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# Sahuarita asks state to approve different ELL program

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The Sahuarita Unified School District, which recently was criticized by the state schools chief for saying it wouldn't follow the state-mandated program for English immersion, is seeking permission from the state Education Department to use an alternate model.

The district also has asked federal officials to document the advice they gave the district regarding English-language instruction.

The school district filed a request to use a program that differs from the state program and allow the district some flexibility with its English-language instruction.

The request comes three weeks after the district governing board decided not to give the required four hours of English instruction to non-English-speaking middle- and high-school students.

School district officials said the decision to not implement the state-mandated English-immersion program was based on advice from U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, which said the state law was discriminatory.

District officials said the law would prevent middle- and high-school students from taking the core and elective classes needed for them to be promoted and graduate on time.

Tom Horne, Arizona superintendent of public instruction, originally said he was "shocked" by the decision and threatened disciplinary action against the school district if it didn't comply with the law.

Horne recommended the school district file the request after he learned the school district has relatively few English-language learners, he said.

"Small numbers are one of the factors that will allow us to approve an alternative model," Horne said.

State education officials will review the school district's request before making a recommendation to Arizona's English Language Learner Task Force, he said.

The task force will then act on the recommendation and possibly make a decision, he said.

Horne said the task force would likely meet later this month.

Sahuarita originally approved a plan that would give the required four hours of instruction to elementary-school students, but significantly less to middle- and high-school students, said assistant Superintendent Manuel Valenzuela.

The district is seeking permission to continue its current model, which provides one to two periods of instruction each day for non-English speaking students in middle and high schools, Valenzuela said.

"The main difference between the current model and the state model is the amount of dedicated time that must be assigned to language acquisition instruction," he said.

"Our action in either direction puts us at odds with instruction we've received from the two agencies, federal and state."

Manuel Valenzuela, assistant superintendent

The school district has about 50 English-language learners in middle and high schools, he said.

Federal officials started monitoring the school district in 2002 after an employee complained that the district wasn't providing adequate materials to teach English-language learners.

Since then, the district has constantly communicated with the Office of Civil Rights regarding its English-language-learning instruction, Valenzuela said.

The federal supervision and the state law have put the school district in a difficult position, he said.

"Our action in either direction puts us at odds with instruction we've received from the two agencies, federal and state," he said.

If the state task force approves the alternate model, the district would be in a position to please both sides.

"We believe we have a common ground with all the parties involved in wanting to promote the success of the students involved," he said.

"Our action in either direction puts us at odds with instruction we've received from the two agencies, federal and state."

Manuel Valenzuela, assistant superintendent

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