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Guest Opinion: How We Measure Up

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In Arizona, education policy commonly is developed from a position of constant deficit.

There is either no research, insufficient research or poor research available to help policy-makers with important decisions of considerable consequence for Arizona's students and teachers.

Either we do not want to face the answers to the toughest questions about our schools, or we don't have the means to get them.

The Arizona Education Policy Initiative - a collaboration of the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University - is a constructive response to this circumstance. AEPI leverages the collective expertise of education experts to consider complex policy questions.

For the second year, AEPI researchers have compiled a comprehensive study of the 10 most important areas in public education.

"The Condition of Education in Arizona: 2005" is the first study to chronicle the comprehensive impact of No Child Left Behind and Arizona LEARNS, the federal and state accountability policies.

The researchers note how these sweeping mandates are pushing the state toward a one-size-fits-all system that struggles to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

The report unearths a number of difficult issues while providing tangible recommendations for improvement. It should be of interest to everyone invested in Arizona public education.

Highlights include:

- The evidence is quite clear; Arizona's African-American, Hispanic and Native American students continue to trail far behind their white and Asian counterparts in academic

achievement - and minority students drop out of school at much higher rates than non-minority students.

As a state, we must learn why students drop out in order to develop effective interventions.

- There is a fundamental contradiction in school finance policy. The expressed aim of state and national education policies is to close achievement gaps between students. Yet Arizona restricts funds for core instructional purposes and promotes an alternative education system (i.e. charter schools, vouchers, tax credits). These policies are more likely to perpetuate achievement gaps than to close them.
- The state has decreased the time it takes students to take standardized tests. The more fundamental question is why we test in the first place and to consider if all the tests in the current battery, with a critical eye on the Terra Nova, contribute enough to student learning to warrant the time and dollars spent to administer them.
- There is a weak relationship between AZ LEARNS school labels (e.g. "Performing," "Underperforming," "Failing") and Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards test scores. Policy-makers consider school labels an important tool for parents as they choose schools; this inconsistency calls into question how effectively the system meets this purpose.
- NCLB is implementing blanket academic goals for all students, even special education students. This approach conflicts with the demands of special needs students, who need differentiated instruction and developmentally appropriate outcomes to match.
- The trend toward leased employees, retired administrators who return for a fraction of their salary while still collecting their pension, has implications for restricting innovation in public schools and a direct cost to the state's retirement system.
- Proposition 203 initiated Structured English Immersion as the primary method to educate English language learners. Little to no research supports this strategy in the way it is being implemented in classrooms. Arizona needs a rigorous evaluation of Proposition 203 to understand the implications of this monumental shift in instructional practices.
- While the state has begun to close the technology gap by wiring schools for the Internet and providing computers, teachers need professional development to make technology work in the classroom.
- With structured English immersion and changes to Early Childhood Education and Care, teachers and caregivers must obtain additional certification and professional development. ECEC could experience a shortage of qualified personnel should current caregivers be unable to dedicate the time or money to become certified.
- Policy-makers are focused on strengthening and expanding ECEC to include fully funded, full-day kindergarten and to improve quality and capacity. Yet there is still no concerted effort by the state to study the impact of these groundbreaking reforms.

In the 2004 report, the theme that emerged was the lack of data to conduct rigorous education policy research. Unfortunately, the gaps in data available to Arizona policy-makers continue to be numerous and large.

To improve the amount and quality of information available to state policy-makers, AEPI has entered into an unprecedented agreement with the Arizona State Board of Education to share data and cultivate research activities.

This agreement is an example of the state board and university commitment to improving public education for all children.

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