Supt. Tom Horne responds to Republic criticism of his defense of state law

Laurie Roberts' attack on me on the issue of dual language got everything completely wrong.

In 2000, the voters overwhelmingly passed an initiative that requires that "all children in Arizona public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English and all children shall be placed in English language classrooms." The language was crystal clear and intended to prohibit bilingual and dual language instruction for students not yet proficient in English.

No one has the right, or the power to overrule a vote of the people in an initiative: not the governor, not the legislature, not the State Board, not the Attorney General, not Laurie Roberts, not I, who has the responsibility to oversee instruction of English Language Learners, and to be sure the law is obeyed.

I was first elected state superintendent of schools in the 2002 election. The incumbent had refused to enforce the initiative, and that was the chief issue on which I defeated the incumbent in the primary and went on to win the general election. The voters had again expressed their strong view on this issue.

Under bilingual education, which was universal when I took office, the rate of proficiency in English in one year for English Language Learners was a pathetic four percent. At that rate almost no one would become proficient, and they would fail in the economy. I introduced structured English immersion, and we got the rate up to 31 percent. At that rate, almost everyone becomes proficient in three or four years.

A key to that success was intensive instruction given to teachers on how to teach structured English immersion.

When I left the office of Superintendent to become Attorney General in 2011 my successors abandoned the intensive instruction, so proficiency rates decreased. I have now renewed that intensive instruction.

Ten school districts, out of over 200, are defying the law. On an apples-to-apples comparison, districts teaching structured English immersion are outperforming dual language districts by 4 to 1 in rates of acquiring English proficiency. The English language students in those ten districts are being cheated out of their right to be taught English proficiency effectively, so that they can succeed academically and in the economy. The defendant in the current lawsuit is the Creighton district. Its rate of acquired proficiency is a pathetic five percent.

A Midwest professor once did a federally funded "time on task" study in which he concluded that the more time students spend learning something, the more they learn. His mother said to him: "you needed a federally funded study to tell you that?"

In dual language, the students spend only three hours a day, learning English, and the rest of the school day, plus the rest of the 24-hour period at home, in Spanish. It is almost impossible to acquire proficiency under those circumstances.

I strongly support learning world languages, including dual language programs, for students who become proficient in English. I studied five languages myself. But first they must become proficient in English to succeed academically and in the economy.

Yes, my wife is the lawyer in the pending lawsuit. She came to the United States from Cuba at age eight, speaking no English, was immersed in English, became proficient in three months, and went on to a successful academic and professional career. She is passionate about this issue. The individual plaintiff is married to a man who immigrated from China, was immersed in English, and similarly became proficient in English quickly, so she is also passionate about the subject.

We need to abandon timeworn, ideologies and focus on the academic success of the students. And government officials and opinion writers, need to acquire more respect for obedience to the law, especially laws passed overwhelmingly by the voters.