

# SAGE Policy Brief

WCER SAGE Evaluation Team

## Class Size Reduction in Practice: How School Administrators Matter

School administrators are critical to whether and how SAGE resources translate into improved teaching practices within reduced size classrooms. This brief highlights how school administrators MATTER in SAGE implementation, the challenges that they face, and promising practices that administrators in improving schools have used. Our spotlight is on how school administrators in SAGE schools can

- leverage the use of space
- blend SAGE resources to support needs and rights of students with disabilities and English language learners.
- build teacher capacity in reduced size classrooms

Schools using these strategies are those that appear to be making or maintaining progress in raising achievement among children living in poverty.

### Finding the Space to Accommodate Smaller Class Sizes

Class size reduction creates the demand for more teachers but also more classroom space. When and where they can, school administrators can maximize the use of school space by *making sure that any space that CAN be used as a classroom IS used as a classroom*. A utility room is generally not a good SAGE classroom space. However, a room that once served as an art room and now houses only art supplies may be. When necessary, and where funds permit,

school administrators also can *create new classroom space by tearing down walls and putting up dividers to create two classrooms out of one*. One *challenge* here is to do so in a way that maintains the quality of the learning environment. Dividers may create more classroom space, but also more crowding and noise. Sometimes, the biggest challenge to space is not physical space but school tradition. In promising practice SAGE schools, the refrain, “but I have always had this classroom” did not take priority over creating space for a reduced size classroom of 15:1.

### Serving Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

Students with disabilities and English language Learners are well represented in SAGE schools. In addition to having the right for 15:1 classrooms, SAGE k-3 special needs students also have legal rights to the least restrictive environment. To help deliver on this right, school administrators can: *Adopt co-teaching models where Title I, special education and/or ELL teachers assist students within the classroom for significant parts of the day*. Through this approach, students are in both in smaller classes but still surrounded for several hours of the day by professionally trained staff with some degree of expertise in best practices for instructing these students. One *challenge* here is how

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to provide special needs students with supplemental supports WITHOUT recreating restricted environments through smaller class sizes. When students are clustered in SAGE classrooms, they also are at greater risk of being isolated from regular education students, because they make up a greater proportion of the class than in a smaller classroom than they do when the same number of them are clustered in a large classroom.

### **Building Teacher Capacity for SAGE**

When working with classrooms of fifteen students or less, teachers cannot simply use the same strategies that they used with larger groups of students. Both brand-new teachers and veteran teachers need continuous learning opportunities to help them teach effectively in classrooms with fewer students. Rather than relying on district wide professional development, school administrators can organize school-based professional development specifically aimed at helping teachers organize school-based workshops linked to:

- more individualized learning approaches;
- best practices in teaching reading to younger students;
- and team teaching.

Skill building around the latter involves more than helping teachers get along, it involves helping teachers learn strategies for co-teaching in classrooms. One *challenge* involves finding ways to customize learning opportunities for SAGE teachers while ensuring that learning opportunities are made widely available to the faculty. This is important because the practicalities of budgets and scheduling mean that even if a teacher is not in a SAGE classroom one year, she or he may be the next year and will need to know how to teach effectively within a SAGE classroom.

### **Key Points**<sup>1</sup>

#### **School administrators of rapidly improving and high achievement schools:**

- Put students' needs such as conditions for student engagement first when seeking classroom space for SAGE
- Leverage staffing and financial resources to provide continuous and inclusive services to ELL and special needs students in SAGE classrooms
- Design staff development for working with smaller groups
- Organize school-based professional development specifically aimed at helping teachers: teach more effectively in smaller classrooms, and work more effectively in team teaching situations.

<sup>1</sup> Based on data collected in nine SAGE schools. For full description of study and findings, see Burch, P. & Theoharis, G. (2005). *Class Size Reduction in Practice: Investigating the Influence of the Elementary School Principal*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Center for Educational Research