about 80% of all ELL students in Arizona are enrolled in grades K-7. Spanish is the primary language of almost 90% of Arizona's ELLs in grades 3-8 (thinkAZ, 2006).

As shown in **figure 3**, the number of ELLs in Arizona has grown more rapidly than overall K-12 enrollments.

This rapid growth, along with a complex and changing set of state policies governing the exit exam and ELL education, makes Arizona a rich context for studying exit exam issues.

**Figure 1. Percentage of States' Total K-12 Enrollment That Consists of English Language Learners**

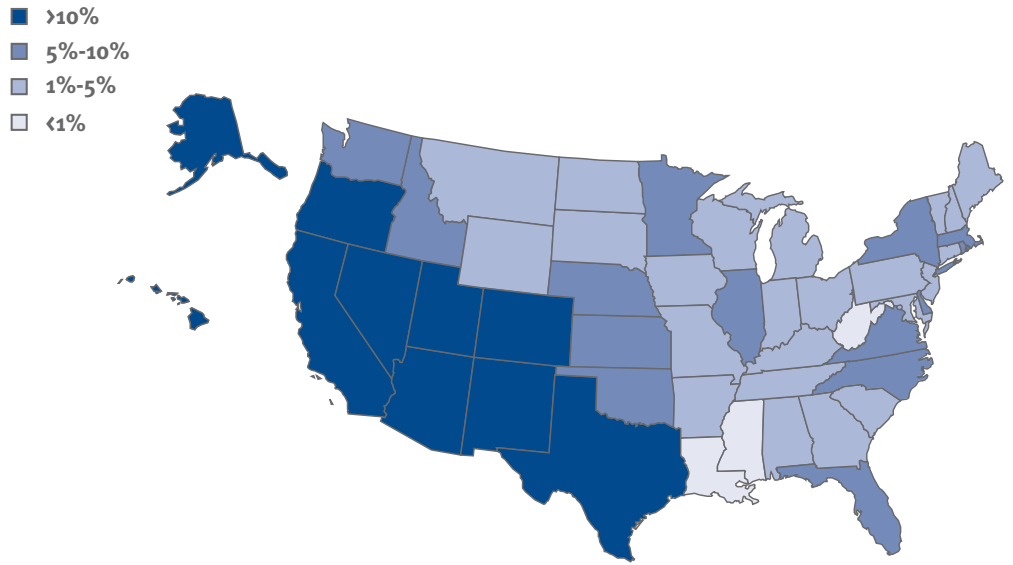


Figure reads: Between 1% and 5% of the students enrolled in grades K-12 in Maine are English language learners.  
 Source: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006a.

**Figure 2. Growth in States' ELL Population between 1994 and 2005**

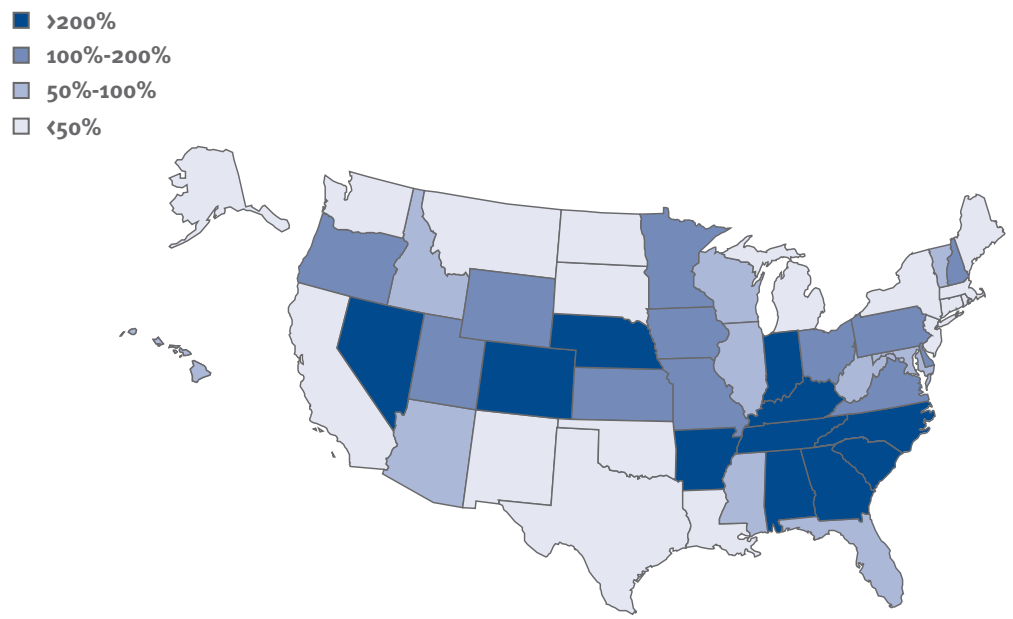


Figure reads: Between 1994 and 2005, the number of English language learners in North Carolina schools grew by more than 200%.  
 Source: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006a.

**Figure 3. K-12 Enrollment Growth in Arizona for All Students and for English Language Learners, 1994-95 to 2004-05**

Year	Total Enrollment	Growth from 94-95	ELL Enrollment	Growth from 94-95
1994-95	766,915	0.0%	98,128	0.0%
1995-96	806,869	5.2%	72,253	-26.4%
1996-97	815,877	6.4%	93,528	-4.7%
1997-98	833,238	8.6%	112,522	14.7%
1998-99	841,647	9.7%	139,599	42.3%
1999-2000	850,840	10.9%	125,311	27.7%
2000-01	875,659	14.2%	135,248	37.8%
2001-02	903,518	17.8%	135,503	38.1%
2002-03	978,128	27.5%	149,354	52.2%
2003-04	1,011,959	32.0%	144,145	46.9%
2004-05	1,029,509	34.2%	155,789	58.8%

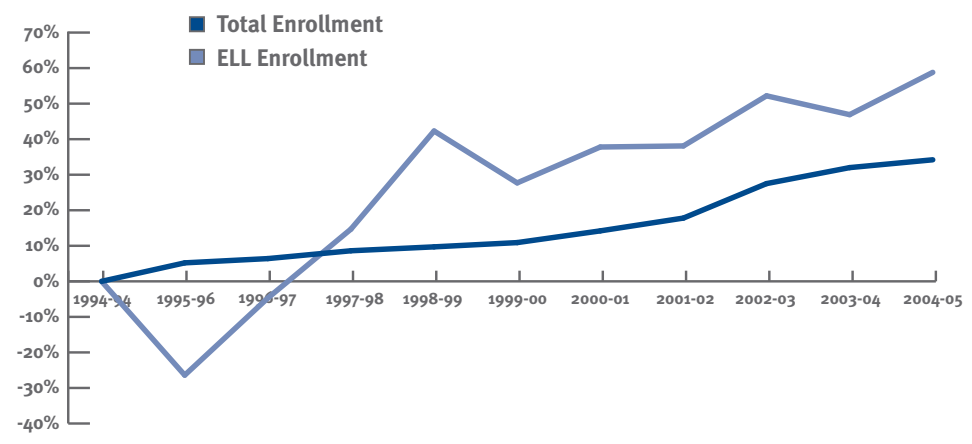


Figure reads: Between school years 1994-95 and 2004-05, the number of English language learners enrolled in Arizona schools grew by 58.8%, a faster rate of growth than the 34.2% increase in overall student enrollments during that period.

Source: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006b.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

This study of exit exams in Arizona set out to address several questions:

- How are districts and high schools in Arizona attempting to support English language learners in passing the high school exit exam?
- What kinds of challenges are school districts and high schools facing in raising pass rates for ELLs on the exit exam?

- How is the exit exam influencing ELLs' educational experiences, including graduation rates and postsecondary opportunities?
- What kinds of changes in policy and practice do key stakeholders (including administrators, teachers, parents, and students) recommend to improve pass rates for ELL students?

## STUDY METHODS

CEP's research in Arizona employed a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2003; Patton, 2003). This approach allowed us to analyze cases in layers (by state, district, and school) using multiple sources of evidence. Case study high schools were selected based on several criteria, including school type (urban or rural), language acquisition options (bilingual education, structured English immersion, English as a second language), and number of ELLs served.

### Selection of Schools

While we chose high schools that would represent "typical cases" (Patton, 2003), we also chose one high school because its ELL population included refugee students, and we wanted to compare that high school with others that served mainly Spanish-speaking ELLs. At the outset, we attempted to include high schools that represented different geographic areas of Arizona but were unable to gain the participation of high schools in areas other than southern Arizona in the time frame of the current study. **Table 1** displays the AIMS pass rates for each of the five schools and their school districts. **Table 2** summarizes the characteristics of the high schools included in the study. Each high school, as well as each school district, was given a pseudonym to maintain its anonymity.

### Data Collection and Analysis

To capture divergent perspectives, CEP staff conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, parents, district- and school-level administrators, community education stakeholders (including officials from postsecondary institutions) and key state-level actors (including officials from the Arizona Department of Education and the state English Language Learner Task Force).<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted until the data became saturated; in other words, we continued to interview participants until no new apparent themes were generated both within the schools and across schools. For the most part, interviews with teachers, parents, and students were conducted in focus groups. We typically conducted one-on-one interviews with key personnel, such as district and school administrators, ELL coordinators, dropout specialists, and parent liaisons. We spent four to five days in each high school, conducting interviews and observing classrooms. Interviews with some district administrators and state-level actors were conducted over the phone. Interviews with parents were particularly difficult to arrange, as noted in the discussion of parental involvement later in this report.

**Table 3** displays the number of interviews conducted at each high school with different stakeholder groups.

<sup>2</sup> We interviewed eight state-level actors and six individuals representing four postsecondary institutions (both two- and four-year colleges).

**Table 1. Pass Rates on AIMS, 2005-06**

School (Pseudonym)	Math		Reading		Writing	
	School	District	School	District	School	District
<b>Azul High School</b>						
% of all 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	52%	50%	51%	52%	47%	49%
% of ELL 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	24%	25%	9%	10%	7%	6%
ELLs cumulative pass rate	19%	18%	10%	10%	4%	6%
<b>Verde High School</b>						
% of all 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	56%	64%	52%	68%	44%	61%
% of ELL 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	26%	20%	10%	11%	3%	7%
ELLs cumulative pass rate	41%	N/A	42%	N/A	50%	N/A
<b>Café High School</b>						
% of all 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	54%	52%	67%	59%	52%	49%
% of ELL 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	23%	30%	5%	16%	2%	8%
ELLs cumulative pass rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Rojo High School</b>						
% of all 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	36%	36%	64%	64%	54%	54%
% of ELL 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	8%	8%	31%	31%	15%	15%
ELLs cumulative pass rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Blanco High School</b>						
% of non-ELL 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	43%	64%	56%	68%	49%	61%
% of ELLs 10 <sup>th</sup> graders passing	4%	20%	7%	11%	7%	7%
ELLs cumulative pass rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table reads: In the 2005-06 school year, 52% of all 10<sup>th</sup> graders at Azul High School in Arizona met or exceeded the required passing score, and 24% of ELL 10<sup>th</sup> graders met or exceeded the required passing score. Only 19% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade English language learners achieved a passing score in math by the end of their senior year in 2006 (the cumulative pass rate).

Note: The pass rates displayed in the table represent the percentage of students who met or exceeded the passing score on the exit exam for the subject shown. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade pass rates represent the percentage of students who passed the test the first time it was administered in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The cumulative pass rates represent the total percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who met or exceeded the passing score by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, either on their first attempt or after several attempts.

Source: Data provided by schools participating anonymously in CEP's case studies of exit exams and ELLs in Arizona, 2007 and ADE, 2006.



**Table 2. Descriptive Data for High Schools in CEP Study, 2005-06**

	<b>Azul</b>	<b>Verde</b>	<b>Café</b>	<b>Rojo</b>	<b>Blanco</b>
School Type	Urban (pop. ≥ 250,000)	Urban (pop. ≥ 250,000)	Urban (pop. < 100,000)	Rural	Urban (pop. ≥ 250,000)
Title I school?*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Total enrollment**	2,000	2,000	2,500	500	1,500
White	4%	5%	23%	37%	38%
Latino	90%	87%	70%	61%	43%
African American	2%	3%	2%	1%	13%
Asian	1%	1%	1%	0%	3%
American Indian	3%	4%	2%	1%	3%
ELLs	17%	18%	5%	16%	19%
Migrant	0%	0%	50%	4%	0%
Free or reduced lunch	79%	61%	67%	68%	57%

Table reads: Azul High School is an urban school that is located in a territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more. The school receives federal Title I funds to improve achievement for disadvantaged students and enrolls 2,000 students. Of these students, 4% are white and 90% are Latino; 17% are English language learners.

\* Not all Title I high schools had “schoolwide” designation; some were targeted assistance schools.

\*\* Numbers rounded.

Source: Data provided by schools participating anonymously in CEP’s case studies of exit exams and ELLs in Arizona, 2007, and U.S. Department of Education, 2005.

**Table 3. Summary of Participants Interviewed**

<b>High School</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>English Language Learners</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Administrators (District and School Level)</b>	<b>Non-Teaching Staff*</b>	<b>Total # of Interviewees</b>
Blanco	San Cayetano	27	36	10	4	8	85
Verde	San Cayetano	10	17	11	4	3	45
Rojo	Kendrick	2	17	10	3	1	33
Azul	Fremont	3	59	10	2	3	77
Café	Escudilla	21	76	19	4	4	124
<b>Total</b>		<b>63</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>364</b>

Table reads: In Blanco High School in the San Cayetano School District (both pseudonyms), staff from the Center on Education Policy interviewed 27 parents, 36 students who are English language learners, 10 teachers, 4 administrators, and 8 non-teaching staff, for a total of 85 people interviewed.

\*Non-teaching staff include counselors, drop-out specialists, coordinators, and parent liaisons. The perspectives of these staff are included with teachers unless otherwise noted in the text.

Source: Center on Education Policy, case studies of exit exams and ELLs in Arizona, 2007.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. We interviewed ELLs who emigrated from or were born in Afghanistan, Iran, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Yugoslavia, and the United States. Interviews with Spanish-speaking parents and students were conducted in Spanish by a native Spanish-speaking researcher, and were then transcribed and translated into English. We also collected internal documents, archival records and testing data for each school as well as policy documents at the state, district, and school levels.

Interviews were analyzed for themes and coded; to enhance internal reliability, multiple coders were used for specific material. A case record for each high school was constructed based on the data collected, and a cross-case analysis was performed analyzing state- and school-level data. To assist us in our analysis we used NVivo, a qualitative research data analysis program.

## Background on Exit Exams in Arizona

Arizona is, in a word, complex. Immigration issues, “English only” laws, and legal challenges to the state’s education of ELLs and to the exit exam requirement have created challenges for educators as they construct curricula and deliver instruction to prepare ELLs to pass the state exit exam. In many ways, English language learners are caught in the middle of the conflicting ideologies and political arguments that have permeated Arizona’s communities and their public schools.

### DESCRIPTION OF ARIZONA’S EXIT EXAM AND PASS RATES

Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards is a standards-based, state-mandated exam designed to determine prospective high school graduates’ mastery of state standards and curriculum frameworks. The exam was first administered in 1999, and diplomas were first withheld in 2006.<sup>3</sup> AIMS tests students’ knowledge in reading, writing, and mathematics and is aligned to standards for 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the grade in which it is first administered. Students are allowed five retakes beginning in the fall of 11<sup>th</sup> grade and may retake the exam an unlimited number of times after 12<sup>th</sup> grade if they have met all other graduation requirements. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade initial administration is used for NCLB purposes; unlike many other states, Arizona uses the same cut scores for both NCLB and graduation.<sup>4</sup>

Students identified as limited English proficient and fluent English proficient can take the exam with standard accommodations for up to two years. Examples of standard accommodations include changing the timing or scheduling of the exam, changing the test setting, or using a translation dictionary. ELL students may also have “limited oral translation in the student’s native language” of the testing directions (ADE, 2005a). Even with accommodations, English language learners in Arizona perform below the state average in every measure of achievement on AIMS, as shown in **table 4**. In addition, ELL students are tied with Native American students for the lowest graduation rate in the state at 59% (ADE, 2006).

Controversy has surrounded Arizona’s exit exam since its inception. For example, new AIMS items were introduced in 2005 based on new standards adopted in 2003 and 2004, and consequently the state set a new scoring scale for the test in May 2005. This process resulted in

<sup>3</sup> Withholding of diplomas was originally slated to take place in 2001 but was delayed.

<sup>4</sup> Nineteen states with current or planned exit exams use the same exam to fulfill NCLB testing requirements. Ten states have lower cut scores for their high school graduation requirement than for NCLB purposes (CEP, 2007b).

**Table 4. AIMS High School Exit Exam Initial and Cumulative Pass Rates, 2005-06**

Student Group	Math		Reading/Language Arts		Writing		High School Graduation Rates
	Initial Pass Rate	Cumulative Pass Rate	Initial Pass Rate	Cumulative Pass Rate	Initial Pass Rate	Cumulative Pass Rate	
All students	64.5%	76.9%	71.0%	80.1%	64.1%	80.9%	75%
White/Anglo	78.3%	84.1%	85.2%	86.7%	75.4%	86.9%	83%
African American	50.5%	66.3%	62.4%	73.6%	58.3%	74.8%	72%
Hispanic	49.7%	68.1%	55.6%	71.5%	49.8%	73.0%	64%
Native American	41.4%	62.7%	47.5%	69.9%	51.7%	70.5%	59%
Asian/Pacific Islander	82.9%	85.2%	81.7%	84.4%	78.2%	84.7%	86%
Limited English proficient	20.7%	46.4%	12.6%	34.0%	12.4%	37.4%	59%
Migrant	44.3%	72.1%	40.4%	63.2%	32.7%	66.8%	75%
Students with disabilities	21.4%	14.2%	29.2%	27.4%	18.9%	26.2%	61%
Economically disadvantaged	48.7%	68.2%	54.0%	70.9%	48.6%	72.1%	75%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 20.7% of the English language learners (shown as “limited English proficient” students in the table) who took the AIMS math test passed it the first time they took it in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. By the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 46.4% of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders who were English language learners had passed the AIMS math test on their first try or after multiple attempts.

Note: Initial and cumulative pass rates represent different cohorts of students. Initial pass rates are for 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who took and passed the test for the first time in 2005-06. Cumulative pass rates represent the total percentage of students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade in 2005-06 who achieved passing scores by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade either on their first attempt or after several attempts.

Source: Center on Education Policy, 2007b and ADE, 2006.

lower cut scores and higher pass rates in all three subjects tested (CEP, 2005). These changes have led some to question the rigor of the exam as well as the accuracy of the data (Garcia, 2005; Garcia & Ryan, 2004).

### THE POLICY OF AUGMENTATION

Currently, students have an alternate path to graduation called augmentation. Through augmentation, students who fail one or more sections of the assessment may “augment” their scores with points derived from course grades of “C” or better. To qualify for this alternative, a student must meet all of the following requirements: (1) complete all required courses with a passing grade; (2) take the AIMS assessment each time the test is offered; and (3) participate in remediation programs available at the student’s school in the failed subject area(s). However, the augmentation policy is set to expire automatically on January 1, 2008.

**Table 5** shows the number of students who graduated with the assistance of augmentation. Although students with disabilities can qualify for augmentation, they also may be exempted from the exam altogether under a different set of state policies. English language learners, however, do not have that option. Officials from the Arizona Department of Education said that they do not have disaggregated information about the number of students in various groups, such as ELLs, who used augmentation to graduate.

**Table 5. Changes in the Number of Arizona's High School Graduates with and without Augmentation from 2005 to 2007**

Year	Number of high school graduates	Enrolled high school seniors	High school seniors who did not pass AIMS and were not able to graduate because of the exam	High school seniors who did not pass AIMS but graduated with augmentation
2005-06*	48,000**	64,000**	332	2,855
2006-07	58,500**	82,000**	525	3,425

\* Students were able to graduate in December 2005 without having to pass AIMS.

\*\* Numbers have been rounded.

Source: Sanchez, 2007.

## LEGAL CHALLENGES AND POLICY ACTIONS

A tangled web of lawsuits and legislative actions complicates the already challenging task of educating ELLs in Arizona. We highlight these key lawsuits and policy actions in order to better understand how the state's unique context affects the education of English language learners.<sup>5</sup>

### Flores v. Arizona and Related Funding Issues

Important legal battles continue to be waged in Arizona over the education of ELLs and the exit exam requirement. The lawsuit that became *Flores v. Arizona* was first brought against the state in 1992 by the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest. This suit raised issues about the adequacy of programs for Arizona's limited English proficient students. In 2000, the court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, finding that state funding for ELLs was arbitrary and inadequate, and ordered Arizona to improve funding for English language learners. Specifically, the court ruled that there were too many students in classrooms; too few classrooms, qualified teachers, and teacher aides; and inadequate tutoring programs and teaching materials.

In August 2000, the court required the Arizona board of education and the ADE to adopt rules and policies to address these issues. In October of that same year, the court ordered the state to conduct a cost study to determine the amount of funding required to adequately educate ELLs. Completed in May 2001, this study provided a range of funding options from \$0 to \$4,600 per ELL student.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these events, see Mahoney, Thompson, & MacSwan, 2004 and 2005.

In December 2001, the legislature passed House Bill 2010, which increased funding for ELLs from approximately \$179 to \$340 per pupil, provided additional funds for teacher training and other programs, and ordered another cost study to be completed by August 2004 (as required by the *Flores* consent order).

The cost study was completed in August 2004 by consultants for the National Conference of State Legislatures and released in final form in February 2005; it provided a funding range from \$670 to \$2,571 per pupil depending on variables such as grade level and risk factors (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Several other legislative and legal actions ensued, and in July 2005, an attorney for the *Flores* case asked a federal court to suspend the exit exam requirement for ELL students until the state complied with an earlier court order to improve instruction for these students. The court granted a motion to exempt ELLs from the test until the state could demonstrate that it was properly funding ELL programs and providing sufficient time for these students to compete fairly on the exam. When the legislature failed to act, a fine of \$500,000 per day was levied, eventually totaling \$22 million.<sup>6</sup> However, legislative leadership and the state superintendent filed an appeal and took the case back to court. Consequently, English language learners in the class of 2006 were required to pass the exam in order to receive a high school diploma.

After a court-ordered evidentiary hearing for the *Flores* case was held in January 2007, the court once again ruled that the legislature's attempts to meet the educational needs of English language learners fell short of adequate. The judge in March 2007 ordered the legislature to comply by the end of the legislative session, but the session ended without a resolution to this issue. On October 10, 2007, a U.S. district court found in favor of the plaintiffs, concluding that the state had willfully violated the March 2007 court order. The judge directed the state to appropriate funds by the end of the 2007 legislative session to help ELLs overcome their language difficulties. The judge also concluded that a two-year limit on funding for ELL instruction fails to fund the instruction necessary for students to attain proficiency in English.

### **Proposition 203**

During the years of the *Flores* battle, several important policy actions were taken by the state legislature and by Arizona voters themselves. One key action occurred in November 2000, when Arizona voters approved Proposition 203, which repealed bilingual education laws. Prop 203 also required all classes to be taught in English and required ELLs to be instructed separately in structured English immersion programs for one year. However, Prop 203 did allow for waivers of this requirement and permitted high school ELLs to receive bilingual education if the parents requested a waiver.

### **House Bill 2064**

In March 2006, the legislature passed House Bill 2064, an emergency measure that appropriated \$2.6 million in fiscal year 2005-06 and \$31.4 million in fiscal year 2006-07 for English language learner programs from the state general fund. HB 2064 also established a nine-member Arizona English Language Learners Task Force, charged with developing and adopting research-based models of structured English immersion, among other duties.<sup>7</sup> In addition, HB 2064 revised the process for assessment, classification, reassessment, and monitoring of pupils with a primary or home language other than English.

<sup>6</sup> These fines never made it to English language learners, but were lost in the legal battles.

<sup>7</sup> Three members of the Task Force are appointed by the Superintendent of Public Instruction, two by the Governor, two by the president of the state Senate, and two by the speaker of the state House of Representatives.

### The ELL Task Force

In June 2007, the nine-member ELL Task Force proposed SEI models to be used in school districts and charter schools in Arizona. The Task Force decided that ELLs must be instructed in English, grouped together in an SEI setting, become fluent in English within one year, and have a minimum of four hours of English language development during the first year they are classified as an English language learner. Furthermore, the Task Force set explicit structures for instruction at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. For example, at the high school level, instruction is divided into four discrete courses (pre-emergent, emergent, basic, and intermediate), depending on the student's language assessment score (see **table 6**).

**Table 6. SEI Models Adopted by the ELL Task Force for High School Students**

Pre-Emergent, Emergent, and Basic	Intermediate
Conversational English and Academic Vocabulary (one hour)	English Language Arts (two hours)
English Reading (one hour)	Academic English Reading (one hour)
English Writing (one hour)	Academic English Writing and Grammar (one hour)
English Grammar (one hour)	

Source: Arizona Department of Education, 2007c.

The ELL Task Force also set rules for class size, grouping processes, and teacher qualification requirements. These SEI models are to go into effect for the 2008-09 school year, and schools will have to adopt them to receive full funding for ELLs.

### Espinoza v. State of Arizona

A separate but related lawsuit, *Espinoza v. State of Arizona*, challenges the constitutionality of the exit exam in Arizona. The suit was filed on April 8, 2006, on behalf of a group of students in the class of 2006 who had met all graduation requirements except passing the exam. The plaintiffs argue that the state inadequately funds education, thereby depriving many students of the services they need to reach state academic standards and pass AIMS. The suit mentions three specific groups of students harmed by the exit exam requirement—racial/ethnic minority students, low-income students, and English language learners.

On May 15, 2006, a superior court judge denied the request to suspend the exam for students in the class of 2006, explaining that it would be easier to distribute diplomas later if the plaintiffs prevailed than to get students to return diplomas if the court eventually upheld the exit exam. As of July 2007, an agreement had not been reached. The case is in the discovery/trial preparation phase with a trial set for January 2008. For now, ELL students must still achieve passing scores on the AIMS to receive a high school diploma.

### Other Recent Policy Developments

English language learners in Arizona are also affected by other recent laws and initiatives passed in response to concerns about illegal immigration. Proposition 200, a ballot initiative that passed with the support of 56% of the electorate, requires “all public agencies within this state to cooperate with federal immigration authorities to discourage illegal immigration”

(Arizona Secretary of State, 2004). Arizona residents will have to show proof of U.S. citizenship for voter registration as well for other public benefits. Further, in 2008, a new employer sanctions law will go into effect. This law authorizes the county attorney to suspend (for a first offense) or revoke (for a second offense) the business license of any employer who intentionally or knowingly employs an illegal immigrant (Arizona Revised Statutes, §23-212). These laws have heightened fear and panic among immigrants in Arizona (Associated Press, 2007; González, 2007).

Thus, as of October 2007, almost 15 years after *Flores*, educators, students, and parents remain in limbo about funding for English language learners and the future of the exit exam in a state environment hostile to many ELL students and their families.

## Research on Preparing ELLs for Academic Success

Research has revealed a significant achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs on high-stakes assessments, such as tests used for NCLB and state high school exit exams (CEP, 2006, 2007a; Escamilla et al., 2003; Mahon, 2006). There is also evidence that high-stakes tests like exit exams have significant impacts on the lives of ELLs (Escamilla et al., 2003; Menken, 2006; Thurlow & Liu, 2000; Wright & Choi, 2006). The consequences of not passing high school exit exams are dire; without a high school diploma, students may be unable to go on to post-secondary education or even obtain a job. In light of these consequences, assessment issues and concerns for ELLs should be considered in high school exit exam policies (Abedi et al., 2000; August, 2007; Butler & Stevens, 2001; Duran, 1989; Francis et al., 2006; García, 2003).

Policymakers and educators generally agree that English language learners need to become proficient in academic English (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and have access to academic content in order to pass a high school exit exam. While these two prerequisites seem to make sense, there is considerable debate and discussion about the best ways to help students acquire a second language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Gersten et al., 2007; Greene, 1997; Lindholm-Leary, 2006; Rossell & Baker, 1996; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Slavin & Cheung, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Traditionally these debates have focused on whether some form of native language instruction or “English only” methods are most effective. To settle these debates, three states—Arizona, California, and Massachusetts—have enacted English only<sup>8</sup> laws that require many ELLs to be instructed in English and restrict the use of bilingual education.

What can research tell us about successful programs adopted by schools in English-only states like Arizona? Recent studies in Massachusetts and California identified some common characteristics of schools that have improved the academic progress of ELLs. A study conducted by the Rennie Center (2007) looked at effective practices for English language learners in Massachusetts, where voters approved a 2002 ballot initiative mandating English immersion as the primary means of instruction for most ELL students. The Rennie researchers found several common characteristics of successful programs, including the following (p. 19):

- The schools believe they cannot effectively serve ELLs with a one-size-fits-all policy.
- Constant attention to data, research, and outside resources is essential.

<sup>8</sup> We use the term “English-only” because of its familiarity to readers; however, it is important to point out that while some states have adopted legislation that favors instruction in English for ELLs, the legislation does not eliminate instruction in students’ native language. These three states differ in their interpretation and implementation of this type of legislation.



- The schools contain adults who hold positive attitudes, values, and beliefs about immigrant students and their families.
- Highly skilled teachers and leaders are the cornerstone of success in these schools.
- Support extends beyond the classroom.
- Students benefit from a staged reclassification process and continued support after reclassification.

Another study by the American Institutes of Research and WestEd (Parrish et al., 2006) found similar results when studying schools with high English language learner achievement in California, another English-only state. The report identified four key features that were present in schools that had success with ELL students (p. IV-1):

- Staff capacity to address ELL needs (namely, teacher knowledge, skills and training; teacher commitment and collaboration; and distributed leadership)<sup>9</sup>
- A schoolwide focus on English language development and standards-based instruction
- Shared priorities and expectations for educating ELLs
- Systematic assessments that provide ongoing data to guide ELL policy and instruction

## Influence of AIMS

In this section and those that follow, we discuss some of our salient findings about the implementation of AIMS and its impact on English language learners.

In the five high schools studied, teachers, administrators, parents, and students made similar observations about how the exit exam was influencing the educational experiences of ELL students and the educators who worked with them. These common themes included: (1) intervention and remediation efforts; (2) dropout and graduation rates; (3) students' attitudes about schooling and themselves; and (4) students' postsecondary plans.

### INTERVENTION AND REMEDIATION EFFORTS

All five high schools have implemented several kinds of interventions to raise initial pass rates and remediation strategies to raise cumulative pass rates for all students. These strategies include test preparation activities, benchmark assessments, increased instructional time in math and reading, remedial classes, tutoring, and AIMS preparation classes for students who fail.

Although these strategies are available to ELLs as well as other students, very few strategies are being targeted specifically on ELLs. In fact, two of the five high schools studied, Rojo and Café, do not provide any intervention or remediation strategies specifically for ELLs. San Cayetano School District (a pseudonym) requires high schools to complete Written Individual Compensatory Plans (WICPs) for ELLs or for students recently reclassified as fluent English proficient who are not making adequate progress in English. The WICP includes information about the kinds of supports needed in the classroom. However, at Verde High School, educators reported serious concerns about the time needed to write and

<sup>9</sup> Principals singled this factor out as the most critical for a successful program.



implement WICPs for so many of their students—more than 700 students were classified as LEP or FEP for the 2005-06 school year.

The ADE has also implemented strategies to raise pass rates, including individualized AIMS study guides, for all students who do not pass the AIMS. However, some teachers and counselors pointed out that many of the study guides ELL students receive are not truly individualized; because of their low skill level, many ELLs miss most of the questions and need to practice everything. Further, the study guides are written in English only. The state also provides compensatory funding for tutoring to help ELLs learn academic English.

Most of the educators we interviewed reported that the participation of ELL students is higher when interventions and remediation are offered during the school day. Many participants reported that after-school and summer tutoring sessions are not well attended, and some students explained that they cannot attend tutoring because of work or family obligations, such as watching a younger sibling. At Rojo High School, a rural school, transportation was a concern, since some students lived over an hour away from the school.

It is also worth noting that the high schools and districts we studied have not formally evaluated their intervention and remediation strategies for either ELLs or all students to determine if their efforts are successful.

#### DROPOUT AND GRADUATION RATES

Most administrators, teachers, and students agreed that ELLs drop out of high school for many reasons besides AIMS, including the need to work to support their family and overall academic failure. Some teachers and administrators said that since the exit exam requirement did not take full effect until 2006, it is too soon to know whether AIMS is significantly impacting the dropout rate for ELLs.

While most participants agreed that ELL students drop out for many reasons, some students and teachers related stories of ELLs whom they knew dropped out specifically because of AIMS. One teacher explained this experience as follows:

*I had one student last year who dropped out because she was failing and because she just wasn't sure—she would rather leave because of the AIMS. She said, "It's going to be really difficult for me to graduate because I know I'm not going to pass the AIMS," so she dropped out.*

Another staff member made this comment:

*They don't see the point in continuing their schooling if they're not going to pass the test. They say, "Well, if I continue to go to school, I'm not going to pass the test. I'm not going to have my diploma, and I'm going to end up working at McDonald's. So what's the difference? I can do that right now, and I can make more money." I tell them that it's not the end—you can still go to college, but they don't understand that part.*

For refugee students, the dropout issue is more complicated, as some students struggle to complete the required coursework on a very tight timeline. One teacher explained how pressure builds for ELLs as they near their senior year:

*They go along with it in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and then it gets down to crunch time. Now they have to pass it, and there's the frustration . . . 12<sup>th</sup> grade—now they know they're not going to pass it.*

Since ELLs in most of the high schools we studied were not permitted to take science and social studies courses until they were in intermediate-level ESL, many ELLs acquire more credits than they need to graduate by 12<sup>th</sup> grade but lack the required coursework. This is especially true for some refugee students, who may enter high school with very little formal education.

While the relationship between AIMS and the dropout rate is unclear, the impact on ELL graduation rates seems more pronounced. Almost all of the counselors and administrators in our study reported that many ELLs are graduating using the policy of augmentation described above. In other words, many ELLs would not be able to graduate if they could not use coursework grades to augment their exit exam scores. Further, many district and school administrators are worried about what will happen to graduation rates, and not just for ELL students, if the augmentation policy is not extended.

We did attempt to collect graduation data, including numbers of students using augmentation, from all five high schools, but only three were able to provide any ELL data related to graduation. Rojo, a small rural high school, enrolled 65 seniors in 2005-06, 13 of whom were ELL students. Eleven of the 13 ELLs graduated, and 2 of the 11 (18%) graduated with augmentation. Of the two ELL seniors who did not graduate, one student did not have enough credits to graduate, and the other did not meet the requirements for augmentation.

Azul High School provided augmentation data for ELLs for 2005-06 but not graduation rates. A total of 39 students used augmentation to graduate in 2005-06, and 17 of the 39 (43%) were ELLs. While we do not know how many ELL seniors were in the senior class, we do know that 321 total ELLs were enrolled in grades 9-12 in 2005-06.

At Verde, we were able to obtain more data about graduation and augmentation rates for ELLs, as is shown in **table 7**.

**Table 7. Number and Percentage of Verde High School ELL Graduates, 2002-03 through 2006-07**

School Year	Number of ELL Seniors	Number of ELL Graduates	% of ELL Seniors Who Graduated
2002-03	52	40	77%
2003-04	87	56	64%
2004-05	50	39	78%
2005-06	35	18	51%
2006-07*	44	27	61%

Table reads: In school year 2002-03, 52 students in the senior class of Arizona's Verde High School (a pseudonym) were English language learners; 40 students, or 77% of the ELL seniors, graduated that year.

\* The 2006-07 graduation numbers include students who graduated in the summer of 2007.

Source: Data provided by school participating anonymously in CEP's case studies of exit exams and ELLs in Arizona, 2007.

Verde High School reported that 11 students from the graduating class of 2007 applied to graduate using augmentation. Of those students, two were ELLs, but only one ELL student actually graduated with augmentation. Three more students of the 11 were fluent English proficient students—meaning that they had recently been ELLs but had been reclassified due to their proficient performance on the state language assessment—and had graduated using augmentation. Therefore, at least 40% of the students benefiting from augmentation were either current or reclassified ELLs.

Data limitations in all five high schools highlight the importance of improving the data collection, analysis, and dissemination process at the school, district, and state levels. The assertions of school and district administrators that many ELLs are benefiting from augmentation would be bolstered by data identifying who is taking advantage of this policy. In most cases, lack of capacity to collect and analyze data was a major impediment. For example, in the rural high school, staff members had to look back through written student files to collect some of the data we requested.

Another concern was raised about what will happen to graduation rates if school districts have to offer four-hour blocks of SEI instruction divorced of academic content. One school administrator spoke to the district's concerns about implementing the SEI models prescribed by the ELL Task Force:

*[T]he state has prescribed very prescriptive, grammar-based, discreet language skills and we just can't—that would just turn back the hands of time for our kids. What that would do to graduation rates and dropout rates would just be incredible.*

Some administrators voiced concern that some ELL students may face longer graduation times, especially if these students have had breaks in schooling or are not literate in their native language. When asked about this possible consequence, an official from the ADE gave this response:

*[T]hey might have to spend an extra year, and I don't think anything's wrong with that, and I would let them know that. Some kids you have come in as freshman; it depends on how much education they had in their country which they've just immigrated from. It depends on how motivated they are; there [are] a lot of variables that enter into it . . . I think it all depends on the student and their motivation to learn English and their attendance. But I really feel that if it takes another year, so be it. At least they receive exactly the same learning that other students are required to take.*

Some students interviewed expressed concerns about staying in high school longer and explained why they would be hesitant to return to school after 12<sup>th</sup> grade if they had not passed the exam or completed all the necessary credits. As one student said, “I am 18, and I am going to be 19 in August, when I get to 12<sup>th</sup> [grade] I am going to be like 22.” Another student spoke about the frustrations of attending school beyond 12<sup>th</sup> grade:

*[T]hey put me two years behind. I should be in 12<sup>th</sup> [grade] in Mexico . . . Imagine 12<sup>th</sup> and another year. I was okay because I had more time to learn English, but another year after 12<sup>th</sup>?*

Administrators further explained that extended graduation times for students could negatively impact their schools' ability to make adequate yearly progress as required by NCLB.

## STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ABOUT SCHOOLING AND THEMSELVES

Many students reported that taking and failing the exit exam repeatedly is stressful and frustrating, a sentiment corroborated by their parents and teachers. Some students reported being worried about passing AIMS and experiencing feelings of pressure and discouragement. One student made this observation about the state exit exam policy:

*They are saying that even if we have all of [the credits needed], they are not going to give us the diploma to graduate. And they are hurting our self-esteem because we are putting a lot of effort throughout the year, and you don't pass the AIMS. Even if you have all the credits, you can't graduate.*

Another student explained, "I put a lot of effort to pass my classes without knowing English and then not graduating because of the AIMS—all the willingness that you had is gone."

Some teachers commented that ELL students who do not technically drop out may give up after failing the AIMS tests multiple times. As one teacher reported:

*Some students try over and over to pass the AIMS, and they have these dreams of going to college or university. And they get to their senior year, and they haven't passed AIMS. And what happens to those dreams, you know? They kind of shut down because of that.*

Many teachers reported that ELLs get frustrated over not passing AIMS. One teacher elaborated on this:

*[I]t's not a question of the test. It's the consequences of not passing the test. [The students] know it. They realize those consequences. And to them, it's very hard even to believe that they'll attain that level [of English] to be able to pass the test. This is where the frustration comes in. I believe that we're really preparing them for failure. They feel that way.*

Many parents agreed that the exam causes considerable stress for their children. Some parents explained that they have seen their children worry about the exam since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. One mother reported dealing with her son's stress over the exam in this way:

*When you see your boy doubting something in him you say . . . "Son, I understand about the classes, that you need good grades but that's not all in life." I had to tell him that, because he was feeling so much pressure . . . [If] those situations like the exam and other school situations, instead of lifting your boy, they finish him—because they standardize children in everything, and not all of them have the same capabilities. They advance kids with a lot of capability, and those kids with less, they put them down.*

Even though most teachers admitted the exam is frustrating for ELL students, they also highlighted positive influences of the exam, such as increasing student motivation. Many teachers reported that they believe the AIMS exit exam requirement motivates students to take the exam more seriously than they did when it was not a graduation requirement. As one teacher explained, "[T]his year, I think they're taking things more seriously, they're worrying about the test . . . because they know that the graduation process is depending on this."

A few teachers also reported that the exit exam is now holding districts accountable for the academic progress of ELL students, a view captured by the following comment:

*Since the AIMS test has come in, though, at least there's been a focus on getting kids to pass, which has been a good thing, though, because at least it's brought some attention to the [ELL] issue, which I think is where we should be working . . . So, in a weird way, it hurts the [ELL] kids first. It impacts them directly. But indirectly, it fixes the problem . . . So it's horrible and it almost sounds mean to say those kids have to fail it. But in failing it, the school will be held accountable, and they'll fix it.*

Even though several teachers pointed to possible negative effects of the exit exam on ELLs, they also acknowledged that it is drawing attention to the larger issue of ELL achievement.

According to the ADE, over the past 3 years, 97% of all students passed the AIMS math test by their third try. However, ELLs generally perform better on the math section than on the reading/language arts or writing sections. Further, this figure does not account for the number of times students have to take the test in order to pass all three sections of AIMS. And, considering that in 2006, only 76.9% of all students and 46.4% of ELLs achieved a passing score on the AIMS math section by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, it is very likely that ELLs have to take the AIMS exam many times.

### STUDENTS' POSTSECONDARY PLANS

From our interviews with representatives of local colleges and universities, we learned that a student's performance on AIMS does not necessarily affect one's chances of gaining admission to a postsecondary institution. We also learned that institutions conduct their own efforts to promote student enrollment in postsecondary education. Postsecondary representatives also expressed concern about how Proposition 300, discussed below, will influence enrollment.

### Performance on AIMS and Admission to Postsecondary Education

A student's performance on the AIMS exam does not necessarily prevent that student from being admitted to college. A representative from one postsecondary institution explained that students need to prove that they have acquired a high school diploma or equivalent to qualify for financial aid. In other words, students who are denied a diploma based on their AIMS performance may seek alternatives, such as a GED, to qualify for financial aid. Representatives from another local college explained that the college application is based on self-reporting and that students are not asked to submit proof of a high school diploma or GED.

From student interviews we learned, however, that many students believe that if they do not pass the exam and receive a high school diploma they will not be able to enroll in a postsecondary institution. For example, one student made the following point:

*[I]f I don't pass the AIMS, I will not be able to get into college; how am I going to do it? I will have to work in McDonald's or something like that, and I am not going to go anywhere from there. I don't want to do that; I want to study what I like so I can get a degree.*

While most students reported believing that colleges use AIMS scores in the admission process, representatives from postsecondary institutions explained that they do not look at AIMS performance primarily because there is no clear consensus in the education community about what performance on this exam means in terms of college readiness.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Students in Arizona can earn a tuition award of approximately \$4,300 for their first year of attendance at any of three state public universities, with an opportunity for a renewal for three years, if they fulfill the following requirements: (1) complete the required core classes and earn a "B" or better; (2) rank in the top 5% of their class with an unweighted GPA of 3.5 or better; and (3) exceed the standard on all three AIMS subject tests (one subject test can be substituted with AP or IB test scores). However, interview data revealed that very few, if any, high school ELL students meet these requirements.

In fact, local colleges use their own assessments for student placement. Representatives explained that although state leaders have discussed the need to examine the relationship between student performance on AIMS and readiness for college, this work has not been conducted.

### **Efforts to Increase Student Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions**

Instead of focusing on AIMS, postsecondary institutions are carrying out their own efforts to promote student enrollment in higher education, although these efforts do not necessarily focus on English language learners. Participating representatives talked about outreach programs, career fairs, workshops to educate students, and workshops to educate parents. Representatives spoke of dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to accrue college credit by enrolling in college classes or taking college-level courses at local high schools. Representatives talked about the need to address myths and misunderstandings about admissions policies, the cost of postsecondary education, and the types of students who should be attending college.

### **Proposition 300 and Postsecondary Enrollment**

A final issue emerging from the postsecondary interviews relates to Proposition 300, an initiative passed in November 2006 that eliminates state financing of adult education for individuals who cannot prove legal residency in the state of Arizona. At the time of our interviews, representatives from postsecondary institutions expressed concern about the impact of this proposition on enrollment rates for illegal immigrant adults and students who must now pay out-of-state tuition to continue their education.

## **Major Challenges Facing Educators**

Our analysis of interview data revealed several challenges that teachers and administrators reported facing as they attempt to prepare ELLs to pass the AIMS tests. Every teacher, administrator, student, and parent we interviewed identified inadequacies in students' academic English skills as the greatest challenge ELLs face as they strive to pass AIMS. However, that challenge alone is complicated by several mitigating factors. Success on the AIMS for ELLs is impossible to separate from the acquisition of academic English or access to academic content. Consequently, this section addresses all the challenges teachers reported facing in preparing ELLs to pass AIMS. These include the widely varying characteristics of ELLs, special needs of refugee students, inadequate resources, student mobility, and difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF ELLS**

The term “English language learner” implies to most policymakers a group of students with similar characteristics who simply need to learn English. However, educators who work with ELL students understand just how simplistic that definition is. ELLs come to school with widely varying academic skills and needs, and teachers must constantly adjust and adapt to their students needs. One teacher provided an illustration of what being an effective teacher of ELLs “looks like” on a typical day:



*You have to constantly adjust the class . . . I have an idea of what I want to do and where I'm going over a certain time frame, but when I get done Monday, I have to assess what I saw from the kids and where I'm at. I might be there late Monday afternoon, retyping, recreating something for the next day, because of a deficiency that I saw or the direction the kids are going. Or I might have three different things created that have the same end goal in mind, but the methodology is slightly different because of where the kids are. You can't just pick up a textbook; it's not one size fits all.*

In this section, we identify some common characteristics of ELL students that teachers report present a challenge to their ability to prepare them to pass AIMS. We do this not to present ELL students from a deficit perspective (focusing on what students are lacking rather than on the skills they bring with them), but rather to highlight for policymakers and others who are not educators just how much these students vary within the group of “ELLs” and the ways in which teachers may struggle in their attempts to work with ELL students. Interviewees focused on these student characteristics: (1) educational background; (2) level of literacy in native language; (3) home environment and family background; (4) socioeconomic status; and (5) absenteeism. We also found that teachers of refugee ELLs faced even more challenges given their students’ experiences; therefore, we discuss refugee ELLs separately in this section.

### **Educational Background**

English language learners, like many students, come to school with a variety of skills. However, teachers of ELLs face more significant challenges because students also come to school with very different educational experiences. For example, some students come to school with breaks in schooling, while others are migrant students. These students usually have gaps in their academic knowledge as well as their language skills. As one math teacher explained, “[T]he greatest difficulties in my teaching day and for my students come from not necessarily their lack of language skills, but from their lack of mathematical skills.” Furthermore, students who are not U.S.-born and educated do not have the same background knowledge as native English speakers—for example, knowing who Abraham Lincoln is or the geography of the U.S. Another teacher explained how inadequate background knowledge in the English language, such as knowledge about terminology or vocabulary, can be problematic as well: “Even in my Advanced Placement class the other day, we were talking about a railing. And [students asked] ‘What’s a railing?’ ‘All those bars out there . . . that’s a railing.’”

### **Level of Literacy in Native Language**

Research confirms that the strongest predictor of English academic achievement for ELL students is the amount of formal schooling they have had in their native language (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Genesee et al., 2006). One teacher explained the relationship between native language literacy and English acquisition in this way:

*What we find in our department is that students who come with a strong base and knowledge and foundation in their own primary language—if they know the sentence structure and they know how to create a sentence [and] they can write a good paragraph and an essay in their first language—then they can transfer the same rules over to English, and they acquire English much faster.*

This is not the case for some ELLs who are not literate in their native language; they can speak their native language but may struggle with reading or writing in that language. At the high school level, it is worth pausing to think about what an incredibly difficult task this is for educators. Imagine trying to teach high school students English when they cannot read

or write in their own language. While attempting to educate a high school student who is illiterate is a challenge for any teacher, it is even more challenging when teachers have to educate those students in a language the students do not understand. One teacher described how difficult it is for students who are not fully literate in their native language:

*The students here come with so many different degrees of literacy, and the hardest struggle is we get kids that are just stuck between two languages. And in order for them to become literate, they usually need to become literate in their first language . . . We force them to try to become literate in English, and they just get stuck; they get trapped . . . They can't read the content because they're not fully literate in one language.*

### **Home Environment and Family Background**

Some teachers identified ELL students' home environment and family background as impediments to succeeding in school and doing well on AIMS. For example, some teachers pointed to a lack of homework support. One teacher explained that students "don't have that support at home about understanding homework."

Other teachers pointed out that students often lack appropriate supplies or materials at home, such as computers or books. Parents' lack of education may influence the kind of support they can give their children. One teacher told us how she encouraged her students to have their parents help them with their homework, only to have one student point out a dilemma:

*And sometimes you say things without thinking, and I said, "You know, it'd be great to let your parents read your essays and help you and so on." And one of my students said, "Ms. East\*, my parents can't speak English, much less read my reports to correct it." And it kind of says, okay, well, these are the kids that maybe need someone to help them more.*

Other teachers also stressed that students often had other responsibilities at home that interfered with the time they could commit to schooling. One teacher made the following observation:

*Their home life is completely different than school, so it's almost like an uphill battle because when they go home, they have to worry about little brothers and sisters and things like that. They have to work, you know.*

Other teachers emphasized that students do not always have opportunities at home to practice speaking English which influences their ability to become fluent in English. As one teacher pointed out, "[they] just go back into the Spanish speaking, you know, if it's not reinforced at home."

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Another challenge described by teachers and administrators was that of educating poor children. Nationally, approximately two-thirds of LEP students come from low-income families (Capps et al., 2005). Research shows that poverty significantly impacts learning (Bracey, 2003; Hart & Risley, 2003; Farah et al., 2006; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Planty et al., 2007) and many of Arizona's ELL high school students are living in poverty, which further complicates schooling.

In addition to impacting development, we found that poverty complicates learning for ELLs in other ways. In the schools that offer after-school tutoring programs for AIMS or English language acquisition, some students reported they could not attend because they had a job

\* A pseudonym



right after school. Some students have to work to provide for their families or to take care of their own expenses when parents cannot provide for them. One student explained:

*There was a time that I worked Wednesday, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays and it was like I would leave school and go straight to work until 10 or 11 at night, and I wouldn't have a chance to do anything. I would get home, super tired, and I wouldn't do my homework and I couldn't go to tutoring because I was working, and I wouldn't have time for anything.*

Another student elaborated, “there are a lot that are here with one of their parents only and the parent doesn't make a lot of money, so they have to work to help themselves and help them.”

Teachers also talked about how some ELLs did not have access to resources at home. Many students do not have computers or access to the internet, books, and other resources typically found in more affluent households.

Furthermore, schools with large numbers of migrant families also see the impact of poverty, as families are forced to move in search of work. And sometimes, the children stay behind as one parent or both parents do seasonal field work.

### **Absenteeism**

According to some teachers and administrators we interviewed, some ELL students are absent more often than native English-speaking students. Attendance issues for ELLs at the five high schools varied. In some high schools, teachers and administrators reported that absences for ELLs have to do with cultural differences or miscommunication between parents and school over the importance of attendance. One teacher noted that parents “will think nothing about making an 11:00 a.m. dentist appointment and taking . . . the whole [family].” Another teacher said that family issues (which may also be cultural) sometimes cause students to miss school:

*What you'll find is that if somebody is ill in the family or they have to travel back to Mexico, everybody goes . . . and that happens frequently around holidays, especially like Easter or the week after. And because that's a practice in Mexico, many of our students will follow the same practice.*

Other teachers observed that some students may miss school to attend a relative's wedding or other family events. Some students travel to Mexico regularly and have difficulty returning across the border, causing them to miss school.

The ADE conducted a study on the effects of absenteeism on AIMS performance and found that:

For the average student in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, a 1 percent increase in his or her attendance rate will increase his or her chance of passing AIMS by 1 or 2 percentage points. Assuming a school year of 180 days, this is equivalent to an additional two days in school increasing the chance of passing AIMS by 1 to 2 percentage points. (R. Franciosi, personal communication, 2004).

### **UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF REFUGEE ELLS**

The characteristics described above often affect refugee ELLs more intensely, according to our interviews. **Box B** explains more about who these refugee students are and what types of educational needs they have.

## Box B. Who Is a Refugee?

### *Refugees*

The American Refugee Committee defines a refugee as someone who has been forced from his or her home country by war, civil conflict, political strife, natural disaster, or gross human rights abuses. Often refugees flee from their homes and villages without warning, having only the clothes on their backs. Further, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that refugees may be unable or unwilling to return to their home countries due to well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. A significant number of refugees have experienced the trauma of being tortured, separated from their families, subjected to personal or sexual violence. Refugees legally enter the United States in search of freedom, peace, and opportunity for themselves and their families.

### *Resettlement*

During the past 25 years, more than 1.8 million refugees have settled in the United States. Individuals granted refugee status by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security are brought to the U.S. for resettlement by the State Department. Refugees receive assistance with their resettlement and integration through programs in the Office of Refugee Resettlement and volunteer programs. Refugees are eligible to receive ORR benefits and services from the first day they arrive in the U.S. Through various programs and grants, the Office of Refugee Resettlement provides assistance to refugees in achieving self-sufficiency and integration within the shortest time period after their arrival in the U.S. For example, the ORR provides cash and medical assistance for up to eight months. Depending on their individual needs, the ORR places refugee children in foster care, group care, independent living, or residential treatment facilities. The ORR also provides employment services, vocational training, skills certification, English language instruction, day care, transportation, and case management.

**Table 8** shows the countries of origin of recently arrived refugees, while **table 9** indicates the states of residence of these new arrivals.

**Table 8. Refugee Arrivals by Country of Origin, 2004 through 2006**

Country	2004		2005		2006	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	52,837	100.0%	53,738	100.0%	41,150	100.0%
Somalia	13,331	25.2%	10,405	19.4%	10,357	25.2%
Russia	1,446	2.7%	5,982	11.1%	6,003	14.6%
Cuba	2,980	5.6%	6,360	11.8%	3,143	7.6%
Vietnam	974	1.8%	2,009	3.7%	3,039	7.4%
Iran	1,786	3.4%	1,856	3.5%	2,792	6.8%
Ukraine	3,482	6.6%	2,889	5.4%	2,483	6.0%
Liberia	7,140	13.5%	4,289	8.0%	2,402	5.8%
Sudan	3,500	6.6%	2,205	4.1%	1,848	4.5%
Burma	1,056	2.0%	1,447	2.7%	1,612	3.9%
Ethiopia	2,689	5.1%	1,663	3.1%	1,271	3.1%
All other countries, including unknown	14,453	27.4%	14,633	27.2%	6,200	15.1%

Note: Ranked by 2006 country of origin.

Source: U.S. Department of State, 2007.

(Continued)

**Table 9. Refugee Arrivals by State of Residence, 2004 through 2006**

State	2004		2005		2006	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	52,837	100.0%	53,738	100.0%	41,150	100.0%
California	6,755	12.8%	7,505	14.0%	5,163	12.5%
Minnesota	5,931	11.2%	6,357	11.8%	4,578	11.1%
Texas	3,382	6.4%	3,243	6.0%	2,764	6.7%
Florida	2,955	5.6%	4,799	8.9%	2,582	6.3%
Washington	3,016	5.7%	2,841	5.3%	2,582	6.3%
New York	3,046	5.8%	2,561	4.8%	2,303	5.6%
Ohio	1,434	2.7%	1,560	2.9%	1,943	4.7%
Arizona	1,978	3.7%	1,868	3.5%	1,649	4.0%
Georgia	2,150	4.1%	1,870	3.5%	1,442	3.5%
Pennsylvania	1,524	2.9%	1,521	2.8%	1,280	3.1%
Other	20,666	39.1%	19,613	36.5%	14,988	36.4%

Note: Ranked by 2006 state of residence.

Source: U.S. Department of State, 2007.

### Educational Needs of Refugees

For some refugee students, breaks in schooling were common as students traveled from one refugee camp to another. In some countries, ongoing wars made it impossible for children to attend school consistently. One teacher described the challenges for students who come to Blanco High School, a school with a significant refugee population, with very little formal education:

*It's just a totally different ballgame with those students. And because of their age, they're placed in a high school without any basic knowledge or with little basic knowledge. And yet, they're expected to cover 12 years of education in 4 years. It's almost an impossible task . . .*

For refugee ELLs, a lack of background knowledge and education presents a particular problem for teachers. One math teacher explained the difference between teaching a mainstream mathematics class with different levels of learners and a mathematics class designed specifically for ELLs and refugee students:

*When you have a group walk into your calculus class, you can almost guarantee what their foundation was. You can almost know that they know what the trig identities are. You have the [ELL] group walk into your class, and you don't know if they've seen a fraction.*

This teacher went on to explain that for some groups of students, the teacher has to start from “ground zero” and be the “total foundation” in a subject. In some cases, teachers must also address students’ previous educational experiences and make cultural connections. One math teacher described how she had to learn the Somali method of long division to “translate” the process for her students:

*The Somalis divide different[ly] than we do. Our long division is a different setup than theirs. So I learned how they did theirs so I could convert it to ours, so I could show them where the different components go.*

We found two additional themes in the high school with a refugee ELL population that were not always evident in schools serving primarily Spanish speakers. These themes included the importance of understanding the emotional, social, and physical needs of students and of recognizing students’ limited understanding of American culture and schooling.

### **Emotional, Social, and Physical Needs of Students**

Many refugee students have been through terrible situations in their home countries, brought on by political conflict and strife. One administrator described this challenge:

*A lot of these students have seen perhaps beheadings, rapes, terrible violence that they’ve experienced in their lives . . . They bring those kinds of things and memories and experiences here with them, and we may or may not know about them . . . I think that’s a huge challenge for us.*

### **Students’ Limited Understanding of American Culture and Schooling**

Refugee ELLs at Blanco come from many cultures with different social norms and customs from those of the United States. Further, most students have limited knowledge of American culture and norms of schooling. For example, knowing that you may have to stand in line to wait for something, rather than cutting in front of others, is an unfamiliar concept to many students. Some teachers reported that boys and girls from other countries may not be used to attending class together, and that they sometimes “self segregate” in the classroom—boys on one side of the room, girls on the other. One teacher described how notions of schooling that Americans take for granted, such as what it means to take an exam, are unfamiliar concepts to many refugee students:

*We had a test today. Some of the kids put their tests in the basket, and then some of their friends are still working, and then who knows what they were saying in their language. Then all of a sudden, they want to go back and redo their test.*

*“No, once you’ve turned your test in, you can’t have it back.”*

*“Oh, but now I know how to do it!”*

*“Well, I’m sorry, you know. You can’t have it back.”*

*“Well, why not? It’s my test.”*

Learning these norms for refugee students is also difficult because they may have to learn the unfamiliar notion of different teachers having different rules—a concept that U.S.-born students learn very quickly in elementary school.

Refugee students may also be unfamiliar with American social norms or skills, such as hygiene standards or how to operate American bathrooms. One staff member recalled some of the challenges they faced last year when an influx of new immigrant students arrived:

*They did have [social] skills, but they weren't anything like typical American skills. They didn't know how to use bathrooms . . . [M]ost of the teaching through last year was just about socializing and acculturating them to America.*

### INADEQUATE RESOURCES

The resources available to educate ELL students varied from high school to high school and even within districts. Most of the teachers and administrators reported that inadequate resources are a serious impediment to preparing ELLs to successfully pass AIMS. All of the district administrators interviewed cited a lack of adequate funding as a barrier to educating ELLs. Further, district officials reported that funding from the state was not sufficient, and that they had to supplement this funding to a great extent to provide an adequate academic program for ELLs. For example, the Freemont School District conducted a study of what it actually costs to educate an English language learner and determined that the cost was approximately \$1,800 per student. The state provides the district with about \$350 per student, so the district has to pick up the difference of about \$1,450.

Small, rural high schools like Rojo High School really struggle with funding programs for ELLs. One administrator summed up the challenge as follows:

*We do not receive adequate funding to provide the type of resources that these students need. I mean, we do the best that we can. The expectations are pretty high. It stretches us and takes from other areas . . .*

This same official, who had been in a larger district before coming to Rojo, went on to explain why size actually matters with funding:

*[What] the state provided . . . helped a little bit, and when you had a lot of numbers, you got enough money . . . [I]t was tough for the small district like this but in a bigger district, we had enough money that we could hire some specialists to do things. In a small district like this—people wear so many hats in a small district, it's tough for them.*

The need for additional funding cited by all district administrators stands in stark contrast with interview data from state officials with the ADE. In fact, ADE officials contend that school districts in Arizona are not spending the money allotted to them. One official said that of the \$10 million allocated for compensatory education for ELLs, districts to date had spent only \$5 million.<sup>11</sup> Further, there appears to be mistrust about how districts actually spend the money for ELLs. The same state official reported that the state would be auditing each school district to make sure that the money is going directly to ELLs:

*In the past, the money would be sent to the school districts and [it] . . . did not go directly to these kids . . . it went into their maintenance and operation budget, so really, nobody had any idea what the lines of expenditure to English language learners were in Arizona. Now we will find out.*

<sup>11</sup> According to this ADE official, any money not spent at the end of the year is rolled over and available to school districts for the next year.

However, some district officials took issue with state restrictions on the use of compensatory funds, as the following comment illustrates:

*For example, with the compensatory education monies . . . [the ADE has] specifically said that they have to be language-based so you can't teach ELL kids language through math. If you're going to use comp ed funds, the comp ed funds are for outside the school day, but they have to be language-based.*

This limitation on content instruction was a concern to some educators because ELL students often need tutoring in academic content as well as in language acquisition.

Another official from the ADE pointed to a relationship between funding and performance of ELLs, noting that “because money is attached to these students, there hasn't been a real need to see about pushing them along or helping them along.” This sentiment was shared by another ADE official, who said, “[U]nfortunately in Arizona, schools are incentivized by getting extra money for English language learners, and so the longer you keep [them] in a program, the more money you get.”

While administrators focused on funding, teachers highlighted other areas of concern, such as overcrowding, lack of qualified and effective ELL teachers, lack of support personnel such as paraprofessionals and translators, inadequate materials and resources, and lack of time.

In two of the five high schools, overcrowding and large class sizes were very noticeable. The teachers in these high schools emphasized that classes are just too big to adequately educate ELLs and prepare them to pass AIMS. Class sizes were almost always larger than 30, and one teacher reported having a class size of 48 ELL students at one time. In one school, overcrowding is so serious that many teachers have to travel from room to room without a permanent classroom. This is difficult when teaching ELL students, who would benefit from a visibly literate environment (such as “word walls” and English labels in the classroom) and from teachers with rich classroom resources.<sup>12</sup>

### STUDENT MOBILITY

Some teachers and administrators reported student mobility as another challenge. One district interviewee cited the problem of ELL students who left the district's school to attend a charter school, only to return to the district school. “There has been a whole new dynamic of mobility,” said one administrator. “[It] used to be mobility within the public school districts . . . now it includes between charter schools and back to us, charter schools and back.”

Student mobility is also characteristic of migrant families. Many ELLs in Rojo High School are also migrant students, who usually arrive in November and leave around April. One teacher observed that migrant ELLs “get shifted around so much, they get discouraged.” Another teacher observed that “just as you start to see progress with them and they're feeling comfortable with you, they in come in tears, [saying] ‘I have to leave.’ And they're gone.”

Migrant ELLs have opportunities to make up lost credits by completing subject-specific units, or take-home packets of work. Students must complete these packets and then take a test at the school's migrant office. This causes problems for students who travel between two or three states, such as California and Arizona; according to interviewees, states do not always coordinate with one another to allow students to take exams in either state. Additionally, the packets are all in English, and the reading demands are geared to a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade level.

<sup>12</sup> ELL teachers who did not have a permanent classroom would often have to put their materials on rolling carts and travel from room to room. This would limit the kinds of materials they could use.

## DIFFICULTIES RECRUITING AND RETAINING QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Many administrators reported difficulty with recruiting and retaining highly qualified and effective teachers for ELL students. One administrator described the efforts that must be made to address a persistent teacher shortage, which affects the kinds of programs this particular high school can offer:

*We have such a shortage of teachers . . . we're going to Michigan [to recruit] where there's a glut. We're not in a glut here. I mean, we're in a terrible shortage, especially in math and science and special education.*

Teacher turnover is an annual problem at Café High School. An administrator reported that every year, Café needs to hire between 16 and 24 new teachers. Many of the teachers who leave each year are retirees, although a significant number are teachers with two or three years' teaching experience who take jobs elsewhere, often in their home towns. Since the teaching supply is limited and the high school competes with other high schools in the area and other districts in the state, administrators fill teaching vacancies by recruiting in other states, including the Midwest, which has a surplus of highly qualified teachers. Another administrator who has experienced the same recruitment and retention difficulties explained that “we've become an excellent training ground for [other local school districts], and they're young kids, and you know, I don't blame them. [But] it hurts . . .”

Sometimes teachers leave because working with ELLs is challenging, and they do not have the support and training necessary to be successful with these learners. For example, when asked in which of the following areas is additional support needed to effectively teach their students, 68% of the teachers surveyed at Blanco High School indicated that they need additional support with ELLs. Indeed, this was the number one response to this question about needs, and it outranked other types of support such as meeting the needs of special education students, closing the achievement gap, and obtaining assistance with student assessment (Center for Teaching Quality, 2007). At Azul High School, 58% of teachers similarly indicated that they needed additional support with ELLs, second only to “closing the achievement gap” at 59%.

## Communication with Students and Parents

To be successful on AIMS, both students and parents need to be informed about the test, its content, and its role in graduation. We attempted to find out what students and parents knew about AIMS and how they obtained that information. In the process, we learned that communication was an issue in all of the high schools we studied.

### KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AIMS

While some high schools seemed to make more attempts to communicate with ELLs and their parents, a lack of accurate information about AIMS was pervasive. In all five high schools, students interviewed knew basic information about AIMS such as the subjects tested. But almost all of the ELLs we interviewed either had no information or incorrect information about the augmentation policy, including the steps needed to qualify. In other words, when we asked students—including seniors—if there was any way to graduate from high school without passing AIMS, almost every one answered, “No.”



Nevertheless, some students recognized inconsistencies between what teachers and counselors were telling them and what was actually happening in the school. In one school, two ELL students discussed these inconsistencies and why they think they exist:

*Student 1: Before, like, a year ago, they told us if you don't pass the AIMS, you don't graduate. But that was a lie; they still graduated—even the people that didn't know how to speak English.*

*Student 2: That's why nobody believes them because that happened last year. They said that they won't graduate. They didn't come, and they graduated, and they didn't pass the exam.*

*Student 1: Nobody knows if they are telling the truth or they are only telling you so you bring your scores up and say, "Look at the school, how many are taking AIMS or how many have better scores."*

Most of the parents we interviewed also knew very little about AIMS, and many did not seem to understand clearly before the interview that the exam is a high school graduation requirement. One parent thought the exam was an evaluation of the teachers and was surprised to learn that it might impact her child's opportunity to graduate. Of those parents who knew about the exam, many did not know which subjects are assessed; many were also unaware that students have multiple opportunities to pass the exam and may continue to retest after completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade. One parent expressed her frustration about AIMS with this question:

*How do they grade the AIMS? Because my girl that is in 11<sup>th</sup> is failing reading. So she tells me, "Mom, I was one point short." And I asked her how they grade the test because I don't understand.*

Some parents reported receiving a letter informing them, as one parent noted, that there is going to be an exam and that their children have to arrive early, "have to sleep well and be well fed," and "should be on time." But most parents seemed to know little more than this.

When asked where they could obtain information about the exam, some parents said they would contact someone at school, such as a principal, teacher, or counselor, but others replied that they expected to gather this information from the researcher conducting the focus group. "[A]t this moment I think I will ask you," said one focus group participant. Others simply began to ask questions about the exam in the middle of the interview when they realized there was information they needed to know about their children's education.

In attempting to uncover why students and parents seemed to know so little about the exam, we asked teachers, staff members, and administrators to explain how information about AIMS and augmentation was disseminated to students and parents. Officials in all five high schools reported that information about AIMS is sent home to parents in their native language (although many parents reported receiving information only in English). Four of the five high schools also reported offering parent information nights about AIMS in Spanish or having translators available.

In some of the high schools, however, teachers and staff members revealed that certain information, specifically about augmentation, is not always accessible to students and parents. Some teachers were told that the formula for augmentation was too complicated for them to understand and to let counselors talk to students about it. Some staff members<sup>13</sup> reported that they were told by the "administration" not to inform students of the augmentation policy or the steps necessary to qualify for it.

<sup>13</sup> Refers to both teachers and non-teaching staff.



This policy of silence was quite evident in the high school that served refugee students. For example, one staff member in this high school explained, “[L]ast year we were told not to tell them to begin with.” Another staff member elaborated on this point:

*[W]e didn't want to make claims until we knew for sure it was going to happen because then all of a sudden, kids are thinking they're going to graduate, and then it doesn't happen . . . and we didn't want to be held liable for giving them this information.*

Yet another staff member spoke to a fundamental reason behind this hesitancy to reveal too much:

*I don't like to tell my seniors unless I absolutely have to about augmentation because if I told them about augmentation . . . I don't feel that they would give as much effort as they possibly can to take the test.*

However, some staff members at this high school expressed frustration over this degree of silence and misinformation, as the following comment illustrates:

*I mean, to a certain extent I get really frustrated and angry because I know how hard these students are working. And this one young man . . . he comes to me and he says, “What happens if I don't pass the test? What if I don't pass the test? Will they still give me my diploma?” And I'm, like, “I can't answer that for you” because they honestly tell us not to tell them whether they're going to pass or not or what. [And when students ask me] why can't you help me, it's like I can't help you because I don't even know what the rules are. How can I tell you how to play the game when I don't even know the rules?*

While teachers, administrators, and staff members in our study high schools may have legitimate reasons for not being transparent about augmentation (such as the uncertain status of the policy), many students and parents interviewed reported that they were “anxious” or “stressed” about not being able to graduate if they could not pass AIMS. In response to this concern, a staff member in one high school replied, “I just think that we have a test that's in place that our state department wants us to promote to pass, and so we're trying to do that.” Additionally, some staff members did report that if they knew a particular student or parent was excessively worried about graduating, they would explain the augmentation policy to allay the student's concerns. Other staff members reported that even though they did not make clear to students the steps necessary to qualify for augmentation, such as mandatory retests or attendance at tutoring, they would ensure students met all the required elements.

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The role of parental involvement was a common theme that emerged from the interview data in all five high schools. In most of the high schools, many teachers and administrators cited a lack of parental involvement as an impediment to the success of ELLs on the exit exam. However, different participants spoke about parental involvement in various ways. Some educators focused on a lack of parent participation in school-related activities, such as parent-teacher conferences or parent information meetings. Other educators pointed out that parents may want to help their children with school but may lack the necessary skills or time to do so. And some educators stressed the cultural differences between the school's way of defining involvement and the parents' way. One teacher said that in Mexico, parents are more trusting of the school to provide for their children, so that approaching the school and asking questions might be misconstrued as disrespectful. In the United States, not being “physically” in the school is often mistaken for lack of involvement.

Other teachers and administrators contended that parents may be intimidated or fearful of approaching school officials because of their own school experiences or because of language or citizenship issues. The recently enacted anti-immigration legislation and the current political climate in Arizona lend legitimacy to the fears of these parents. One parent described how difficult it may be for some parents to approach their child's school with questions or concerns: "[It] is hard . . . I feel parents need courage . . . They don't dare to go. But now I know that we, the parents, have a lot of power."

Parent interviews were the most difficult to obtain in each of the high schools we studied. Interview data from parents is also difficult to interpret because, predictably, the parents who attend these interviews are usually more "involved" in the schooling process. However, in some of the high schools, we were able to get parents to participate in our interviews who had never before participated in events at the high school. When we questioned these parents about their participation, the answer was also predictable: many participated because they were told the interview would be in Spanish or that a translator would be available in their native language. Language as a barrier to accessing the school or information was a common theme in parent interviews. For example, parents in one high school described their frustration over not being able to communicate with their children's educators, as these comments illustrate:

*[S]ometimes we have to talk to all the teachers and they speak English, so you have to wait for the only teacher that speaks Spanish so he can translate.*

*[T]he other day I got to talk to her (the teacher) but I don't speak English, so I asked for an interpreter, and a girl in the kitchen came.*

*The meeting I went to, since it was in English, I didn't understand anything, and I haven't come after that . . . That is why when they called me for this meeting; I said, "I am coming if they are speaking Spanish."*

Even in schools where parents agreed that communicating with the school was somewhat easy because they could always find someone who spoke Spanish, other parents brought up the importance of being able to speak to staff members (such as counselors) in their native language:

*[T]he problem is the counselors. They don't speak Spanish . . . There is a barrier. I can't understand, and I can't say things in my own way. To understand better and to not be left with a doubt, you prefer your own language . . .*

Other parents admitted that using an interpreter sometimes makes them feel uncomfortable. "I don't speak English, and [teachers] speak only English," said one parent. "They have interpreters, but I don't like to use them because sometimes the conversations are confidential."

In the high schools such as Azul that reported more parent involvement, parents stressed the benefits of having someone who speaks their language and understands their culture contact them and conduct parent meetings.

## Acquiring English

As expected, almost every participant we interviewed identified “acquiring English” as the most important skill needed for ELLs to pass the exit-level AIMS. The students interviewed expressed a desire to become proficient in academic English; they understand that English is the key to academic success in school and economic success in this country. Yet the educators in our study held varying views about how this could best be accomplished given the constraints of the current law (HB 2064). The ADE, through the ELL Task Force, has decided that four-hours of English language development per day, divorced from academic content, is the best way for Arizona’s ELLs to learn English. When asked about current research supporting this instructional policy, none of the ADE officials or Task Force members interviewed was able to cite any research or evidence. One ADE official reported that “there is some research that backs that in order to teach English, you probably should teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar,” while another official compared acquiring a second language to practicing football or the piano:

*Well, I don't think I've seen any [research] in the language itself, but I guarantee you that if you had a football program and you talked to the coach and he said, “You know, if you can give me these kids for this length of time, I'm going to give you a winning season,” I'm sure that would happen. The same with a concert pianist. “If you're going to give me four hours a day, I guarantee you I'm going to get Bach out there like you would not believe.”*

One Task Force member noted that there was no empirical evidence guiding the proposed models of instruction and admitted that research had not informed the Task Force’s decision:

*[W]e essentially at the Task Force ignored the research, which argues that you really need to understand kids in their primary language . . . and we're essentially told that that research is interesting, but it's not aligned with the law . . . No one has any research that suggests four hours in a block or dispersed in non-blocks or targeted in different ways produces academic English development. We don't have the data. That data doesn't exist. I wish it did; if it did, I'd be a supporter of it.*

Furthermore, while the law states that ELLs should be able to acquire academic English in one or two years, almost all of the participants agreed this would be unrealistic for the majority of ELLs. One Task Force member spoke to this concern:

*And I think there's no evidence that anyone can do it in one year, in two years, and there's some question as to whether it can be done in three years, particularly at the high school level. If you get a student who's entering school for the first time, or has had sub-par educational experiences in a country other than the United States and comes to that high school as an ELL student—pretty hard to get them through in one to two years and meet all the content, academic, or other requirements to finish within a high school period.*

A teacher of structured English immersion agreed with this perspective and commented on the unrealistic expectations that all ELL students can become proficient in one year:

*And it's so hard. I've never worked as hard in my life as I have this year . . . and this is why a lot of people that have SEI credentials choose not to teach SEI classes because it's so difficult. And it's frustrating because you want them to go faster, and they can't. And [policymakers] think, “Oh, one year's enough.” No, one year is not enough. Now there may be an exception or two, but no, for the majority of them, no.*

One administrator also called attention to the difference in state expectations about the time involved for English-speaking students to learn a foreign language and for ELLs to acquire English:

*When you look at foreign language standards, they're mapped out differently for kids. And what is not understood is that for many of our students, English is a foreign language, but yet the expectation is that they're going to become proficient in one year when the foreign language standards and the way that's implemented is not the same.*

Another district official spoke to how difficult it would be to create a program that could move all students to proficiency and ultimately pass AIMS in a specified time frame:

*I could build a good model where they theoretically could pass AIMS in four years. But the reality will probably be kids that are not going to make it in those four years—not because they're dumb or we [designed] a poor model but just because they're on a different trajectory. And being able to exist in that paradox is difficult from a policy perspective because you want to create a policy that's clear and everyone can understand. How do you justify the fact that you'll have outliers?*

## Importance of Culture

Interviewees in the five high schools we studied varied significantly in how they talked about students' culture and incorporated it into schooling.

### DEGREE OF EMPHASIS ON CULTURE

In some high schools, such as Azul High School, it was evident that students' culture is valued and plays a central role in the learning process, while in other high schools, students' culture appeared to play no role at all. In Azul High School, students' culture is emphasized in many ways, including visible art work in the school or the courses offered.<sup>14</sup>

An administrator explained why this focus on culture is so important in the high school:

*I think there are more opportunities for young people to be involved in extracurricular activities. Some of these activities are activities they see themselves in. They see a reflection of who they are in activities that go on here—all the way from having a mariachi program, a Folklorico program, to having kids get together [for] what they call a Mexican American social club . . . And they see that they can learn not just about academics, but they can keep cultivating what is their culture.*

A teacher emphasized that these kinds of programs help students remember where they came from and to be proud of who they are, in spite of what others may say about them and their culture.

Educators in the five high schools held diverse perspectives on the importance of students' culture. Some mentioned the importance of understanding and emphasizing students' culture, others spoke of culture as a deficit or an impediment to learning, and still others did not mention students' culture at all.

<sup>14</sup> For example, students can choose to take Mexican American Studies, Native American Studies, Folklorico, Mariachi, American Sign Language, and O'Odham (an Uto-Aztecan language of southern Arizona and northern Sonora).

Those administrators and teachers who recognized the importance of culture to academic learning said that the school needed to help students adjust to their new culture in order for them to succeed academically. “I think the adjustment young people have to make [is difficult],” said one administrator. “They’re coming from one particular system into another. They’re adjust[ing] to a new culture of school . . . to a new country, to a new environment.” This administrator also admitted that the school needed to do “something that will help young people adjust quicker to the new culture, the new social norms.” One parent confirmed the difficulty of adjusting to a new culture: “You arrive to a city, and there are new ways—a different way to live in which you have to adapt because you are going to live there.” She went on to describe how her children struggled to adapt, adding that “I talked to them [about it] so they wouldn’t suffer.”

Some educators noted that some teachers knew very little about ELL students’ culture, which influenced their teacher-student interactions. Many teachers told us stories about “cultural misunderstandings” they had encountered or “cultural knowledge” that they or their peers had to learn. For example, two teachers related a story about how new teachers to the school often have very little experience with immigrant students:

*A lot of [teachers] come from the North, Midwest, and they don’t have a clue what it’s like. And a lot of them have no idea what the differences in culture are themselves . . . I know there’s several new teachers who just get really angry when the students refer to them as “teacher.” “Teacher! Teacher!” instead of “Mr. so and so” or “Mrs. So and so.” And it’s a culture thing: “teacher” is a title of respect in Mexico.*

Other teachers talked about how some students feel more comfortable in their classes because they do understand their culture, as the following comment indicates:

*[M]ost of them want to be here because it’s one of the classes where they feel that they are home, and they feel that they can relate to everything that is going on . . . So they see my classroom as a place to be themselves, to be accepted for who they are. Someone mentioned, “I like this class because you can pronounce my name right . . . that’s important.”*

Some educators reinforced this notion by incorporating students’ culture into their teaching practices. Examples of these practices include using literature in the classroom that students can identify with; empathizing and reassuring students that learning another language and the customs of another culture does not mean they have to lose their own culture; encouraging students and parents to participate more in school by having school functions that incorporate the whole family; and recognizing the struggles that come with learning another language and another culture and encouraging students to talk about those struggles. One teacher described how he uses pedagogical approaches to teaching students English that incorporate students’ native language:

*[T]o be able to speak Spanish to the students occasionally, not all the time of course, but occasionally be able to explain to them, “Hey mi hijo, este aqui es ando.” A-n-d-o; it means “ing” in English. So if you see it, it definitely means it’s going to be a verb. Brincando, nadando, mirando, you know, jumping, swimming, looking, you know, whatever—but “ing.” And you can help those kids identify those problems in language or those variables and those commonalities that they have. Mente is “ly.” So anytime they see an “ly” word, well that tends to also make it an adverb. You know, so when you can explain that to them in Spanish, then, from that point on, they can use that as kind of like the structure they need to understand English better. And so for me, that was always the best approach.*

## LANGUAGE AS AN ASSET OR IMPEDIMENT

While teachers and administrators recognize that acquiring English is the most difficult obstacle for ELLs to surmount to succeed on AIMS, some teachers shared a concern about how language is framed as a deficit within in the state, district, or school. One school district official made this observation:

*Somehow language has become a handicap rather than an asset, and that's—I mean you're sitting in an environment where bilingualism ought to be an asset and ought to be something that's sought after . . .*

Another administrator emphasized that the state makes it difficult for school districts to approach native language as a resource rather than as a deficit:

*[I]t's a very punitive approach that the state takes toward ELL. It's always a deficit model. It's a subtractive model rather than an additive model for ELL, and so that's been a great challenge for us to maintain an approach and an attitude in the face of subtractive policies that we have from the state level . . . What kids bring is a resource. It's a language as a problem orientation . . . That attitude I think—it pervades areas of our district, our community, across the state and nationwide even. That's a hard thing to deal with. Kids feel it.*

However, other educators agreed with the state's language policies, as illustrated by one teacher's assertion:

*I feel as a [language] teacher, I personally do not feel that it is the state's responsibility to maintain my child bilingual. I feel that is my responsibility as a parent. I feel that being in the United States, if I want my children to be successful, I need to teach them enough English so that they can compete with native speakers.*

While participants had different perspectives on the state's language policies, almost all participants—including students and parents—reported that learning English was important and should be the outcome of public schooling for ELL students. An analysis of interview data shows that many of the statements made by participants about Arizona's language policies are intertwined with deeper philosophical and political issues about immigration, culture, and diversity.

## PREJUDICE AND RACISM

Some interviewees identified the existence of prejudice and racism as additional impediments to successfully educating ELLs. Some teachers and administrators reported that segregation and racism are not only prevalent in the school but exist within the community. Moreover, some students, teachers, and administrators talked about student segregation within the school between newly arrived Mexican students and well established Mexican-American students.

*We have a lot of subclasses within a particular group of kids. You've got the kids that have been here for a while that are resentful of the ones that are just arriving; you get kids that are second and third generation in this area . . . and they don't want to be affiliated with somebody that's just coming in.*



Some students also maintained that newly arrived students were subjected to prejudice and racism from established Mexican-American students, often U.S.-born citizens. One group of students reported that they were often called “wetbacks” or “aliens” by Mexican-American students. Some students also described their interactions with Mexican-American students. One student contended that some Mexican-American students “speak Spanish [but] when you talk to them in Spanish, they pretend they don’t understand you.” Another student elaborated on this point:

*There are certain students that try to say that they don’t speak Spanish. An immigrant that has a class and a teacher that doesn’t speak Spanish, and he doesn’t understand English and tries to ask for help, there are a lot of students that say, “I don’t speak Spanish,” and they are denied help. They get intimidated . . .*

Further, one student revealed, “There are [students] that are Mexicans, and they say, ‘No, no. I am American.’ They deny they are from Mexico.”

Teacher beliefs and expectations about ELLs were also identified as impediments to the academic success of ELLs. An administrator explained how these beliefs and expectations negatively impact ELL students:

*There’s a prevailing kind of attitude [or] belief towards our immigrant student—certain perceptions about how they learn, and certain expectations that may or may not be based on any kind of data, but . . . more based upon political views or prejudice or racism. And that challenge has become more prevalent, I think, over the past few years.*

A teacher offered a different perspective about how some teachers’ expectations for ELLs may be actually holding them back:

*What bothers me . . . within some of our feeder patterns [elementary schools and middle schools], there is such an ingrained culture of nice racism that our kids don’t improve, and it’s this thing of trying to make them feel so good about themselves by trying to have them not feel bad that they didn’t succeed in reading something.*

Some teachers and administrators expressed concern over how racism, prejudice, and politics are influencing educational decisions about English language learners and talked about the consequences of these decisions for students’ future:

*And it’s too political. [The students] look at the news just like we do, and they see comments being made by extremists from both sides. And I don’t know. I just feel that there’s not an equal playing field for them. I feel that we’re creating a society of classes if we continue with this, where, you know, certain people are not going to pass the AIMS test. Therefore, they’re not going to go to college. They’re not going to get the job that they want . . .*

Another teacher brought up the concern that students were very aware of how these discussions were being framed:

*The one thing that people in education at the state level, the federal level—I’m talking about the policymakers—the English language learners, the recent immigrant, is always going to be an easy target. And they’re going to get blamed for a lot of things. But it hurts more than the English language learners. It hurts that second, third, fourth generation student, because he has the same surname, and they’re all painted with the same brush.*

Educators are not divorced from the environment in which they teach. We suspect that many of the themes identified in this section mirror larger discussions occurring within communities in Arizona.

## Changes Recommended by Arizona’s Educators

This section presents the suggestions of administrators, teachers, students, and parents for changing policies and practices to increase pass rates for ELLs on AIMS. Students and parents often recommended eliminating the exam, offering the exam in the student’s native language, or removing the requirement tying the exam to graduation. We briefly discuss other recommendations below.

### PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS AND FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS

Many teachers talked about how the traditional structure of K-12 schooling does not fit the needs of many ELL students. One teacher described this dilemma:

*[W]e have a school culture right now that has worked for many years for many kinds of students, and the biggest problem is that we try to get our students, our population to fit that school culture. We’re kind of almost trying to see if we can wait them out and see if they’ll be able to adapt enough to what is currently in place.*

Thus, many teachers recommended looking for alternative ways to meet the needs of ELL students, such as flexible scheduling or changes in the school calendar. Additionally, some educators suggested that more than one pathway be provided for ELLs to meet graduation requirements, particularly for students who enter high school as an ELL. The importance of providing flexible pathways and extended graduation options for ELLs is supported by other researchers and organizations studying ELLs and high school completion (Callahan, 2005; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

### INCREASE COLLABORATION

Educators reported a need for increased collaboration within departments, between departments, and between levels of schooling (elementary, middle, and high school). Increased collaboration was seen as a way to align curriculum, increase consistency in instructional practices, and begin earlier academic interventions with struggling ELLs. However, many educators cited insufficient time as the most difficult obstacle to collaboration.

### PROVIDE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Teachers and administrators reported they need additional resources to better prepare ELL students for the exit exam. These resources ranged from additional funding to classroom materials and staff.

### CREATE AND USE BETTER ASSESSMENTS

Many teachers and administrators said that Arizona’s current language assessment (the AZELLA) is not helpful and in some cases is inaccurate. Many teachers would like an assessment that also includes diagnostic information about the academic skills ELL students possess. Further, most administrators and teachers reported that proficiency on the AZELLA does not mean that students possess a sufficient level of academic English to succeed on



AIMS, and some questioned whether students are even ready for mainstream classes. An official from the ADE supported the notion that students who score at the proficient level on the AZELLA may not possess the level of English necessary to pass AIMS but rather are ready for instruction at their grade level.

### **CREATE TRANSITIONAL CLASSES AND/OR SUPPORTS**

Even when students finish their prescribed curriculum of ESL courses, many teachers and administrators reported that students still need supports. Some teachers stressed a need for transitional classes from ESL to academic content classes.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

A comparison of some characteristics of successful programs for ELLs in other states with the restrictive language policies of states like Arizona highlights both common practices and common needs. For example, the five high schools in our study are all struggling in their own way with a one-size-fits-all policy for educating ELLs—a policy that stakeholders in these districts say has become more restrictive with the adoption of the SEI models.

Lack of capacity in some form or another was an issue for all five high schools. Our research and interviews indicated that there seems to be very little planning underway, either at the state or district level, to address critical capacity concerns. In many ways this is fueled by uncertainties about how the legal battles over funding of ELL programs and the constitutionality of the exit exam will be resolved.

Tensions existed in all of the high schools we studied about shared expectations, priorities, values, attitudes, and beliefs about English language learners and their families. Some of these tensions may be influenced by Arizona's language policies which “do little to promote, or even tolerate, the native languages of ELL students” (Wright, 2005, p. 23) or by pervasive anti-immigrant ideologies spread through the media. Schooling does not occur in a vacuum, and the context of Arizona may play a significant role in how various stakeholders think about the education of English language learners.

While some districts agreed that relevant data and research is a powerful tool in designing more effective programs for ELL students, the capacity to conduct, collect, and apply this research was uneven at best. For example, we were unable to gather comprehensive data we deemed important to the study, such as who is benefiting from augmentation and what the cumulative pass rates are for ELLs. Therefore, it is likely that not all high schools in our study have access to rich data sources and are using data to inform policy and practice.

In light of the pass rates and other achievement data available for ELLs, what might the future hold for Arizona's English language learners if policies and practices remain unchanged? Can “political and ideological considerations yield to pragmatic reality” (Clark & Carlson, 2006a, n.p.)? One state-level actor painted a troubling picture of things to come should policymakers continue in the current direction:

*My fear is that with this kind of policy environment and the kind of effects it's having in the education of these kids is that you're going to produce . . . a fairly resilient underclass; a class of individuals who have not achieved academically. What you're doing with Hispanics—a very large number of them—is now potentially creating an educated underclass because they're not going to be able to compete, and they're going to do what other kids [have done] who aren't able to compete in the regular sort of economic forums . . . they're going to turn to alternative places where they can compete. And that's issues that relate to violence. So you're going to be seeing more Latinos in prison; you're going to see more interactions with the judicial system; you're going to see all of that stuff, and begin to see it in much larger proportions . . .*

## **EXPLANATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS**

While the economic argument for addressing the achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers is compelling, issues of equity and fairness should be more compelling. In light of these concerns, CEP makes several recommendations to policymakers, explained in more detail below.

### **Provide More Training to and Support for Teachers**

Research shows that adolescent ELLs need “skillful teachers so they can develop literacy skills for each content area in their second language as they simultaneously learn, comprehend, and apply content-area concepts through that second language” (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007 citing Garcia & Godina, 2004 and Genesee et al., 2006). The ADE and school districts should consider the challenges that educators report facing in trying to adequately prepare ELLs for AIMS and should craft policies and implement practices that specifically address those challenges. For example, while many educators reported that SEI training provided by the state was helpful, they also said that it was insufficient and that they needed additional professional development in educating ELLs. A one-size-fits-all approach to professional development should be avoided; each school's and district's ELL population should be considered when developing additional training and support for teachers.

### **Increase Funding for ELLs**

The state should acknowledge that adequately educating ELLs for success on the exit-level AIMS will require substantially more resources than districts currently have available. The majority of children of immigrant parents are U.S. born and U.S. citizens (Capps et al., 2005), contrary to Arizona state Superintendent Horne's assertions (ADE, 2005a).<sup>15</sup> The ongoing legal battles about funding for ELLs are not only harming ELL students but are harming the broader citizenry of Arizona. A cost benefit analysis could demonstrate that the cost to the state in the long run of failing to adequately educate these students (including the costs of state assistance programs and incarceration) will far exceed the costs of adequately educating ELLs in K-12 public schools.<sup>16</sup>

Further, it is clear that Superintendent Horne realizes that it will take at least three years for ELLs to become proficient in academic English and content to pass AIMS (Horne, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> In an *Education Week* article (Zehr, 2005), Jeffrey Passel, a senior research associate for the Pew Hispanic Center, contested Horne's assertion that 125,000 children of undocumented immigrants are living in Arizona and pointed out that most of those children were born in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> According to the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) report, *State Versus Private Prison FY 2005 Cost Comparison*, the average cost of a state bed per day is \$49.28, totaling \$18,177 per year. Also according to the ADC, Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals make up a significant percentage of the total prison population ([www.azcorrections.gov/adc/reports/ethnic.asp](http://www.azcorrections.gov/adc/reports/ethnic.asp)).

Therefore, the state needs to fund programs for ELLs for at least this period. We are unaware of any research showing that most ELLs can gain proficiency in academic English in one or two years, a sentiment shared by almost all of the educators and education experts we interviewed in Arizona. Funding can still be tied to accountability measures such as language assessments and the AIMS exam (when students reach a certain level of language proficiency). However, concerns raised by some teachers and administrators that the current assessment, the AZELLA, relies too heavily on oral language proficiency should be investigated. Students will need to do more than become proficient in oral academic English to pass the exit exam.

### **Make the Augmentation Policy Permanent for All Students or Provide Flexibility**

The state legislature should either make the policy of augmentation permanent for all students or should amend existing legislation to allow school districts to take into consideration the different circumstances of ELLs. For example, refugee ELLs who begin their schooling in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade are less likely to be able to learn academic English well enough to pass AIMS in time to graduate. Therefore, school districts ought to be given the flexibility to address the specific needs and concerns of some ELL populations, such as exempting students with “extreme” situations or crafting other policies to deal with these issues fairly and reasonably. Arizona could look to other states, such as Minnesota, that have crafted similar policies that permit districts to exempt some ELLs from passing their exit exam if they have been in the country for less than three years before graduation. It seems paradoxical to invite refugee families to Arizona only to deny their children the opportunity to make their way in the United States by withholding their diploma.

The state might also want to consider using different tests for the exit exam and NCLB purposes. Educators held differing perspectives about whether or not students would continue to try as hard on the initial administration (which is used for NCLB purposes) if they knew about augmentation. What was clear in the high schools we studied is that the pressure to perform well on AIMS was creating ethically questionable actions by some administrators, counselors, and teachers in purposefully withholding or misrepresenting information about augmentation from ELL students and their families.

### **Ensure Accurate Information about AIMS is Accessible to ELLs and Their Parents**

The ADE and school districts should take steps to evaluate the effectiveness of communication with ELLs and their families about the role of AIMS in high school graduation. School districts should make sure that parents are provided information in their native language. Further, the ADE should monitor school districts’ efforts by conducting focus groups with or administering surveys to both ELL students and their parents.

### **Craft Structured English Immersion Models Informed by Research**

The states SEI models should be rethought to require school districts to implement instructional models that are truly research-based. We were unable to find any research supporting the SEI instructional models adopted, a fact admitted by both ADE officials and Task Force members interviewed. For example, research shows that students acquire second language skills when instruction is embedded in meaningful contexts and not divorced from subject matter (Crawford, 1997, 2004; Echevarria & Graves, 2003; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; Garcia & Godina, 2004; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Furthermore, nationally recognized experts in second language acqui-

sition and second language literacy have questioned some of the evidence<sup>17</sup> presented in support of the Task Forces’s SEI models (D. August, personal communication, October 23, 2007; Krashen, Rolstad & MacSwan, 2007).

Additionally, rigorous research should be undertaken on both the intended and unintended outcomes of the four-hour block of SEI instruction. In Café High School—which is already using the SEI model adopted by the Task Force—some unintended outcomes were observed, such as involuntary tracking of ELL students and inappropriate placement of students in academic courses.

### **Use Data to Guide Policies and Instruction for ELLs**

The state and districts should collect and make available data that can be used to guide policies and instruction for ELLs. The ability to collect, analyze, and disseminate data about students has been repeatedly identified as a key element in successful schools (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006). Implementing a data-driven approach may limit, to some extent, the ability of anti-immigration ideologies to drive educational policy. Further, districts should evaluate their instructional programs for ELLs as well as AIMS-related intervention and remediation efforts for ELLs. Again, accomplishing this will take significant resources, a recurrent theme in our findings.<sup>18</sup>

## **Limitations of the Study**

Case study research is not generalizable to populations. In other words, the findings of this study do not “represent” all the high schools and districts in Arizona. Further, we were unable to obtain the participation of high schools in all areas of the state. Most notably, our sample did not include a high school with a significant population of ELLs who speak Native American languages such as Navajo or Apache. Thus, the findings of the study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. However, given the strength and consistency of themes across schools and districts in the study and the depth and breadth of the data collected, we believe that other high schools in the state with similar characteristics are most likely struggling with similar challenges. We would encourage other researchers to attempt to replicate the findings of this study with different ELL populations in different geographic areas of the state.

<sup>17</sup> The Arizona ELL Task Force wrote a research summary and bibliography supporting the proposed SEI models. The document is available at [www.ade.az.gov/asd/lep/downloads/modelcomponentresearch.pdf](http://www.ade.az.gov/asd/lep/downloads/modelcomponentresearch.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> In June, 2007, Superintendent Horne announced that the ADE has received a grant from the federal government totaling almost \$6 million. Horne stated that “the money will be used to strengthen the statewide system to collect information on individual student academic progress and other important data. Other data will include annual achievement results, attendance rates, and graduation data along with demographic information. This will help schools make continuous data-driven student achievement improvement decisions at the local level” (Arizona Department of Education, 2007b, n.p.).

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