After English:
A Study of Support for Reclassified English Language Learners in Arizona

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Thesis Committee

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Executive Summary

Background:

Nearly 14% of K-12 students in Arizona are English Language Learners (ELLs). As such, Arizona ELL policy has been the subject of nationwide research, with many studies finding that students struggle before and after participating in Arizona ELL programs (see Table A).

Despite evidence that the achievement gap between reclassified ELLs and mainstream students is not closing, little information is available about the additional support that reclassified students receive. To better address this void of information, I conducted a study on the prevalence and adequacy of support components for reclassified ELLs in Arizona schools.

Methodology:

Eighty-seven mainstream instruction teachers and eleven principals from twenty Arizona public elementary schools participated in this study as part of a randomly-selected, state-representative sample. Teachers from grades two and three (the grades in Arizona with the most reclassified ELLs) completed an anonymous, online survey. The survey was comprised of questions regarding the availability and quality of English language support components. The survey also asked teachers to self-report their awareness and knowledgeability of such support. Principals from selected schools were requested to participate in a confidential phone interview. Interview questions were similar to those of the survey but allowed for elaboration. Survey and interview designs were based upon a literature review of Arizona ELL policies, Arizona Department of Education documents and relevant academic studies.

Key Findings:

What support exists?

Apart from a state-required teacher training, there are ordinarily three components of English support for reclassified ELLs in Arizona schools: monitoring of recently reclassified students, compensatory instruction for which only recently reclassified ELLs are eligible and auxiliary resources that support all reclassified ELLs. According to study participants, the most common forms of reclassified ELL monitoring are teacher-student interactions and standardized assessments, while compensatory instruction is most commonly provided as small group and individual instruction. Tutoring is the most reported auxiliary resource for reclassified ELLs, though afterschool programs are also widely reported at high-density schools.

What do teachers think?

Most teachers agree that recently reclassified ELL students are prepared for mainstream classroom instruction, participate actively in class and demonstrate English proficiency. Although many teachers agree that reclassified ELLs perform well on tests and assignments, more teachers disagree and express neutrality with this statement (53% disagree or are neutral, 47% agree). Generally, a larger proportion of

* High-density schools have 25% or more ELL students
teachers agree than disagree that support components for reclassified ELLs are accessible, quality and in adequate supply; however, there are significant pluralities of teachers that express neutrality or disagreement (see Table B). Teachers at high-density schools report the highest levels of supportiveness across nearly all survey questions.

### Table B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements regarding teacher support for reclassified ELLs (% of total)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is an adequate amount of English Language Development resources for teachers.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Development resources are easily accessible.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Development resources are high quality.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an adequate amount of training for teachers to support these students.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The training available to teachers is high quality.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Awareness and Knowledgeability

Most teachers, 91%, are aware of the number of reclassified ELLs in their classroom, but only 76% are aware of the number of recently reclassified ELLs (who must undergo state-mandated monitoring). Much fewer teachers are aware of the English Language Development (ELD) history of their reclassified students or how to access that information—52% and 45% respectively (see Graph 1). Overall, teachers express low levels of knowledgeability about support components for reclassified ELLs. When identifying the availability of compensatory instruction programs, teacher responses even contradict those of their corresponding principal. Principals do not clearly differentiate between ELLs and reclassified ELLs in their descriptions of student support but are knowledgeable about ELL/reclassified ELL requirements and support components.

### Conclusion:

This exploratory study provides an empirical glimpse of English support for reclassified ELLs and of educator opinion about such support. Though a majority of participants express satisfaction with reclassified ELL support components, the academic literature points out a large and persistent achievement gap between reclassified ELLs and their mainstream peers. The apparent disconnect between teacher opinion and student achievement can be rationalized by two different conjectures: 1) English support for reclassified ELLs is adequate, implying that the reclassified ELL achievement gap stems not from English proficiency but from low academic content competency or other factors like social stigmas; or 2) English support is not adequate, and teachers are not sufficiently knowledgeable about or aware of reclassified ELLs and their corresponding support components.

To better understand the reliability of teacher opinion for measuring the effectiveness of support, more empirical data is needed on how support is provided at the school level. Further research that specifically examines reclassified ELL learning obstacles could illuminate how different forms of support—English language, academic content or other—affect student achievement. This study provides initial insights into reclassified ELL support, but Arizona’s underachieving ELL population and contested ELL policies deserve even more attention from educators, policymakers and academics alike.

Graph 1

Teacher Awareness of Topic (% aware)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of reclassified</th>
<th># of recently reclassified</th>
<th>ELD history</th>
<th>How to access history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements regarding teacher support for reclassified ELLs (% of total)


References

1. Arizona Department of Education 2013 data.


For further readings related to ELL policy in Arizona and across the U.S.:


