

Reply from the Center on Education Policy

CEP's report, *Has Progress Been Made in Raising Achievement for English Language Learners?*, was reviewed by Jeff MacSwan, professor of applied linguistics at Arizona State University, for the Think Twice think tank. We welcome this type of scrutiny of our research-- we have always presumed our work would be put under a microscope. Our reports are meant to be of use to both researchers and policy makers, and we get scrutiny from both sides.

However, MacSwan's review misrepresented our report. It unduly simplified the content of our work by playing down the extent to which we warn of the limitations of state test data for discerning how English language learners (ELLs) are achieving in school, and by ignoring completely the conclusion to our report.

We went through great pains to point out limitations of ELL test data and put it into context. In the introduction to the report we stress "the factors that make it difficult to accurately assess what ELLs know and can do." The first two findings point out that test results for ELLs may not accurately reflect what these students know and can do, and that population changes make discerning trends for this group difficult. These findings are clearly presented on the very first page of the report, as well as in more depth in the sections titled "Problems in Testing ELLs" and "Changing Numbers of Test-Takers."

Most puzzling is the reviewer's decision to ignore the conclusion of the report for the purposes of his critique. Our conclusion includes specific policy recommendations which are based on the very limitations mentioned above, and which the reviewer asserts that we underplay. These recommendations are:

- 1) Current methods of determining adequate yearly progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are problematic for this subgroup of students, and should be changed.
- 2) Use of growth models that track the progress of individual students over time might be a better way to track the academic progress of ELLs, although such models still present problems.
- 3) ED has recently provided money to states under ARRA to improve testing of ELLs, including plans to test the effectiveness of testing accommodations for ELLs. We support this effort.
- 4) ED should "help states to develop reliable and fair assessments for ELLs of both content knowledge and language proficiency that can be used to make valid inferences about their learning and that offer students a variety of ways, including appropriate accommodations, to demonstrate what they have learned."

These recommendations are based on the limitations of ELL testing explained in the report and are meant to urge policy makers to search for ways to improve testing for this subgroup.

Our aim in writing this report (and other reports in our series on test scores trends) is to provide objective information so that when policy makers discuss policy concerning ELLs or other subgroups of students, they have adequate background. Part of this background is test scores. Vast resources have gone into testing of ELLs and all other students at the state level, but state test score trends are not regularly or comprehensively reported by any national organization

other than CEP. In our analysis of ELL test results, we found that trends are generally upward and felt that was worth pointing out.

There are other examples of the weaknesses of MacSwan's critique. For example, the reviewer states that, "We know with some certainty that all the students in the ELL subgroup have been assessed as having limited English proficiency by a state language proficiency test." Actually, this is not the case. Federal regulations allow ELLs to remain in the subgroup for two years after they have passed a state English proficiency test. The reviewer criticizes us for "not using any statistical tests to compare student outcomes." It is not clear what statistical tests he has in mind. We assume he is thinking of a test of whether the percentage proficient is significantly different in one year from what it was in a previous year. However, such statistical tests are inappropriate since we are dealing with results for the entire population of tested students rather than a sample of students. Another example of a weakness in the critique is that the reviewer suggests that an alternative explanation for the upward trends may be that states with higher percentages of ELLs have easier tests. However, the focus of the study is on the increases or decreases in percentages proficient within a state--the difficulty of their tests relative to other states would not be a factor in explaining such trends.

The overall tone of MacSwan's review is that CEP is engaging in a kind of deception by reporting that the percentage proficient figures for ELLs on state tests is increasing. Nowhere do we say in this report that such results are cause for celebration. The report makes clear that, while improvements have occurred, ELLs are struggling academically. Our conclusion emphasizes the need for better ways of assessing the achievement of this subgroup of students. Again, while we welcome critiques of our work, we wish that this reviewer would have given a more honest appraisal of the report by correctly representing our treatment of the limitations of ELL test data and our conclusions about policy implications.