by Tom Hruz

A Cause for Caution:

A More Complete and Honest Look at the SAGE Program

Here's a radical notion: Smaller class sizes, as achieved by Wisconsin's SAGE program, do not improve student achievement—at least not in all circumstances.

The Student Achievement Guarantee in Education program, known better as SAGE, reduces the number of students in a classroom to 15 per teacher in grades kindergarten through third grade. The program began in the 1996-97 school year in 30 schools composed primarily of low-income students. Based in large part on the favorable results of biased evaluations of the program, SAGE has continued to expand to well over half the state's approximately 1,100 elementary schools, including those having only small percentages of low-income students.

As a result, the state now spends roughly $100 million a year for the SAGE program and its ever-expanding, class-size reduction goal.

Not only has funding grown exponentially, but adulation of the program has become so common and intense in Wisconsin education policy circles as to make the idea of limiting its scope practically nonsensical. The program has been deemed unassailable in terms of intellectual discussion and untouchable politically. Rational discussions about the actual effects of the program are muted by dismissive comments, such as, "Everyone knows that SAGE works." When statements such as these are as prevalent as they are, it seems one cannot help but assume their truth.

Last September the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute published a report that I authored called "The Cost and Benefits of Smaller Classes in Wisconsin: A Further Evaluation of the SAGE Program." The study, which is available on the Web at www.wpri.org, highlighted various concerns with the actual impact and costs of the program. Among its findings are the following:

- It is doubtful whether the smaller classes required by the SAGE program have any significant effect on students who are not low-income, not African-American, or who do not attend Milwaukee Public Schools. This does not mean that SAGE should be discarded, as students in these categories need all the constructive support they can receive in their education. What it does suggest, however, is that the money being spent to expand the program to schools that do not contain large numbers of these students is not being effectively spent.
- There is simply no evidence to confirm that smaller classes in the second and third grades are having an independent effect on improving student achievement. This is true even of African-American students—those who overwhelmingly show benefits from being in smaller classes in the first grade.
- The effects of SAGE on academic achievement are relatively meager. While proponents of the program incessantly proclaim that the program shows "statistically" significant gains, the actual magnitude of these gains is very small. In fact, the statistical significance achieved is mainly a function of the very large sample size used in the evaluations.
- Much of money spent on SAGE could be better used in other areas of education. These include improving teacher quality and experience, factors that consistently show larger effects on student achievement than mere class size. Moreover, the most recent SAGE evaluation even noted that the SAGE classrooms with the highest improvements were those characterized by direct instruction techniques, suggesting that a policy of direct instruction can have a greater effect than simply reducing class size.
- Many more questions need to be answered and data analyses conducted to determine whether it is wise to expand the SAGE program to more districts, schools, students, and grade levels. What data we do have, when inspected in a meaningful manner, suggest that the aggregate results for SAGE are being driven by large gains made in select populations of students and contexts. In other words, a large number of students do not academically benefit from being in smaller classes.

Many of these concerns have been only amplified by the data reported in the most recent UW-

Average Test Score Gains: SAGE vs. Larger Classrooms, 1999–2000

From the End of First Grade to the End of Second Grade

All Students:	SAGE	Comparison	Difference
Language Arts	28.75	27.55	1.20
Reading	26.39	22.61	3.78
Mathematics	35.48	29.36	6.12*
Total	30.23	26.94	3.29*
African American Students:			
Language Arts	20.83	19.95	0.88
Reading	23.81	24.40	-0.59
Mathematics	28.53	18.66	9.87*
Total	23.72	21.87	1.85

From the End of Second Grade to the End of Third Grade

All Students:	SAGE	Comparison	Difference
Language Arts	21.47	22.72	-1.23
Reading	14.16	20.28	-6.12*
Mathematics	30.63	35.83	-5.20*
Total	22.17	26.44	-4.27*
African American Students:			
Language Arts	18.92	20.50	-1.58
Reading	18.21	20.67	-2.46
Mathematics	38.55	36.35	2.20
Total	25.70	26.28	-0.58

* Significant at the .05 level

Milwaukee evaluation of the SAGE program, released this past January. It examined student achievement from the 1999-2000 school year, and compared the performance of students in SAGE classes with students in regular-sized classes.

Looking at the test score gains made by both SAGE classrooms and comparison (non-SAGE) classrooms, we see that students in SAGE did not consistently make larger improvements than those in larger classes, at least in the second and third grades. In a number of subjects, students in larger classes actually made greater gains than SAGE students, with the differences being statistically significant in some cases (see table on this page).

Moreover, African-American students in regular-sized classes made greater gains than African-American SAGE students on half of the measures available.

The Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, and politicians who are wedded to the program will all demur that SAGE students still scored higher than non-SAGE students, even in grades two and three. Yet this difference is most likely a carry-over effect from exposure to smaller classes in the first grade. In other words, the achievement gap between SAGE and non-SAGE students did not increase in the second and third grade and in fact decreased in some instances. This result is illogical, however, if one believes that smaller classes have an independent, positive effect on students in each year. Nonetheless, the current state budget is going headlong into funding the expansion of SAGE into even more second- and third-grade classrooms.

This is but one example of how the actual effects of the SAGE program are not being fully disseminated to the public. There are even more untold stories to be heard. Yet to question the efficacy of SAGE—and its smaller classes—is a blasphemy of epic proportions in the minds of those who wish to have the program avoid critical examination and continue to expand indiscriminately.

After the release of the WPRI report last fall, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial staff wrote that "the report is sober enough to warrant a formal response" from those who rate SAGE favorably and claim the report erred in its appraisal of the program. Those of us who are still reasonably skeptical of the program's effects continue to await that response. ◗

Hruz is a resident fellow with the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. His research focuses on education issues. Prior to his appointment at WPRI, Hruz worked as a research assistant at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the UW-Madison. He has a masters degree in public policy analysis and public administration from the UW-Madison and received his undergraduate degree in political science and history from the UW-Milwaukee. He is currently attending Marquette University Law School and resides in Milwaukee.