

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

ELL costs are a matter of perspective

By Tom Horne

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On March 14, the Capitol Times ran a guest column by the president of the Arizona School Boards Association stating that Arizonans should be "outraged" at me. The column was 100 percent emotion, zero percent analysis.

The attack relates to the new models for English Language Learners adopted by a task force established by the Legislature. These models require four hours of intensive English language instruction every day, so that when the students are transferred into mainstream classrooms, they will understand instruction. Until now, schools have thrown students who understand not a word of English into regular classrooms to sink or swim. This is not English immersion, but "submersion," and is not an educationally sound practice.

The column describes this as "segregation," as though it were a return to the negative type of historic segregation. They know this slur to be false. The applicable federal court case on this subject states:

"...school systems are free to employ ability grouping, even when such a policy has a segregative effect, so long, of course, as such a practice is genuinely motivated by educational concerns and not discriminatory motives."

The charge in the column that the model "disallows the teaching of core curriculum to these youngsters" is false. At my initiation, the model contains a requirement that, while the students are being taught English, the context is to be the academic subjects.

The School Boards Association, along with other so-called alphabet groups, defends the status quo at all costs against any proposals for reform. Arizona's rate of reclassifying students as English proficient is a dismally low 13 percent, implying that it takes almost ten years for the student to learn English.

We have examples that show that, when English is taught properly, students can become English proficient within one year. Charter schools reporting that 100 percent of their students in the younger grades becoming proficient in one year include Valley Academy (where I recently taught a class and observed its success), Challenge Charter, Career Success, and Peak Charter Schools. District schools experiencing success in teaching students English include Nogales and Yuma. But the School Boards Association will defend the dismal overall status quo because change frightens them, like the characters in the book "Who Moved My Cheese?"

Proposition 203, which was passed overwhelming by the voters in 2000, requires as follows:

English learners shall be educated through sheltered English immersion during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year...Once English learners have acquired a good working knowledge of English...(they) shall be transferred to English language mainstream classrooms.

The School Board Association's position, that students who do not know a word of English should still be thrown into classes where some have no idea what is going on, and do not learn English, is not only bad for those children, but is clearly illegal.

They also complain about the amount of money being allocated. We have determined that an additional 1,400 teachers are needed statewide, with a total additional cost of about \$40 million. This number is well-substantiated with specific analysis, district by district, school by school.

They are claiming \$300 million. Where that number comes from, no one can figure out. One district requested funding for 90 additional teachers, without explanation, and after ADE review, the district only needed 13 additional teachers; another district applied for 66 teachers, without explanation, and only needed 17; another district applied for 49 additional teachers, without explanation, and only needed 1; and so it goes.

John Stollar, who is in charge of our analysis, was a principal for 20 years. He says that, as a principal, if asked how much money he wanted, he would have come up with a large number. But in his current role, he had a fiduciary duty to calculate precisely what was needed. There is a difference of role, and perspective, and differences are understandable.

But what is maddening is the blind adherence of the School Boards Association and other alphabet groups to the status quo, no matter how compelling the need for reform. They even oppose reform of the Roosevelt School District, where evidence of failing schools is overwhelming.

The ones who suffer the most are students from lower economic neighborhoods, where they get less help at home, and the need for good schools is greatest. This is a serious moral issue. Shame on the rest of us if we continue to let the alphabet groups stave off reform, when what is needed is a sense of urgency, not complacency.

Tom Horne is the state superintendent of public instruction.