

SAGE Policy Brief

WCER SAGE Evaluation Team

Connecting Home & School Through SAGE

Theories of class size reduction often focus on experiences inside classrooms. While important, it is also necessary to consider how class size reduction reforms might strengthen the resources available to families and how that in turn, increases learning opportunities within schools. The designers of the SAGE program recognized the potential contributions that families can make by including it as one of the 4 SAGE pillars:

- ▶ Smaller classes K-3
- ▶ Rigorous curriculum
- ▶ Professional development & teacher evaluation
- ▶ Activities that strengthen the link between home and school

Named the *Lighted Schoolhouse* component, SAGE legislation calls

The Role of SAGE in Addressing Family Needs

Their lives are so busy just trying to scrape out a living at this point, that it's hard for them to fit anything else in. Or buy snacks. I mean, people are *really* struggling. (Jane, Earhart)

It is common to think of families living poverty as less involved in their children's education than families who have more economic resources. Our 48 participants felt the pressures across economic levels and recognized that families were often working 2 jobs, serving as a single parent, with competing demands at home.

Within all of these pressures, families longed for school support to make connections *among* families. They

for the following activities:

- ▶ Keep the school open every day from early in the morning until late in the day, as specified in the contract.
- ▶ Collaborate with community organizations to make educational & recreational opportunities, as well as a variety of community & social services, available to all school district residents.

In this policy brief, we look at families' perspectives on their contributions to SAGE schools. Based on focus groups in 9 SAGE schools, we explore how families defined the needs in their communities and their desire to respond & support their friends & neighbors.

sought tools like a school telephone directory so that they could easily contact other families to arrange play-dates or to allow more effective networking among families. They also looked for school-sponsored social events designed for positive interactions among community members like *Family Fun Night*. These social events were highly meaningful to families, particularly when teachers attended. Finally, reflecting the isolation noted by many families, they suggested adult focused activities in which the school provided childcare for children so that parents/guardians could have a special time out.

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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. & Oen, D. (2006)
You just feed them with a long-
handled spoon: Family
perspectives on their
experiences in SAGE schools.
Madison: Wisconsin Center for
Education Research.

Families Want to Contribute

Families contribute to schooling in a variety of ways. From getting their children to school on time to selling popcorn for fundraising, families cherished the opportunities to support their child and their school.

Participation didn't come without a price, however. Families talked about going without sleep to volunteer at school (after a 12 hour shift driving a truck) or taking vacation days for a special school event. And those who volunteered to help at school were not always invited in. Lack of coordination for family

volunteers resulted in sadly missed opportunities for collaboration and tended to reinforce the image of the poor families that don't care about education.

Families recognized needs in their community and were eager to brainstorm ways to pool resources to create change. Families talked about creating community centers that would keep children off the streets, about providing food and transportation for those in need.

Well-Coordinated Family Support Programs

Well-coordinated family programs were based on the idea that activities to involve families needed to be as diverse as the families themselves. Providing families with good information about school activities was a first step, so that they knew about the opportunities provided by the school and could make good decisions about their participation. Various forms of "home and back" folders were used by schools to keep parents/guardians informed about individual students and the social life of the school. Other forms of communication included email, telephone, and school marquees announcing activities. Regularly scheduled family activities, often planned around the dinner hour and including a meal, allowed busy families into the school building and helped them forge social connections. Successful family activities came out of school people working to find out about family needs

and resources. Basing activities on evidence of family desires made it more likely that activities met real needs experienced in the community rather than some imagined *generic parent*. One of the main constraints on this approach is coordinating staff to communicate with families. Successful schools make this a priority.

One school's approach to family connection: free preschool programs in the school's family room, free membership in the boys and girls club, after-school enrichment program with activities like stamp club, cooking lessons and Hmong language learning, movie nights & Saturday family field trips. The year begins with a Hopes and Dreams conference where families share their expectations with teachers and those "hopes and dreams" are posted in the classroom to show the teacher's commitment to the home school partnership.

Key points:

1. The SAGE program includes a family-strengthening component that potentially creates opportunities to connect families with community resources.
2. Families were eager to contribute to the school community but often found it difficult to connect their resources with school needs.
3. High quality family programs use diverse activities based on assessments of community needs. This increased the likelihood that activities were valued by families and enhanced participation. Ongoing needs assessment of all stakeholders is a necessary component of the Lighted Schoolhouse.