

SAGE Policy Brief

WCER SAGE Evaluation Team

Professional Development in SAGE Schools

Recognizing that producing student achievement is a complex endeavor, SAGE encourages schools to change instruction through

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

The professional development segment of SAGE legislation has five distinct components: a transition program for new employees, planning time, submission & review of teacher/administrator professional

development plans that address student achievement, and a staff evaluation process focused on student performance.

In this policy brief, we look at the role that professional development plays in SAGE schools. We describe how nine schools developed professional development activities that addressed the specific knowledge & skills that teachers need to take advantage of the resources provided by SAGE and we explore how school & district professional development programs supported SAGE teaching practice.

SAGE-specific Professional Development

Class size reduction is a good investment because smaller classes can provide opportunities for more positive teacher-student interactions, fewer discipline problems, and more intense teaching & learning. In smaller groups, teachers are able to do more assessment and they develop closer relationships with students & families so they tailor their instruction to student strengths & needs. A self-generating cycle of success is created where teachers have higher morale and students develop stronger student identities.

Although it might seem natural for teachers to change their practice when they move from a large to smaller group, that is not necessarily

the case. The strategies that make the most of class size reduction are typically different, requiring strategic professional development.

Interviews with SAGE teachers & principals indicate that schools have provided very limited staff development on the elements of the SAGE program. Few of our more than 40 participants in nine schools could recall SAGE-specific professional development and they felt that it would be a valuable addition to their practice. Because most of our participants' knowledge of SAGE was limited to the class size provision, we recommend the development of staff development related to the SAGE program.

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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. (2006) Professional development & class size reduction: Complementary resources looking for connections. Madison: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Focusing on content in SAGE schools

SAGE schools focused their professional development efforts on the curriculum element of the program, with most schools directing attention to "best practices" in literacy & mathematics. Three distinct approaches were identified:

- *Teacher-driven*: The design of the professional development program was diffuse & eclectic, with individual teachers choosing education opportunities through conferences, classes & workshops.
- *School designed*: In these schools, the professional development

program came out of school improvement plans, assessment-identified learning needs, or through capacity-building funding initiatives.

- *District focused*: District administrators designed and implemented professional development in response to district learning goals & student achievement trends.

High quality professional development is more likely in contexts where it connects to local curriculum materials and academic standards and where teachers are actively involved over time.

Investing in SAGE Professional Development

If you're teaching a classroom of 15 kids the same way you would have taught a classroom of 30 kids, what's the point of 15 kids? (Ms Stratton)

Participants suggested a variety of staff development activities to strengthen instructional practice in SAGE schools. The first was a general *SAGE orientation* that provides an overview of the program theory, components, and suggested practices. This orientation would serve as a reminder of the logic used to organize a program now in its 10th year.

The second strand would provide *examples of high quality instructional &*

administrative practice in SAGE schools. Recognizing that it's easy to do what you know, both teachers & administrators wanted a chance to learn from successful SAGE educators about strategies that worked in other contexts.

Finally, finding both *interpersonal & instructional strategies to take advantage of a 2-person classroom* could ease the stress of this way of teaching. In 30:2 classrooms or shared space contexts, this type of professional development is key to its success.

Key points:

1. So that teachers and administrators can take advantage of the resources provided by the SAGE program, professional development programs should address the specific knowledge & skills necessary for teaching smaller groups.
2. Promising SAGE professional development activities should be multidimensional. SAGE educators suggest the following:
 - a. A SAGE orientation to provide an overview of the program's theory, elements, and research basis for all teachers & administrators.
 - b. Presentations about high quality administrative & instructional practice with smaller groups.
 - c. Specific efforts to support co-teaching, including attention to both instructional and interpersonal strategies used in successful 30:2 classrooms.