



## **Conflicts Between State Policy and School Practice: Learning from Arizona’s Experience with High School Exam Policies**

### **Executive Summary**

This report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) looks at how local educators perceive and act on state policies designed to help at-risk students and English language learners (ELLs) achieve the levels of proficiency needed to pass state high school exit examinations and graduate. Our findings are based on data from school observations and interviews with more than 50 school administrators, teachers, and other school staff in Arizona. In particular, the report seeks to answer two main questions:

- a) What are the causes of confusion among teachers and students about the state policy regarding alternate paths to high school graduation?
- b) Which factors impact the effective implementation of state policies aimed at improving instruction and closing achievement gaps?

The data in this report are drawn from our 2007 study that looked at the impact of Arizona’s exit exam on teaching and learning for ELLs (CEP, 2007). In particular, we describe local implementation of state policies in three areas—Arizona’s augmentation policy, which offers students who have failed the state exit exam an alternate path to graduation by allowing them to augment their exam scores with points derived from passing grades in their courses; a high school language proficiency test used to place ELLs in English language development (ELD) services; and a policy that requires individualized instructional plans for ELLs and students who have failed state assessments. This report also builds on knowledge gained from CEP’s study of all states with high school exit exams, now in its eighth year.

### ***Key Findings***

In the schools we studied in Arizona, an inherent tension existed between the state's high school policies and school-level implementation of these policies. Our specific findings about policy implementation in Arizona suggest the following broader policy implications for other states:

- ***Multiple factors contribute to the deflection and dilution of state policy at schools.*** Some administrators intentionally concealed information about Arizona's augmentation policy because they did not believe that students would be motivated to try their best to pass the exit exam if they knew they could get credit for course grades; in addition, if initial passing rates on the exit exam were low because students did not put forth enough effort, this could bring serious consequences to schools under federal accountability policies. Further, educators' desire to provide reliable information made them downplay the augmentation policy, which was viewed as being subject to change, and emphasize the more established exit exam requirements. The lack of specific communication strategies at different levels of policy implementation also led to varied interpretations and perceptions among school staff about the policies' impact on students.
- ***The lack of coherence between different state policies weakens the impact of these policies on instruction.*** In the Arizona schools we visited, teachers challenged the validity of the state's language proficiency test for ELLs and noted that its objectives were different from those of the state's high school exit exam. The composite scores on the language proficiency test may identify some ELLs as fluent without detecting their weaknesses in reading and writing, two key subjects on the exit exam. ELLs may lose much-needed support from English language development program. Teachers also noted that the language proficiency assessment failed to provide

adequate information about students' learning needs that could be used to make decisions about improving instruction.

- ***Schools' lack of capacity results in ineffective implementation of state policies.*** For the schools participating in our study, the state requirement to provide individualized instructional plans for ELLs and students who failed the reading portion of the state exit exam largely amounts to paperwork for school staff and barely affects classroom instruction. This was because the schools enrolled high percentages of ELLs and struggling students, and had insufficient staff, resources, or knowledge to implement the individualized plans envisioned for targeted students.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on our research, we recommend the following actions for states to improve policy implementation at the local level:

1. ***Policy dissemination.*** A comprehensive system to disseminate policy information is as important as the design of the policy itself. Information regarding state graduation policies needs to be disseminated early in high school to all stakeholders— not just to school administrators but also to students, parents, and teachers—in an easily accessible and understandable manner. The information needs to be available in families' home languages for English language learners and disseminated through varied venues with sufficient opportunities for stakeholders to obtain clarification. In particular, we recommend that states assist local districts and schools with incorporating timely information about state policies into professional development, parent education, and other community programs aimed directly at teachers, parents, and students.
2. ***Monitoring of implementation.*** To address confusion and misinterpretation that emerged among school staff during the implementation process, districts and states need to share responsibilities for providing technical assistance that explains complex state policies and

for ensuring that schools appropriately implement them. We urge states to specify strategies for monitoring when they design policies and to collect feedback from the monitoring process to inform future policy. Additionally, we suggest that states evaluate the effectiveness of policies for placing ELLs in English language development programs by collecting student-level data and examining changes in the academic achievement of students once they receive additional services.

3. ***Need for coherence.*** States need to examine their testing and accountability policies to ensure they are coherent and compatible with each other. The lack of coherence not only poses threats to test validity and the usefulness of test results for instructional decisions, but also puts students in danger of not receiving needed services. The lack of holistic planning and the discontinuity in service delivery may partly explain sharply varied test performances and appalling achievement gaps.
4. ***Attention to school capacity to implement policy.*** When designing policies, states should consider schools' capacity to respond fully to the policy requirements and should make adjustments as necessary. Particularly, we recommend that the design process 1) define the issue, 2) estimate the scope of problem schools face and the expected human and financial resources involved in implementing the policy, 3) measure the gap between the status quo and the expected school capacity, and 4) design strategies to address the capacity gap.

## Study Purpose and Methods

For the past seven years, the Center on Education Policy has conducted research and issued annual reports on states' efforts to implement high school exit exams—tests students must pass to receive a high school diploma. As part of this ongoing work, CEP conducted a study during 2006-07 school year on the impact of Arizona's high school exit exam policies on teaching and learning for English language learners in five school districts. School year 2006-07 was the first year the state withheld high school diplomas based on students' performance on its

exit exam, Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). Our findings were reported in the 2007 publication, *Caught in the Middle: Arizona's English Language Learners and the High School Exit Exam* (CEP, 2007).

Our 2007 study revealed that students, parents, and teachers often lacked an understanding of state graduation requirements. Even though the state had begun in 2007 to implement a policy of augmenting test results with passing grades in courses, almost all the students we interviewed believed there was no way to graduate other than passing the high school exit exam. To further understand the sources of confusion at the school level, we took a more in-depth look this past year at the interview data collected for our 2007 publication.

This 2009 report describes what we found from a more detailed look at the 2007 data. It illustrates how organizational structure and deficiencies in state policy pose challenges to the implementation of high school graduation policies at the school level. It also shows how multiple layers of bureaucracy in the state's education system provide opportunities for policy to be deflected and diluted.

The purpose of this study is to learn from Arizona's experience how state policies can be more effectively implemented at the local level. While this study did not include all schools across the state, it nevertheless offers a snapshot of the challenges schools face in implementing state graduation policy. The understanding of the problem articulated in this study is a crucial first step to defining strategies for better coordinating policy and practice.

The data for this current report came from interviews conducted in school year 2006-07 with 3 school- or district-level administrators, 40 teachers, and 10 school staff in five Arizona high schools that participated in the federal Title I program. The 10 school staff interviewed included 6 counselors, 2 program coordinators, and 2 dropout specialists. The five schools are in five different districts and were selected based on several criteria, including school type (urban or rural), language acquisition options (bilingual education, structured English immersion, or English as a second language), and number of English language learners served. This method for selecting schools was not intended to produce a statistically representative sample that would allow us to generalize our findings, but rather to identify a variety of local responses to state high school graduation requirements. Appendix A provides detailed demographic information about

each of the five schools, which are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this report. For a fuller explanation of the study methods used, see our 2007 report, *Caught in the Middle*.

## **Mixed Signals about Augmentation at the School Level**

In 2007, Arizona started carrying out an augmentation policy as an alternate path to high school graduation. Under this policy, students who complete high school courses with passing grades but fail to pass one or more sections of Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) can augment their test scores with points from courses in which they receive a passing grade. Students must earn a total of 20 course credits, the same as required for students who do not need augmentation, to take advantage of the augmentation policy. To qualify for augmentation, students must meet three requirements:

1. Complete all required courses with a passing grade (C or above);
2. Take the AIMS assessment each time the test is offered; and
3. Participate in remediation programs available at school in the failed subject areas.

Students meet the alternate graduation requirements if their augmented scores exceed the threshold for “meets the standard.”

Most educators we interviewed about the state's augmentation policy said they appreciated its motivating effect on students and perceived it as helpful and necessary for struggling students. However, very few teachers were able to articulate how the policy actually functioned. One frustration that teachers expressed with the state graduation policy was the lack of information about policy updates and details from the state. As a result, they were unable to answer students' questions about augmentation. School administrators in the Blanco School District, for example, discouraged teachers from answering questions about graduation requirements because teachers did not have professional training in explaining the augmentation policy; instead, teachers were urged to direct students' questions to counselors. One teacher commented about this practice:

*[W]e never know. It used to be no, but then it also used to be that they'd have to take the test; and then it was like, yes, you have to take the test. Now there's augmentation and all these weird rules and it changes so all you can say is “go talk to your counselor” and then you see this poor lost soul . . .*

Principals and school counselors in general demonstrated a better understanding of the policy, but they seemed to struggle with how much information they should divulge to students. On one hand, they did not want students to stress about the high school exit exam because in most cases the augmentation could help students graduate even when they failed AIMS. On the other hand, principals and counselors were concerned that students would not take the exam seriously once they knew they could earn a high school diploma through augmentation without passing AIMS.

Since the state statute authorizing AIMS augmentation was originally set to expire on December 31, 2008, educators expressed some doubt about the stability of the state exit exams. This doubt challenged schools to think programmatically about how to support students to help them meet the graduation requirements. For example, we observed that schools in our study tended to focus on the most stable parts of the policy—the requirements of AIMS—and were reluctant to reveal too much information about the augmentation policy, which they saw as uncertain and perhaps temporary. Information about augmentation was often withheld until students reached their senior year. A counselor described the situation as follows:

*[L]ast year, when they had the augmentation, we knew about the augmentation but the kids didn't know about the augmentation until the very end. And then we said oh, okay. But we kept talking about "you have to have good grades and you have to do this and you have to do that," but we didn't tell them because we were told we couldn't tell them until the end about augmentation.*

A special education teacher also reported that students in special education would not know if they could graduate until the spring before graduation, even though some of them were eligible to be exempted from the exit exam requirement.

School staff gave three main reasons for withholding information. The first was the constant change in the state policy. The state statute authorizing augmentation expired on December 31, 2007; however, in May 2008, the state legislature approved a bill that made augmentation permanent. When CEP staff visited schools in late January 2007, schools were not sure whether seniors graduating in May would be able to take advantage of the augmentation policy. Two counselors discussed the uncertainty of state policy:

*Counselor 1: Last year we were told not to tell them to begin with; for the first semester I think we weren't supposed to tell them they could pass with augmentation, and maybe it's because it was such an iffy thing at the time.*

*Counselor 2: Right. We didn't want to make claims until we knew for sure it was going to happen because then all of the sudden kids are thinking they're going to graduate, and then it doesn't happen and they don't. And then we didn't want to be held liable for giving them this information.*

*Counselor 1: Because the state's been weird about it.*

*Counselor 2: I think because sometimes policies are coming and going so fast that as a department we sort of stick with, you have to pass AIMS . . .*

Two special education teachers in Rojo High School reported that students had received such conflicting information about the graduation requirements that they did not seem to care about their performance on AIMS.

A second reason why schools concealed the augmentation policy has to do with student motivation. Some school staff believed that high-stakes tests would motivate students to take school more seriously, and that AIMS was a viable test that students could pass if they worked hard enough. One counselor explained her thinking this way:

*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; because they know that there's this little catch for them, that they will graduate because of this one thing. So I want them to try.*

Schools often made different decisions about revealing information on augmentation depending on an individual student's situation. In our student interviews, some students understood that there was a safety net but were not clear about what it was (CEP, 2007). One counselor described how she explained the augmentation policy to students with high levels of stress:

*[W]hen I have students who are getting really discouraged or showing a high level of frustration, I'll pull up the augmentation piece on the computer and I'll try to show them how and why it would work for them, and then they go, oh . . .*

The third reason for schools' selective dissemination of the augmentation policy is the complexity of the policy itself. The formula to calculate augmentation credits involves six content areas, a record of course taking in each subject area, course grades, and AIMS scores.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the augmentation formula ties course credits, exit exam results, and graduation together. It was by no means easy for educators to explain to students how coursework and exit exams might influence their access to different classes and lead to different pathways to graduation. One counselor made this comment:

*[W]hen we do explain to them about the augmentation safety net, they kind of, the word isn't totally unfamiliar to them, but oh my God, it's so hard to explain . . . [W]e probably went through at least three trainings ourselves to understand augmentation, and it took the district people and the smart computerized district people to figure out how to do it and how to teach it, and administrators maybe still don't get it. Counselors get it a lot better. So for the teachers not to understand it is not a surprise at all. I would never want to have to explain it to them.*

In addition to being technically complex, the augmentation policy also affects the courses students need or are eligible to take. For instance, school counselors often placed struggling students in AIMS classes for augmentation credits, even though the students themselves may not have seen the need for these classes. A counselor elaborated on students' questioning about their courses:

*[S]tudents will come and say, "Hey, so why do I have to take an AIMS class?" I'm like, well, because one, we want to prepare you for the test, and we want you to do the best you possibly can, and we want you to pass it. They're like, yeah, but I don't need the class. And I'm like, no, you do. And they're like, why? And I say, "Because these are the reasons—not only do we want you to pass it, but also let's just say you don't pass, by taking this test you also get these augmentation points." And then try to explain how it works with their letter grades and so forth and so on, and hopefully they understand that when they're walking out of your office, but some of them probably are like, huh, what are you talking about?*

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<sup>1</sup>A calculation spreadsheet is available on the Arizona State Department of Education's Web site, [http://www.azed.gov/standards/AIMS/Administering/AIMSAugmentation\\_Schoolyrs2007\\_08-2008\\_09.xls](http://www.azed.gov/standards/AIMS/Administering/AIMSAugmentation_Schoolyrs2007_08-2008_09.xls).

The preventive strategy to place struggling students in AIMS classes for augmentation credits influenced students' access to the high school curriculum in many ways. One counselor described some students' reaction this way:

*[W]hen you put them in the class because the results don't come in till later, [and] then they get their results and they've passed, they're right at your door: "I've passed the math or the reading, I don't need this AIMS class" . . .*

A teacher in Verde High School spoke about the issue of the prescribed curriculum, emphasizing the motivating effects on student learning if students could participate in decisions about their curriculum:

*[Students] have different objectives . . . And I'm teaching them to take control of their education— not a counselor, not a teacher, not mom and papa—but you have to be able to make your own decision. What classes are you going to take next semester? You need to know. You need this grade, and I need this, and you have to decide it. And once they do that, they feel more committed to do it because they are . . . making the decision . . . They are taking responsibility.*

Despite schools' reluctance to lay out the augmentation policy explicitly before students reached their senior year, a few school staff reported their attempts to explain to seniors the connection between AIMS, augmentation, and coursework. One strategy counselors used was to simplify the policy language and process. One counselor reported:

*I don't necessarily say augmentation. I just say, "Hey, you get bonus points for every A you get in your class. For every B you get more bonus points for AIMS." And so our students know, oh, I get bonus points, okay, because for me that's the best way I can articulate it where they understand what it is.*

School staff pointed out that once students understood the relation between their performance in class and AIMS, students became more motivated. One counselor described his experience as follows:

*I really think augmentation is very successful . . . it still holds students accountable because you should see these students . . . [A]ll of the sudden they're like, wait a second, an A holds more points than a C, and when you average that . . . I literally have students come say, "I got straight As because I know that's more points" . . . So I mean that's a motivating factor for some students . . . and having those conversations with those students, I was like, listen, don't try to just get a B in the class, try to get an A, and so forth and so on, they're like, okay. I mean, trying to have students get higher grades in itself, that's a great factor, and*

*so I like augmentation because it works. You're rewarding students for doing hard work.*

The augmentation policy was designed to recognize class performance over the four years of high school; it offers flexibility in a high-stakes testing policy to adjust for students' growth and continued efforts at schools. The rationale was that if students know early enough how their course performance relates to AIMS and graduation, they will be likely to work harder on their coursework and feel less stress about high-stakes tests.

In the meantime, the augmentation policy also creates tension between school-level accountability and student accountability. With augmentation, students can graduate without passing AIMS. The state, however, uses students' results from the first administration of AIMS in grade 10 to determine whether schools and districts have made adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.<sup>2</sup> In other words, schools have a vested interest in students doing well the first time they take AIMS because these scores are used for federal accountability purposes. By releasing partial information to students, the principals in our study schools intended to motivate students to improve their test performance and to downplay the alternate paths that might bring up the graduation rate but would not necessarily contribute to a positive evaluation of their schools or districts.

Schools in Arizona must comply with both federal and state accountability requirements, and both of these use the state's high school exit exam results and the same cut scores to evaluate school performance. The state accountability system uses a growth model based on improvement in students' scores over time, while the federal accountability system uses fixed achievement targets to determine whether schools have made adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. The two layers of accountability intermingle and both may bring schools serious consequences. This makes policy implementation at school level even more complex.

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<sup>2</sup>Detailed information about Arizona state policies for school accountability is available at <http://www.ade.az.gov/schooleffectiveness/STDSRUBRIC.pdf>.

## Lack of Coherence in State Assessments for ELLs

The achievement gap between ELLs and general students in state assessments has led many states to offer additional assistance to improve ELLs' academic achievement. The recent controversial Arizona suit over the state's use of federal funding to provide services to ELLs (*Flores v. Arizona*) has drawn attention to the impacts of the state's English language proficiency test on the teaching and learning of high school ELLs. Arizona is one of the six states with more than 100,000 ELLs, constituting about 15% of the state's public school students. Arizona, however, has no program designed exclusively to help ELLs pass AIMS (CEP, 2007). Beginning in 2009, the state required ELLs to be taught using the structured English immersion (SEI) model, which incorporates four daily hours of English language development for the first year a student is classified as ELL. Only English language and materials in English are used for instruction in an SEI setting. The goal of the program is to have ELLs become proficient English speakers in one year (Davenport, 2008).

To comply with state and federal requirements for assessing English language proficiency, all English language learners from kindergarten through grade 12 attending Arizona schools must take the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA). This test measures students' progress toward meeting state English language proficiency standards.<sup>3</sup> ELLs of all grades are required to take four hours daily of ELD if they test below "proficient" on AZELLA. At the high school level, AZELLA contains five subtests: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and writing conventions. The test items include multiple-choice questions, writing samples, and both short and extended oral response test items. The speaking test is scored on site by examiners who follow a scoring guide. High school ELLs scoring at the intermediate level may receive one to two hours of ELD instruction in their second year of being classified as ELLs.

Most of the teachers we interviewed attributed the low AIMS passing rate of ELLs to differences in testing objectives between AZELLA and AIMS. (Appendix B compares the AIMS

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<sup>3</sup>More detailed information about AZELLA is available at <http://www.ade.az.gov/oelas/AZELLA/AZELLAAZ-1TechnicalManual.pdf>.

pass rates of ELLs with those of all students in the schools participating in our study.) AZELLA emphasizes oral proficiency and gives a composite score of students' oral English proficiency, together with reading and writing. Sometimes a very high oral score could camouflage ELLs' weaknesses in reading and writing, the two major areas tested by AIMS. As a result, many ELLs are reclassified too soon to receive needed support and be successful in meeting state standards. AZELLA, therefore, fails to demonstrate that it is a valid predictor of students' readiness for mainstream classrooms and does not share the same measurement objectives as AIMS, which assesses achievement in the areas of reading and writing. According to our interviewees, this content discrepancy makes AZELLA an inappropriate indicator of how well students are prepared to participate in mainstream English class and take the AIMS. One mainstream English teacher gave an example:

*I've had to try and get a kid pulled out of my class just because there's no way he was going to pass [AIMS]. And the counselor fought for it too, but [the student] kept passing the test [AZELLA], so he was good enough to pass that, but there's no way he's going to pass English [in AIMS].*

A district superintendent revealed that his district used to have about 30% of students in need of English as a second language (ESL) services; after the implementation of AZELLA, the share of students who were determined to need ESL services based on their assessment scores decreased to 8-10%. He described AZELLA as the "magic wand" which demonstrated that the state's structured English immersion program could transform students from being monolingual Spanish to fluent English speakers in a relatively short time. As shown in appendix B, however, the low pass rates of ELLs in the schools we studied suggest this has not really occurred. Participating schools in this study showed an appalling achievement gap between ELLs and general students in the state's high school exit exams. The data in appendix B illustrate the challenges ELLs face in graduating from high school and their potential needs for continued ELD services, even when they pass AZELLA. Many schools, however, did not have transitional programs to support students who passed AZELLA but were not prepared to move fully into an English classroom.

Teachers in some schools, therefore, did not rely on AZELLA scores to determine ESL placement. Some teachers looked at only the reading and writing scores in AZELLA to decide if students should be placed in ESL programs. Verde High School, for example, had a full-time language program coordinator who met with students to identify their language skills. This individual assessment not only provided more comprehensive evaluation of students' language proficiency but also helped schools place ELLs for the month after they took AZELLA but had not yet received the results from the test publisher. However, not many schools had a full-time staff person to assess students individually.

Teachers also noted a negative impact of the use of AZELLA on state funding for ESL services. Since 2001, Arizona has given districts \$365 per ELL in addition to the standard per-pupil funding (Zehr, 2008). Thus, if AZELLA leads to fewer students being identified for ESL services, then total funding for ELLs will decrease. A teacher at Rojo suspected that AZELLA was being used as a way for the state to reduce funding for ELLs: "They made [the assessment] so easy so all these kids got taken off because we get extra money for those kids." Another teacher at Azul High School explained the impact on school funding as a result of students exiting ESL after passing AZELLA:

*I can put them in bilingual class if I think that they need to be there, but in terms of being counted as the number of ESL students that we have and that need help, I think that we are and will be affected especially— not that money cures things, but it does. I mean, can we afford to have another teacher? You know, is there money to hire another teacher to help those students who do need it?*

The state's insufficient funding for ELLs has long been a public concern. In *Flores v. Arizona*, a suit that dates back to 1992, parents argued that "the state law circumvents the Equal Education Opportunity Act and NCLB by including federal funds and limiting ELL services to two years per student" (Sparks, 2009). The Supreme Court was scheduled to hear the argument on April 20, 2009.

## Lack of Local Capacity to Implement State Policies

While AZELLA illustrates the gap in expectations between varying state requirements for student advancement, the Arizona policy requiring certain students to have a written individualized compensatory plan (WICP) demonstrates a different kind of policy incoherence—that between policy expectations and school capacity.

WICP is an online system that documents the individualized instructional plans that teachers must develop for ELLs who failed AZELLA or general students who failed the reading portion of AIMS. Students who do not move up from one level to another in the course of a school year are considered to be “not progressing appropriately.” Teachers write a plan of interventions intended to ensure these students will demonstrate a year’s growth on the next exam. In many ways, the plan resembles the individualized education programs (IEPs) required for students in special education.

For the five schools we studied, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELLs had a pass rate of less than 40% in reading. In this case, WICP meant a tremendous amount of paperwork for teachers. A language coordinator spoke about the frustration of carrying out WICP:

*It’s a very new form and a very cumbersome one. It’s very difficult at the high school level . . . What ideally it should look like is, all the teachers of that student come together and develop this plan. This is what we’re going to do in the classroom for this student . . . That is not feasible in a school our size with our number of ESL students. Unfortunately, what it’s looking like is more of a standard list of all the interventions that we provide schoolwide that this student has access to. It’s not really individualized at this point . . . A high school with 20 or 30 ELL students I’m sure can follow more of that elementary school model. Just because of the sheer numbers . . . we haven’t figured out the logistics of how to get that much information from that many teachers about that many students.*

At Verde, teachers were exempted from doing WICPs because the school had more than 300 students who failed the test and needed WICPs. The district allowed the school to use the same plan for everybody in school year 2006-07 to reduce the amount of paperwork involved in fulfilling this requirement. This modification, however, was not discussed with most teachers. In one of our focus group interviews with teachers, only the chair of the special education

department attended the accountability meeting and was informed about the exemption. She explained that the school's rationale was to avoid putting an extra burden on the teachers.

WICP is a state effort to guide instruction with assessments; however, it did not fulfill its purposes in the schools we studied. Because these schools had similar student characteristics to those of Verde, they lacked the capacity to fully implement the state policy. The gap between school capacity and state mandates often undermines the impact of a policy on classroom instruction. A teacher noted that this was the case with WICP:

*[O]n higher levels there's great visioning processes, and they have a great idea on this is how it should be and then they just dump it below and say, "And you take care of the vision" without the sufficient resources. Or, a lot of times with the legislatures it's simply without funding programs or stuff like that. But in other ways, too, it's without even taking into account the huge amount of details that have to be considered when you do any sort of programs like that.*

In the case of WICP, schools' response to state policy did not go beyond paperwork. The essential individualized instruction hardly took place in the classroom in the schools we studied.

## **Implications**

The three policies discussed in this report—augmentation, AZELLA, and WICP—demonstrate how state-mandated policies were disseminated and implemented in some local schools. These three policies highlighted in the 2006-07 school interviews remain current concerns for schools that are striving to fulfill the state's high school graduation requirements. Concerns linger over the augmentation policy and student motivation. In May 2008, the legislature extended the augmentation policy but decreased the percentage of the augmented score a student can receive after school year 2010-11. The state continues to mandate WICP with unclear assistance to schools. AZELLA, though published by a new publisher, remains the only test to indicate ELLs' English fluency and still uses a composite score to determine students' readiness for mainstream English classes. In February 2009, the state department of education recommended that legislature slash more than \$30 million in funding for instruction for ELLs. The state's new standards require students to spend four hours a day in English-language instruction until they pass AZELLA. It was claimed that, under this new instructional model,

several districts have doubled the rate of children reaching fluency according to AZELLA results (Gersema, 2009).

Issues addressed in this report have relevance for generic problems other states face in implementing state policy. Four lessons learned from this study merit attention.

***First, a comprehensive system to disseminate policy information is as important as the design of the policy itself.*** The state has put in place policies for high school graduation but has not done a good job of disseminating information. Some complicated state policies were not well explained or were not put in a format that teachers, parents and students could understand. The school staff we interviewed were very careful about what to tell and what not to tell students about the policy because they were concerned that the flexibility in the state policy would undercut the motivating effects of high-stakes tests. School administrators tried to reduce the counter-effects by selectively informing students of high school graduation requirements; however, such strategies seem only to have caused mistrust among students toward school. CEP's earlier report on the impact of AIMS on ELLs (CEP, 2007) examined students' perceptions in greater depth. The following excerpt illustrates students' mistrust:

*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."*

States need to develop multiple pathways, instead of just relying on school administrators, to disseminate policy information widely and ensure it is better understood. These pathways could include community organizations, parent meetings conducted in a language parents can understand, and professional development sessions for educators. Arizona, for example, has set up a variety of avenues to disseminate information about AIMS, including Q & A hotlines; however, sources for other state policies pertaining to graduation remain limited.

*Second, states and districts need to share the responsibility to provide sufficient technical assistance and monitoring to ensure that schools effectively implement state policies and to address confusion about implementation in a timely manner.* When administrators, teachers, and other school staff implement state policies, their actions are often influenced by their beliefs and professional experiences. Teachers, school counselors and principals choose to engage students differently based on their own perceptions of the consequences of the policy. Their theories or predisposed expectations serve as filters for policy implementation. As a result, state policies may be used to fulfill administrative and instructional purposes instead of the goals they were intended to accomplish.

To make dissemination more practical, language and technical procedures in the policy need to be simple. A lesson we learned from school counselors is that they had to use very clear and straightforward explanations when describing the augmentation policy to students. Jargon, ambiguity, and complicated procedures are not helpful in establishing the legitimacy of a state policy or positively influencing its implementation. If a policy is too complicated to be understood by all stakeholders, can schools be held accountable for not implementing the policy well?

In particular, we recommend including policy as part of teacher professional development to inform teachers about policy modifications. Our interviews with school staff indicated that professional development in our study schools was limited to improving instructional strategies and fulfilling administrative requirements. No teacher mentioned that he or she had learned about state graduation requirements in a systematic way, and many were told they were not supposed to know. However, the high-stakes testing policy has bound instruction and policy so closely together that any change in policy may call for adjustments in teaching. Teachers' frustration with the graduation policy examined in this study suggested that the void of policy knowledge in teacher's professional development may hinder policy implementation in classroom. A professional learning community has the greatest influence on teachers' practices and expectations (McLaughlin, 2005), and professional development programs are a natural place for teachers to learn about state policies. The discussion of these policies could provide a framework

for structuring professional development programs that foster a deeper understanding of policy in relation to everyday teaching.

We also urge states to specify strategies for monitoring when they design policies and to collect feedback from the monitoring process to inform future policy. This reciprocal process may address public confusion about state policies at an early stage and, therefore, improve the social atmosphere for policy implementation. Additionally, we suggest that states evaluate the effectiveness of policies for placing ELLs in English language development programs by collecting student-level data and examining changes in the academic achievement of students once they receive additional services.

***Third, the various facets of state testing and accountability systems need to be consistent and compatible with each other.*** State requirements can be overwhelming for schools, particularly when they are not consistent with each other. A coherent policy system allows teachers to prepare students to meet one requirement on their way toward meeting another.

AZELLA is an example of a state policy that does not have teachers' buy-in, mostly because it is not a valid predictor of ELLs' readiness for mainstream classes and its measurement objective is detached from that of AIMS, which carries higher stakes for both schools and students. To spur schools to respond more positively, state policy needs to address how different pieces of policies function as a system and how meeting the requirements of one policy will help schools meet the requirements of the others.

***Fourth, states need a systemic approach to gauging school capacity as a first step for making decisions on intervention policies.*** Schools need capacity and resources to implement state policies effectively. WICP, as described in this report, was essentially abandoned by some schools because these schools must deal with broader issues than the policy was originally designed to address. More importantly, these schools do not have sufficient staff, resources, or knowledge to put the policy ideas into practice. Simply put, the objectives of the policy exceeded these schools' capacity. We recommend that policy design take school capacity into consideration. Particularly, the design process needs to 1) define the issue, 2) estimate the scope of problem schools face and the expected human and financial resources needed to implement

the policy, 3) measure the gap between the status quo and the expected school capacity, and 4) design strategies to address the capacity gap. This approach not only allows a state to estimate the scope of implementation but also helps adjust the policy design.

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## Appendix A. Descriptive Data about Schools Studied, 2005-06

School Pseudonym	Azul	Verde	Café	Rojo	Blanco
School type	Urban (population 250,000 or more)	Urban (population 250,000 or more)	Urban (population less than 100,000)	Rural	Urban (population 250,000 or more)
Title I*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Total school enrollment	2,182	1,964	2,477	353	1,555
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%
Native American	3%	4%	2%	1%	3%
ELLs	17%	18%	5%	16%	19%
Migrant	0%	0%	50%	4%	0%
Low-income	79%	61%	67%	68%	57%

Table reads: Azul High School is an urban school in a city with a population of 250,000 or more. The school receives federal Title I funds to improve achievement for disadvantaged students and enrolled 2,182 students in school year 2005-06. Of these students, 4% were white and 90% Latino; 17% were English language learners.

\*Not all high schools had sufficient low-income enrollment to be designated as “schoolwide” Title I programs; some were targeted assistance Title I schools.

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

## Appendix B. Percentage of 10<sup>th</sup> Graders Who Performed at the “Meets” or “Exceeds Standards” Level (Graduation Passing Levels) on AIMS, 2005-06

	Math		Reading		Writing	
	School	District	School	District	School	District
<b>Azul High School</b>						
# of all students tested	502	806	479	791	486	790
# of ELLs tested	107	145	103	149	102	144
All students (met or exceeded)	52%	50%	51%	52%	47%	49%
ELLs (met or exceeded)	24%	25%	9%	10%	7%	6%
<b>Verde High School</b>						
# of all students tested	396	3,907	427	4,113	431	4,094
# of ELLs tested	62	353	67	379	67	368
All students (met or exceeded)	56%	64%	52%	68%	44%	61%
ELLs (met or exceeded)	26%	20%	10%	11%	3%	7%
<b>Café High School</b>						
# of all students tested	721	2,554	743	2,603	746	2,602
# of ELLs tested	40	249	43	265	43	262
All students (met or exceeded)	54%	52%	67%	59%	52%	49%
ELLs (met or exceeded)	23%	30%	5%	16%	2%	8%
<b>Rojo High School</b>						
# of all students tested	105	105	106	106	107	107
# of ELLs tested	13	13	13	13	13	13
All students (met or exceeded)	36%	36%	64%	64%	54%	54%
ELLs (met or exceeded)	8%	8%	31%	31%	15%	15%
<b>Blanco High School</b>						
# of all students tested	380	3,907	383	4,113	379	4,094
# of ELLs tested	80	353	81	379	76	368
All students (met or exceeded)	93%	93%	95%	95%	90%	90%
ELLs (met or exceeded)	4%	20%	7%	11%	7%	7%

Table reads: In the 2005-06 school year, 502 10<sup>th</sup> grade students at Azul High School took the AIMS math exam. Of these students 107 were English language learners. Fifty-two percent of all students who took the exam, and 24% of ELLs who took the exam, met or exceeded the score required to pass the AIMS for graduation purposes.

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.

Source: Data provided by schools participating anonymously in CEP’s case studies of exit exams and ELLs in Arizona, CEP, 2007; and Arizona Department of Education, 2006.

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