Guest opinion: Why schools can be so confusing

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Parents and other citizens are often frustrated by certain policies in public schools.

Arizona, for example, for several years has required students to pass Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards in order to receive a high school diploma.

An exception, called "augmentation," allows students who fail the test to get a diploma, provided their grades are good and they take remedial courses in math, English or both.

The problem has been that students, parents and even teachers have not always known about this important exception or how students can take advantage of it. Confusion results.

The Center on Education Policy, an independent Washington, D.C., advocacy and research organization, studied policies for at-risk students and English-language learners in Arizona during the 2006-07 school year.

Researchers conducted 364 interviews with students, teachers, administrators and parents at five high schools in southern Arizona.

Three Arizona policies in particular were the focus: AIMS and augmentation, the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment and the written, individualized compensatory plan (a learning plan for English-language learners who have been classified as "fluent" in English but are not making progress).

Serious problems were found with understanding and implementing all three policies.
In addition to the confusion about the augmentation policy, many teachers believed English-language learners passing AZELLA were not necessarily ready for mainstream classrooms, let alone passing high school exit exams.

Once students pass AZELLA, in principle, they are not qualified to receive any language service; AZELLA becomes a legitimate excuse to deprive students of desperately needed services.

Under such circumstances, it is natural that some schools create their own rules of classification and manage to subsidize programs without funding from the state.

Legal arguments, such as Flores v. Arizona, should not be surprising, because the state's identification, classification and funding system is simply not working for students, teachers and schools.

Another problem area is Arizona's written individualized compensatory plan. Teachers are to specify learning goals for struggling students to help with their academic progress.

This is a really good idea when a couple of students in each class need such service. But when a school has to write individual plans for more than 700 students, as in some of the schools reported in the study, this well-intended policy turns out to be unrealistic.

This program was abandoned by some schools because they did not have sufficient staff, resources or knowledge to put it into practice.

Policy design is not just theory; this individualized plan program is an object lesson in how idealistic design can contribute to impractical implementation.

The lesson from our work in Arizona couldn't be clearer: State policies may not only fail in achieving their goals, but also may bring unexpected consequences to students and schools.

CEP's report captures this reality during 2006-07 and describes a wide range of reactions among teachers and school staff.

We hope, for the students, parents, teachers and other citizens of Arizona, the situation has improved.

But the broader lesson is that the state government and local school boards should make sure their policies make sense when implemented together and don't conflict
with one another.

They should also be sure that teachers and local administrators have the capacity to carry out those policies.

Otherwise, there will be confusion in the public and frustration in the schools.

Arizona is not alone in having school policies that do not fit well together and in requiring policies when there is little or no capability to carry them out.

But not being alone should not be an excuse. Policymakers must make sense out of what we ask our schools to do.

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

**More online**

To read the full report, Conflicts Between State Policy and School Practice: Learning from Arizona's Experience with High School Exam Policies, go [http://www.cepd.org](http://www.cepd.org) and look under High School Exit Exams.

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