

Senate Committee on Education
March 5, 2015

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Testimony on 2015 Senate Bill 31 and 32

Thank you, Chairman Olsen and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Dee Pettack and I am the Legislative Liaison at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). With me today is Jonas Zuckerman, Director of the Title I and School Support Team, which includes the SAGE program. We are here today to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 31 (SB 31) and Senate Bill 32 (SB 32), 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 SB 31. SB 31 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 SB 32. SB 32 seeks to rebrand SAGE to create an achievement gap reduction program. 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 State Superintendent Evers' 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 schools could

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

participate from the outset. 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.

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 SB 31 and SB 32, some schools will operate under the current SAGE rules and some under the Achievement Gap Reduction 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.