

**Assembly Committee on Education
May 7, 2015**

**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Testimony on 2015 Assembly Bills 195 & 196**

Thank you Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Jennifer Kammerud and I serve as a policy advisor at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). I am here today to testify in opposition to Assembly Bill 195 (AB 195) and Assembly Bill 196 (AB 196) as these bills raise technical concerns, and more importantly, change the focus of the SAGE program so significantly that it essentially ends a program that has been effective and well utilized in school districts across Wisconsin.

SAGE was created in 1996-97 as a class size reduction program based on the concentration of low-income students in the school. The program quickly became so popular that the eligibility was expanded and now includes 205 school districts, 423 schools, and over 83,000 students in grades K-3. Many children are currently benefitting from this program. Parents across the state know what SAGE is and support the program.

First, I'd like to address AB 195. AB 195 would extend current SAGE contracts for one year. While this seems like an attempt to assist school districts, we are concerned about the patchwork system of solutions created if either of these bills pass on their own. Under current law, 83 percent of our contracts must be renewed for another five year period¹ in the next few months and schools have already begun to plan for the renewal process. Schools need certainty in the contract process which the current five year SAGE contracts provide. If this bill passes on its own it will not allow us to renew any of these contracts again at the conclusion of the extra year. This means that 83 percent of schools in the program will no longer be able to participate.

Second, let's discuss AB 196. AB 196 seeks to rebrand SAGE to create an achievement gap reduction program. While we agree that the achievement gap is a critical need in our state and we believe the legislature should create a program to specifically address the achievement gap. The department has made several proposals in this area, particularly around closing graduation gaps, supporting English learners, and improving workforce outcomes for students with disabilities.

I want to be crystal clear: closing the achievement gap is one of the State Superintendent Evers's top priorities. However, the list of schools and districts that constitute our largest achievement gaps are not necessarily the same as those who are current participants in the SAGE program. SB-32 does not allow new schools to join this reconstituted program, regardless of the achievement gap in those buildings. The legacy of the old SAGE program would limit which

¹ 353/423 schools have contracts that expire at the end of the year.

schools could participate from the outset, while changing the program so substantively could impact a school's decision about whether they will participate in programs like this in the future. Schools need consistency and to avoid the duplicative efforts of applying for multiple programs.

The strategies proposed in this bill would allow districts to choose among a number of sound educational strategies. While this additional flexibility can be valuable, it also dilutes the program and would make program evaluation difficult. Additionally, these practices are widely in place in most successful schools, which would limit the impact on students and schools.

The Senate recently passed an amended version of SB 32, in anticipation of the Assembly concurring with the amended version of the senate bill; I would like to relay the following concerns that exist with in that amendment.

Class Size Requirements

Current SAGE law says "Satisfy the class size limitation by reducing each class size in each school covered by the contract." That means that each class must have a ratio of 18:1 or 30:2.

The language in the amended version Senate Bill 32 says "reduce the class size in one or more classes in one or more participating grades" to the same ratios of 18:1 or 30:2. Depending on how is this implemented it could mean that if a school has 5 first grade classes, and reduced the class size to 18:1 in one of those classes, the school would be able to claim SAGE aid for all low income students in all five first grade classes. Additionally, the language included in the amendment reads "in one or more participating grades" this could mean that the school can claim for all classrooms in grades K, 2, and 3 if they only reduce class size in one first grade classroom. Additional clarification around the intent of this language would be needed for the Department to know how to distribute funds to school districts.

Evaluation

Senate Amendment 1 to Senate Bill 32 makes changes to the annual SAGE evaluation, which raises some questions/concerns:

- The amendment ends the current evaluation "in the 2014-15 school year". Since the data used for evaluation is always a year delayed, the evaluation of the 2014-15 school year will take place in the 2015-16 school year.
- The amendment also requires evaluation "Beginning in the 2017-18 school year". This timeframe does not allow for any baseline evaluation, which may make the evaluation beginning in 2017-18 more difficult.

In this time of so many moving parts, we hear time and time again that stability is critical to the success of our schools. Allowing the SAGE program to continue is one concrete first step on that path. If we adopt AB 195 and AB 196, some schools will operate under the current SAGE rules and some under the AGR rules and it will lead to more confusion. The Department would love to work with the legislature to craft a program to assist schools to approach achievement gap reduction, but not at the cost of the popular SAGE program. If you have any questions, we would be happy to answer them at this time.