Arizona State University Professor Jeff MacSwan attacks a study performed by my department ("Bad data poison language study," My Turn, Friday).

This study compared students in structured English immersion with students in bilingual programs for the 2002-03 school year, prior to my enforcement of the rule that students not proficient in English be in structured English-immersion programs.

This was a massive study of the test scores of 70,000 students. It showed that students in structured English-immersion programs outperformed students in bilingual programs in that they were anywhere from one to six months ahead through fifth grade, and over a year ahead from sixth grade on. (When a subtest was done for Spanish-speaking students only, it still showed English-immersion students ahead in every subject at every grade level, with 18 of 21 measures statistically significant at the .05 level.)

We had no way of knowing in advance what these 70,000 sets of test scores would show. The fact that the differences were so consistent (seven grade levels, times three subjects, equals 21 consistent measures) and were so large (as much as 1.5 years ahead) tells an important scientific story.

Some highly ideological pro-bilingual professors don't like to face up to scientific results. Most professors are conscientious, but a few are highly ideological.

An analogy to the ideology of bilingualism is the ideology of "whole language" reading, a failed method of trying to teach students to read without teaching them the sounds of the letters (phonics). The analogy is especially apt because many of the "whole language" ideologues are the same professors as the bilingual ideologues.

The federal government has spent so much money on researching how children learn to read that it has reached the status of a physical science. It shows conclusively that
phonics must be included. We therefore require the element of phonics in reading programs funded through our department.

An unfortunate factor is that there are some tenured faculty at ASU and the University of Arizona who are still ideologically stuck on "whole language." The irony is that politicians are pushing science, while some of the academy is stuck on ideology.

MacSwan claims that our data is flawed. Even if there were some flaws in our data, the chance that they would account for 21 consistent results, with no exceptions, in the study of 70,000 sets of test scores, is exactly zero.

In support of his argument that there were flaws in the data, MacSwan cited an article written 10 weeks ago. But he was the author of that article. Citing yourself is not normally considered an effective method of advocacy.

He gives three alleged flaws in the data, which we refute below:

• "The study ignored socio-economic differences." There is no reason to believe that students in the English-immersion programs were either poorer or richer than the other English-language learners.

• "The study ignored relevant background knowledge." Even before I began enforcing the initiative, students had to show some knowledge of English to qualify for a bilingual waiver. The bilingual program therefore had an advantage in "background knowledge," but still scored worse in every subject at every grade level.

• "The study confused classroom-level and program-level decryptions." For the period at issue, bilingual-program students after the first year typically moved on to a "transitional bilingual" classroom. Therefore, the higher achievers among bilingual-program students, who MacSwan feared were being credited to English immersion, were actually analyzed as part of the bilingual program. English-immersion students still performed better in every subject at every grade level, as much as 1.5 years ahead.

English immersion is important for one reason: the academic performance of the students.

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