

SAGE Policy Brief

WCER SAGE Evaluation Team

Why Class Size Reduction is Important

The class size reduction component of SAGE builds on a robust literature that supports smaller classes K-3. The investment in class size reduction is based on the following assumptions:

- ▶ Smaller classes provide more opportunities for teacher-student interaction, with fewer disciplinary disruptions.
- ▶ Teachers tailor instruction to student needs through more interactions with students, assessment-refined instruction, & closer personal relationships with students.
- ▶ Students develop positive student identities, more fully understanding the cultural rules of school.
- ▶ The literature on class size reduction and its effects focus on programs that have *reduced group size*, assigning fewer students per class rather than *pupil teacher ratio* approaches that add staff but tend to increase group size.
- ▶ The SAGE law calls for reducing class size to 15:1 K-3. In practice, schools implement this through the following formats:
 - Single teacher with 15 students
 - 30:2 shared space (2 teachers and 30 students who operate as 2 separate classes)
 - 30:2 team taught
 - SAGE block: part time teacher added for literacy & math instruction

Organizational challenges

SAGE is a wonderful resource but it also presents some interesting organizational challenges.

- ▶ Space: When schools reduce class size there is an increase in the number of sections in a school. As a result, space can be an issue. Some schools choose to maintain a group size of 15, others opted for a team taught-double size group of students. Teachers noted the critical influence of space on their instruction: adequate space for materials, equipment, and for small group instruction protected from extraneous noise are necessary conditions for successful SAGE teaching.
- ▶ Teaming: 30:2 configurations require that paired teachers work collaboratively, something that many teachers did not feel adequately prepared to do. As a result, a number of the partner classes used “*tag team teaching*” where one teacher led the group and the other did administrative work. This strategy actually *increased* class size while lessening administrative burden.
- ▶ Teaching in new ways: The shift in SAGE instructional practices requires professional support for teachers. While many participated in professional development on best practices in literacy or math, few could recall support for teaching smaller classes or in teams.

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Work presented here comes out of ongoing research with nine SAGE schools in urban, semi-urban, & rural districts.

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Graue, E., Hatch, K., Rao, K., Oen, D. (2005). The wisdom of class size reduction. Madison: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Promising Practices

Space:

Schools used a variety of tools to accommodate SAGE programming within tight school spaces:

- ▶ Building space was renovated to increase the number of classroom spaces.
- ▶ Specials instruction was moved into K-3 classrooms to free up space.
- ▶ Teamed classrooms used auxiliary space in hallways for pull out activities.

Teaming:

Self-selected teams appear to be more successful than arranged partnerships. Partners need to share a philosophy or at least complement each other in their teaching. Time for planning, to reflect, and communicate is vital for teaching teams. Teachers valued going to observe successful teaching teams to

Professional development:

SAGE teachers and administrators favored the idea of a SAGE orientation, which would provide an overview of the program and its 4 pillars as well as showcasing "best practices" in SAGE teaching. Recognizing the variability

- ▶ Classrooms in close proximity coordinated their schedules to reduce noise drift.
- ▶ Teamed classes shifted to shared space to allow teachers their own instructional space.
- ▶ Higher achieving schools used 15:1 SAGE implementation and the quality of those teaching contexts were higher than the 30:2 configurations.

gain ideas about strategies. Support from administration and staff discussion of co-teaching makes tag team teaching less likely. Successful teaching partners suggest that co-teaching requires flexibility, the ability to share students, and a willingness to learn from each other.

among schools and teachers, it would be important to share a range of options that helped school people best plan SAGE implementation in diverse contexts. Sharing ideas from SAGE veterans who have tried different strategies would help teachers see new ways of using SAGE resources.

Key points:

1. SAGE's class size reduction is based on assumptions about changing the ways that teachers structure their classrooms.
2. Successful SAGE implementation requires adequate space for classrooms to accommodate materials, equipment, and small group instruction.
3. Teaming in 30:2 situations requires support so that teachers can develop strategies to work with other professionals. Without this support, they default to tag team teaching which undercuts the value of class size reduction.
4. Professional development specifically related to SAGE would provide an overview of the program and highlight strategies used in other SAGE schools.