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Study backs earlier class-size findings

Younger children benefit most from lower student-teacher ratio

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A new study of Wisconsin's popular class-size reduction program supports earlier findings that the program prompts achievement gains for students in the earliest grades, particularly kindergarten and first grade.

But the study showed no gains for students in the program, called SAGE, beyond the third grade, and researchers say the results for fourth-graders were inconclusive because of the small number of schools in the study.

"The sample size was too small to come to any firm conclusions about anything," said Norman Webb, a senior research scientist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which conducted the study.

If anything, the researchers say, the study shows the need for further research of SAGE at a time when the program costs the state about \$95 million a year and involves more than 500 schools statewide.

The study, commissioned and funded by the state Department of Public Instruction, cost about \$250,000.

SAGE, the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education, gives schools extra money to make sure that the student-teacher ratios in kindergarten through third-grade classes are 15-to-1 or less, among other things.

The researchers analyzed test scores from the original 30 schools involved in the SAGE program as well as a comparison group of 17 other schools. They looked at results on the TerraNova test, as well as on the state reading test for third-graders and the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination for fourth-graders.

Some of their findings mirrored those of Alex Molnar, a former University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor instrumental in starting SAGE, who found that students in the program make more progress than comparable students not in the program, particularly in kindergarten and first grade.

Although SAGE has remained politically popular over the last few years, critics have argued the money could be better spent on other ventures, such as teacher training.

Webb said he believes the study confirmed previous research that SAGE has a positive effect for first-graders, but he wanted to find out more about the long-term effects. An upcoming study will significantly broaden the sample size, he said.

Tony Evers, the deputy state superintendent of schools, said the study showed how important it is for researchers to gather data for a larger group than the 30 original schools.

"It is time to do something where we know we can get reasonable data out of it," he said.

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