

Introduction

David Garcia

Arizona State University Tempe Campus

The Condition of Pre-K-12 Education in Arizona: 2005, the second annual report by the Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), is a collection of policy briefs on key issues in Arizona education. Launched in 2003, AEPI uses the expertise of faculty from Arizona's public universities to inform public debate on education policy issues. The authors of *The Condition of Pre-K-12 Education in Arizona: 2005* briefs are on the faculty of Arizona's three public universities: Arizona State University (ASU), Northern Arizona University (NAU), and the University of Arizona (UA). In addition, all the briefs were reviewed by an expert in the field.

Taken together, the ten policy briefs that follow are a case study of sorts on the impact of standardization and accountability in a single state. Academic standards and accountability are a consistent theme in many of the briefs. This illustrates the extent to which the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act and Arizona LEARNS affect nearly every facet of K-12 public education in the state.

Michael Kelley of ASU West and Joseph Tobin and Karen Ortiz of ASU Tempe note that the condition of early education and care remains largely unchanged since 2004. "Collection of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) data continues to be extremely fragmented (collected by multiple state agencies and community organizations) and difficult to obtain, creating difficulty in making accurate comparisons or assumptions." Although the authors identify a number of initiatives implemented since the release of the 2004 report, they caution that significant systemic change has not occurred. Not surprising, most of the authors' recommendations pertain to improving early education research by investing in data collection and analysis to better understand the impact of Arizona's early education programs.

Standardization has affected the education of Arizona's English Language Learners (ELL) since the passage of Proposition 203 in 2001. Proposition 203 requires Structured English Immersion (SEI) as the program of instruction for ELL students. Kate Mahoney of ASU East and Jeff MacSwan and Marilyn Thompson of ASU Tempe conduct a review of recent studies about the effectiveness of SEI and bilingual education programs. The authors conclude that the research findings are at odds with the current philosophy and direction of Arizona's language policies.

In their brief on special education, ASU Tempe professors Sarup R. Mathur and Rob Rutherford address the tension between the goals of NCLB, which focuses on accountability standards for all students, and the individualized instruction required for Arizona's Special Needs children. They discuss the uncertainty among special educators as they work to meet the provisions of NCLB. They also highlight promising practices developed from university and state partnerships, and calls for additional collaborative efforts to address other special education challenges in Arizona.

The academic achievement provisions in NCLB are based on the expectation that 100 percent of all students will reach proficiency on the Arizona Academic Standards by 2014. Francis Reimer of NAU documents the extent of the achievement gap for Arizona minority students using academic indicators that are central to NCLB: graduation rates, dropout rates, and scores for Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). She also identifies two state policy issues that, if not addressed, could hinder Arizona's efforts to educate all children and close the achievement gap between majority and minority students: the delay in providing sufficient funds for the education of ELL students and limitations in state data collection.

The brief on teacher quality identifies the far-reaching implications of State Board of Education policies. For example, changes in State Board rules significantly affect college and university programs that prepare teacher candidates. Sherry Markel of NAU reviews State Board minutes over a 14-month period and highlights how the policies adopted will influence the training of new teachers and the ongoing professional development of the current teaching force.

In their analysis of school administration in Arizona, Arnold Danzig (ASU Tempe), Walter Delecki (NAU), and David Quinn (UA) highlight the challenges principals face in the current era of accountability. The authors explore how unprecedented state intervention for failing schools through the use of Arizona Department of Education (ADE) Solutions Teams affects principals. They also raise questions about the effectiveness of certification tests for administrators and discuss the practice of re-hiring retired school administrators. The authors caution that the decision to re-hire retired administrators slows the entry of new people into the field, which could stunt the introduction of new ideas, energies, and capacities for learning into schools.

The most public feature of accountability in Arizona is the labeling of schools based on indicators of academic achievement. David Garcia of ASU Tempe analyzes the relationship between the Arizona LEARNS school labels and 2004 AIMS scores. He finds confusing variability in school performance across individual schools. For example, two elementary schools, one with 0 percent of students meeting or exceeding the standards in 2004 and another school with 93 percent of students meeting the same standards, are both classified with a “Performing” label. The author then offers several explanations for the discrepancy between school labels and AIMS scores, and recommends that policy makers provide clear and consistent information to parents.

In school accountability systems, student academic achievement is reduced to scores on standardized tests. Most of the general public is familiar with test scores, but few understand the intricacies of assessing student learning and the influences of assessment on classroom instruction. Darrell Sabers and Sonya Powers of UA provide an informative overview of standardized testing that should be requisite reading for all consumers of test scores. The brief is tailored to inform the reader about Arizona’s standardized assessment, the Dual-Purpose Assessment. The authors discuss how well assessment tests meet their intended purpose and the impact of testing for accountability on classroom instruction.

In her brief on the state of technology in Arizona public education, Laura E. Sujo de Montes of NAU reviews research that demonstrates how meaningful integration of

technology into instruction can improve student academic achievement. However, despite the general availability of technology in Arizona schools, the author notes Arizona educators are not effectively integrating technology and instruction. Sujo de Montes concludes by discussing the inadequacies of technology education in relation to Arizona's aspirations to excel in the knowledge economy.

Ric Wiggall of NAU contrasts Arizona's standards movement with state funding to support it. He notes policy makers have not taken into consideration the "two-edged nature of accountability." The development of a system of standards and measurements to hold schools (and students) accountable also requires a new approach focused on differentiated funding that takes into account the varying needs of students. He concludes, however, "policies promoted by the Arizona legislature appear to be focused on restricting funds for core instructional purposes to the greatest degree possible and financially promoting a competitive system that offers alternatives (charter schools, vouchers, tax credits) to traditional public schools."

The Condition of Education in Arizona: 2005 is intended as a resource document. Each brief stands alone; readers can go directly to their area of interest or review the entire document to get a comprehensive picture of the current condition of public education in Arizona.