

June 21, 2010

Statement on Arizona's English Fluency Initiative

The undersigned faculty of Stanford University's School of Education, Department of Linguistics, Department of English and supporting faculty from across the university endorse the following statement.

In response to the Arizona Department of Education's targeting of English teachers who speak "heavily accented" English, the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona produced a statement (re-printed in full below) that demonstrates the numerous fallacies of the new policy. Not only is Arizona's policy based on uninformed linguistic and educational assumptions, but such a policy also has the potential to unfairly target Latina/o teachers *and* their students by removing the very teachers who may be best qualified to teach them. As indicated in the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) statement on the policy (re-printed in full below), what matters most is not the "accent" of the teacher, but whether or not that teacher "understands students and the dynamics of language learning."

Moreover, we have decades of research indicating that "accents" are arbitrarily defined and more often than not an indication of how we feel about particular groups of people, rather than a specific language variety. The *Wall Street Journal* (4/30/10) points out that Arizona's English "fluency" initiative is particularly troubling if read within the context of the state's extremely tense debate over immigration (SB 1070), and we would further add, its recent ban on Ethnic Studies (HB 2281). Both policies have been widely interpreted as harmful to Latinos directly and to other non-dominant groups by extension. Ironically, these policies may inadvertently serve to further the very social divisions they purport to eradicate, and they may deepen the educational rift between Latina/o students and their White counterparts.

The undersigned faculty support all efforts to improve the educational welfare of Latina/o students, and *all* students, but our strong preference goes to programs and policies that are supported by sound educational and linguistic research. Arizona's new policy does not meet these criteria. Given the cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes contemporary society, we support NCTE's call to put "sound educational principles ahead of misguided cultural assumptions," as well-intentioned as they might be.

The full statement from the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona can be downloaded here:

http://www.u.arizona.edu/~hammond/ling_statement_final.pdf

The full statement from the National Council of Teachers of English can be downloaded here:

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Involved/Action/NCTEpositiononAZELLrules.pdf>

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