Evaluation of the Achievement Gap Reduction Program

for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction | 2024-25

Over the past 50 years, achievement gaps by socioeconomic status have been stagnant, both nationwide and in Wisconsin. Providing additional funding to low-income students, however, has been shown to increase achievement and improve later-life outcomes. The Achievement Gap Reduction (AGR) program, created by 2015 Wisconsin Acts 53 and 71, aims to improve the academic performance of students in Wisconsin schools with high concentrations of low-income students by providing funds for kindergarten through third grade. To receive AGR funding, schools must implement one or more of the following strategies in each participating grade:

- **Class Size:** A class size of no more than 18, or, no more than 30 with at least two teachers.
- **Coaching:** Instructional coaching by licensed teachers in participating grades.
- **Tutoring:** One-to-one tutoring by licensed teachers to students struggling with reading or math.

Acts 53 and 71 provide for an annual evaluation of AGR. This brief includes results from the seventh annual evaluation. Unlike previous years' evaluations that addressed programmatic impacts on test scores and other outcomes, this year's evaluation focuses on AGR's financial aspects. To access past AGR evaluations, please visit https://dpi.wi.gov/sage/resources

AGR Finances

Figure 1 shows AGR statewide funding and total enrollment at AGR/SAGE schools, both for all students and for low-income students, from the introduction of SAGE in 1996–97 through 2023–24. AGR began in 2015–16. SAGE began slowly, but between 1999–20 and 2000–01, SAGE-funded students and funding increased dramatically. After the initial program introduction and ramp-up, the statewide number of SAGE students peaked at over 100,000 in 2002–03 and the statewide number of low-income students peaked at 54,506 in 2010–11. After 2000–01, the total number of AGR/SAGE students steadily declined, dipping below 69,000 in 2023–24. Funding increased incrementally between 2002–03 and 2007–08 but has since remained at approximately $110,000,000 per year.

FIGURE 1: STATEWIDE STUDENTS AND FUNDING

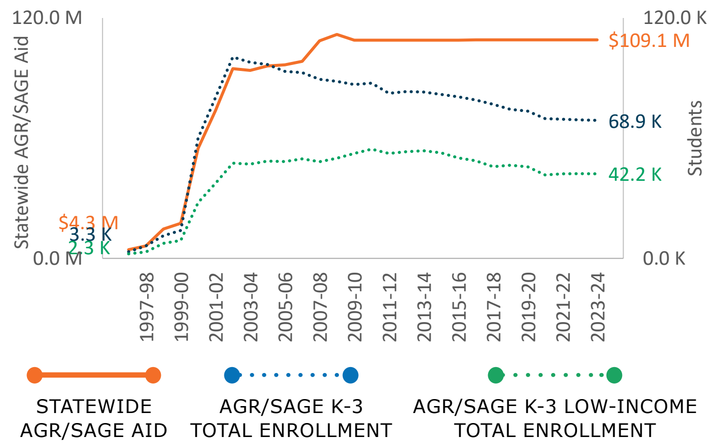


Figure 2 shows AGR/SAGE funding per low-income student, both in current and inflation-adjusted dollars. Through 2006–07, aid per student was static around $2,000. Since 2014–15, funding per low-income student has increased incrementally as the number of funded low-income students has declined. This increase in per low-income student funding is a mathematical byproduct of fewer low-income students at AGR/SAGE schools coupled with stable statewide funding (Figure 1). The total pie was the same, but it was split between fewer students. In terms of inflation-adjusted dollars, per-student AGR/SAGE funding has decreased over time. In 2023–24 dollars, SAGE funding in the first years of the program was over $3,500 per student, approximately $1,000 per student higher than its 2023–24 value. Notably, throughout the period in Figure 2, AGR served approximately the same fraction of K–3, low-income students in Wisconsin. The decline in the number of low-income students served by AGR resulted from a statewide decrease in total enrollment.

FIGURE 2: FUNDING PER STUDENT

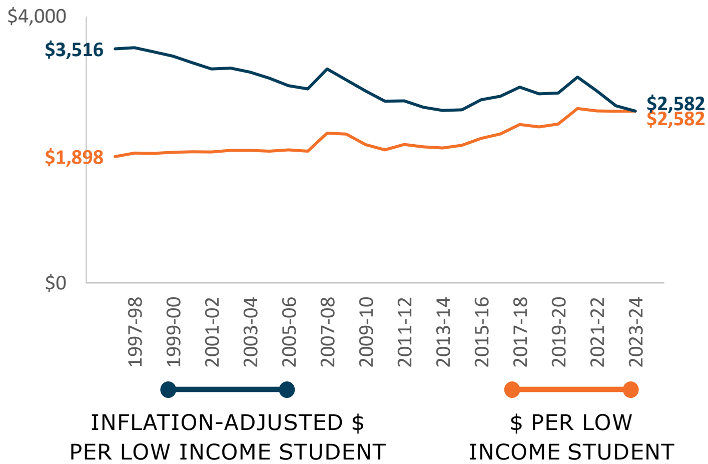
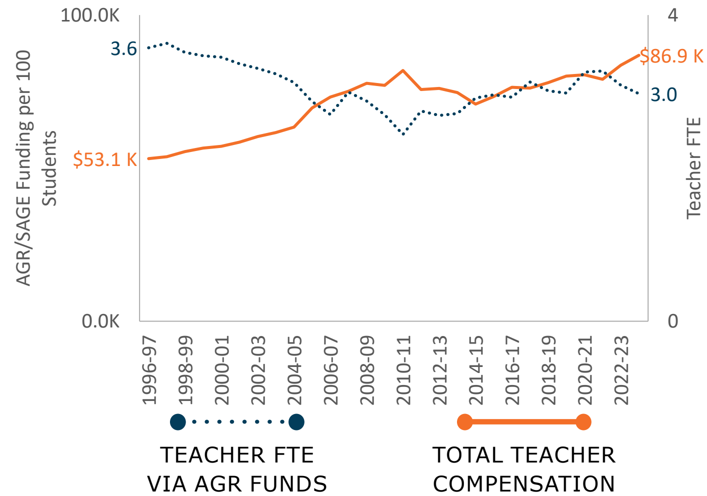


FIGURE 3: TEACHER COMPENSATION & PURCHASING POWER

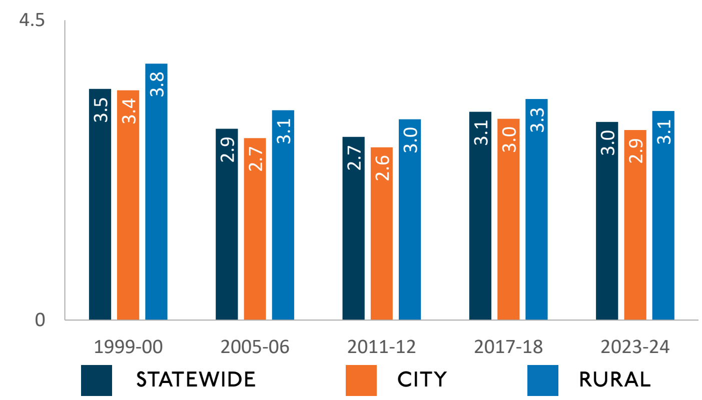


Purchasing Power

AGR/SAGE funds are important because they buy real-world resources for students. All three AGR strategies require additions of licensed teaching staff — classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and/or tutors. As such, the purchasing power of AGR funds depends on the costs of hiring teachers. Figure 3 shows average total teacher compensation (salary plus benefits) and the teacher full time equivalents (FTE) that a school could hire with AGR funding for 100 low-income students. In general, as teacher compensation has increased due to inflation, the purchasing power of AGR has decreased. Figure 3 shows that, for every 100 low-income students at an AGR school, the number of teachers schools can hire has ranged from 3.6 in 2000–01 to a low of 2.4 in 2010–11. After 2010–11, total teacher compensation decreased for several years. Combined with a steady increase in AGR per-pupil funding, the decline in teacher compensation that occurred after the passage of Act 10 created a period of increasing purchasing power. After 2021–22, however, AGR's purchasing power has declined. Assuming that AGR funding remains the same and that teacher compensation continues to increase (as we would expect with typical inflation), the purchasing power of AGR funds is expected to decline.

In addition to varying across years, teacher compensation levels also vary over locale, due to cost of living. In general, more populated areas have higher costs of living, and higher teacher compensation, than less populated areas. This can be seen in Figure 4, which shows that the purchasing power of AGR funds has been consistently higher in rural areas than in urban areas and Wisconsin in general. In 1999–00, the average AGR school located in a city could hire 3.44 teacher FTE via funding from 100 low-income students, relative to 3.85 at rural schools, a difference of 0.40 FTE per year. That difference fluctuated during the intervening years before declining to approximately 0.29 FTE by 2023–24 (2.85 FTE in cities vs. 3.14 FTE in rural areas).

FIGURE 4: PURCHASING POWER BY LOCALE



About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC)

WEC is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally-responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at wec.wceruw.org. The full evaluation report can be found at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sage/pdf/2025_Evaluation_of_Wisconsin_Achievement_Gap_Reduction_Program.pdf. Please direct questions to WEC Principal Investigator Jed Richardson at jed.richardson@wisc.edu.