

# **MPS School Board should reject proposal to increase class size**

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On March 10, Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Darienne Driver announced that she was proposing to increase class size in grades 1-3 in the 64 Milwaukee schools participating in Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) class size reduction program.

Modified in 2015 by Wisconsin Act 53, the SAGE program is now called the Achievement Gap Reduction (AGR) program.

Unlike SAGE (which required small classes in grades K-3) districts participating in the AGR program are allowed to select from a menu of three strategies: 1) one-to-one tutoring provided by a licensed teacher; 2) instructional coaching for teachers provided by a licensed teacher; and 3) maintaining 18:1 or 30:2 classroom ratios and professional development related to small group instruction.

Driver proposes to maintain class size reduction only in kindergarten (K5) classrooms, justifying her proposal with the claim that "K5 is the only grade level where data shows smaller classes improve student achievement." Driver is incorrect. The research data supporting the impact on achievement of small classes in kindergarten through grade 3 is some of the strongest evidence in education research.

Eliminating small classes in grades 1-3, Driver proposes instead to provide AGR teachers with ongoing professional development; to provide each AGR school with an AGR administrator for "instructional coaching and ongoing support;" to provide additional curriculum resources; and to "refresh" K5 — third-grade classroom materials.

I'm sympathetic to Driver's situation. The Wisconsin Legislature has allowed SAGE funding to stagnate. Over time, fewer and fewer superintendents were able to provide from district sources the additional funds that would have allowed them to create the small classes required by SAGE. Starved for cash, superintendents wanted access to SAGE money, and Act 53 gives it to them. In other words, as Marie Antoinette might have crafted the legislative message to cash-starved school districts: "Let them eat flexibility."

The options offered by the AGR program are all good in the abstract, but the circumstances in impoverished school districts are very concrete. That is why I believe Driver's recommendations will, if adopted, harm those children who most need protection.

To get the results tutoring advocates tout requires very specific circumstances, very specific programs and very highly trained tutors. Taken together, these require more money than reducing class size. In other words, Milwaukee students never will see the results highlighted by tutoring advocates, but they will lose the benefits of small classes.

Professional development, mentoring and coaching are all excellent ideas; however, none of these strategies has demonstrated as much of an independent academic and non-academic impact as small classes.

While there is evidence to suggest that professional development, mentoring and coaching may indeed amplify the student achievement gains in small classes, the fact is that even without additional professional development class size reduction produces significant achievement gains in K-3 classrooms — especially for children living in poverty.

Up-to-date curriculum materials and "refreshed" classroom resources are something every school should have as a matter of course; however, purchasing them at the cost of larger classes is much too high a price to pay. They will not produce the same benefits for students as small classes.

As University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Allan Odden noted in his 2007 report on Wisconsin education funding, the academic impact of small classes in the primary grades is documented by powerful research evidence, and small classes are a foundational reform for creating an educationally adequate system. In other words, small classes lay the foundation for improved outcomes. The first five SAGE evaluations, for example, found teachers in small classes provided more individual attention; knew more about their students needs and interests; spent less time on classroom management and paperwork, and more time on hands-on individualized activities.

The School Board should reject Driver's proposal to increase class size in grades 1-3 in Milwaukee's SAGE/AGR schools. Milwaukee's impoverished children suffer enough. Let them keep their small classes and, along with them, perhaps a bit of hope.

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