June 2006
Volume 1, Issue 4

SAGE Policy Brief

WCER SAGE Evaluation Team

Class Size Reduction in Practice: How District Practices Matter

District support is critical in helping schools implement SAGE in ways that make a positive difference for students. How districts:

1. select SAGE schools,
2. determine program funding formulas, and
3. staff the program at the district level

influences who benefits from the program, and the depth and quality of the services that they receive.

Based on a study of six WI districts participating in the SAGE program, in this brief we consider:

- how districts are responding to flexibility in the law,
- the resources that they are drawing on to make SAGE dollars go farther, and
- the dilemmas that they face in this work.

Who Gets What?

As of 2000, any school that serves children in grades K-3 can participate in the SAGE program. Elements of district culture, particularly views about, "who gets what," help drive *which* schools become SAGE schools.

Some districts take an approach we term **spreading the wealth**. In these districts, SAGE funds may go to schools with only a handful of low-income students. Schools are reimbursed $2,000 per low income student. Frequently, the district has to kick in additional funds to make up the difference between the $2,000 generated per low income pupil and the funds required to meet the mandates of the law – among other things, to hire additional teachers so that children can be in class sizes of 15:1.

Other districts choose to concentrate resources in schools with high percentages of children in poverty. These schools tend to be located in low-income communities and serve children with significant social, emotional and academic needs. We call this strategy **leveling the playing field** because it uses SAGE to reduce resource disparities between predominantly low-income schools and their middle-class counterparts.

Underpinning both approaches is the principle of equity. Does equity mean (1) ensuring that all low income students, whichever school they attend, have access to smaller class sizes, or (2) ensuring that children attending schools with high concentrations of poverty receive "more"?

In a climate of scarce resources, the pressure to make sure that all kids have access to small classes is quite strong. Districts need to decide if and how they want to honor the law's original emphasis to make sure kids living in poverty have access to reduced class sizes and quality teaching. What is important is for districts to be *explicit about where they stand on the issue*, and given this stance, *identify the strategies* that are needed to ensure that SAGE dollars are being used in ways that support goals of achievement.

WCER SAGE
Evaluation Team

Wisconsin Center for Education Research
1025 W. Johnson
Madison, WI 53706

PHONE:
608 262-1717

E-MAIL:
pburch@wisc.edu

SAGE Evaluation Website:
http://varc.wceruw.org/sage/

Which Resources are Leveraged?

Clearly, saying you will honor that commitment is one thing. Finding the resources to do so is another. In some instances, the number of students in the low-income population does not generate enough money to support full implementation of the reduced student/teacher ratio, whether 15:1 or 30:2, at the site.

Some districts use what we term a **synergistic approach**. In these districts, administrators actively draw on multiple funding streams, such as Title I, Title IIA, and state funds to make SAGE "work." In these contexts, making SAGE "work" means ensuring that schools have the resources to create the conditions for success, such as:

- training teachers in small group instructional strategies that activate the class size reduction resource,
- providing families with opportunities to connect, network, and share their strengths with one another and the school, and
- ensuring the availability of high quality instructional materials that are aligned with district and state standards.

Other districts employed what we refer to as a **separate approach**. This approach keeps funding streams and programs separate for reporting and audit purposes. While this strategy may make good sense from an administrative standpoint, from an instructional standpoint, it is questionable. SAGE, Title I, Title IIA and other programs work toward the same goal-improved student learning— and resources should be used synergistically to improve student achievement.

District "SAGE Liaison"

SAGE cannot run itself. Well-trained district-level administrators are a necessity. These administrators must be clear about:

- who should benefit from SAGE,
- what "benefiting" from SAGE means, and
- how the district can successfully mediate this process.

Most importantly, SAGE administrators must know how to use SAGE funding synergistically. Specifically, they need to know how to use Title I, Title IIA, district and state funding ***with*** SAGE funds to reach district goals.

Staffing patterns reveal that districts tend not to control SAGE with a single position, but rather add it to other responsibilities of existing district personnel. This brings different kinds of expertise to SAGE, as well as varying levels of knowledge about instructional programming, schools' needs, and funding sources.

The capacity to leverage the benefits of SAGE participation to meet district goals is not a "given"—administrators need learning opportunities to develop needed skills and explore resource leveraging options.

Promising Practices[1]

District administrators can,

- Remain committed to the original intent of the law by both prioritizing and enabling success in high poverty, low-achieving schools.
- Administrators achieve this by *synergistically* addressing funding limitations by combining *existing* funding streams to achieve district goals and improve instructional practices for student learning.
- In order for this to happen, SAGE liaisons must be able to coordinate expertise across district departments, both budgetary and instructional.

[1] For full description of study and findings, see Burch, P., Fadali, E., Good, A., & Shiels, S. (2006). *Resource distribution in the implementation of class size reduction policy: Looking inside the black box of district practice*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Center for Educational Research.