STATE REPRESENTATIVE
KRISTEN DEXTER
WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY
68TH DISTRICT

Testimony from Representative Kristen Dexter
March 9, 2010

Committee on Education
In support of AB 808

Chairwoman Pope-Roberts, Committee members, thank you for convening today to hold this hearing on Assembly Bill 808, relating to the student achievement guarantee in education (SAGE) program.

SAGE was created in 1995 as a pilot program designed to increase the academic achievement of children living in poverty. The key mechanism used to achieve this goal is a student-teacher ratio of 15:1 in grades K-3. In addition to smaller class sizes, participating schools are expected to implement curricula with a rigorous academic focus and engage in professional development and accountability plans.

From year to year schools found it difficult to determine exactly how many students to expect in the SAGE classrooms, and this created staffing uncertainties. Those uncertainties led to a system of waivers granted by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) that allowed schools to temporarily increase the student-teacher ratio, or to hire a part time teacher to teach the core subjects of math and reading to a class of 15:1. Currently DPI is issuing waivers to schools for ratios up to 23:1.

This legislation would allow greater flexibility for districts with SAGE contracts by raising the current SAGE classroom limits from a ratio of 15:1 to 18:1 beginning with the 2010-11 school year. Besides giving schools the additional flexibility, this change will lead to a more uniform program which more accurately reflects the original intent of SAGE.

Schools that currently have a SAGE contract will be allowed to continue that contract with the new 18:1 ratio. If they are receiving a waiver for a higher cap, this bill also grandfathers the existing waivers. However once the waivers expire DPI will not be able to issue new waivers.

In addition this bill allows schools the opportunity to enroll in SAGE, an opportunity they have not had for at least a decade. School Districts will have a year to apply for a contract for the 2011-12 school year. These new contracts will phase in the classroom cap just like the original SAGE open enrollment in 1997. In year one schools will have to abide by the caps for Kindergarten and first grade, year two the cap will be in place for K-2nd and year three K-3rd. This will allow districts time to comply and adjust to the new class sizes.

I would like to thank John Forester of the School Administrators Alliance for his help on this legislation, as well as the Wisconsin Education Association Council and the Department of Public Instruction. My special thanks also goes to Chair of this committee, Rep. Pope-Roberts, for her early blessing and support of this legislation. The collaborative effort that led to this bill is a model that I intend to pursue as we continue working together to support and strengthen education in Wisconsin. Thank you again for convening this hearing and I hope that we can work together to pass Assembly Bill 808.

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WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Tony Evers, PhD, State Superintendent

Assembly Committee on Education
March 9, 2010

Department of Public Instruction
Testimony on Assembly Bill 808

Thank you to Chairperson Pope-Roberts and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Assembly Bill 808 (AB 808). My name is Shelly Greller and I am the Assistant Director of the Title I and School Support Team at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

The Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program was established in the 1996-97 school year to improve student achievement through the implementation of four specific school-improvement strategies. They are:

- class sizes of no more than 15:1 in grades K-3;
- increased collaboration between schools and their communities;
- implementation of a rigorous curriculum; and
- improved professional development and staff-evaluation practices.

Wisconsin's 475 SAGE schools enter renewable 5-year contracts designed to promote academic achievement through lower class sizes in the primary grades. Schools receive state aid equal to $2,250 for each low-income K-3 child although that amount is now prorated at $2207.60.

AB 808 raises the maximum class size for schools participating in the SAGE program from 15 to 18 students per teacher or 30 students to two teachers and eliminates the ability of the department to grant waivers to school districts from SAGE requirements. The department believes these are beneficial changes that will create additional room for districts that have a difficult time meeting the 15 to 1 cap, while sending a strong message that there will be no additional flexibility beyond that point in order to keep to the intent of the program.

AB 808 also opens up a new enrollment period for schools that may wish to participate in SAGE. The department feels schools should have the opportunity to participate based on the fact that poverty rates have changed since the last enrollment window.

There is one change the department would like to see made to the bill. There is often a lot of uncertainty as to when districts are in or out of compliance with student numbers in SAGE. The department would like the legislation to clarify that the third Friday counts are the counts to be used to verify enrollment numbers. We are working with the author to address this issue.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: John Forester, Director of Government Relations
DATE: March 9, 2010
RE: Assembly Bill 808 – SAGE Program

The School Administrators Alliance (SAA) strongly supports Assembly Bill 808, relating to the student achieve guarantee in education (SAGE) program contracts.

Under current law, a school district may enter into a five-year, renewable SAGE contract with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to reduce class size to 15 students in grades kindergarten to three in exchange for receiving state aid equal to $2,250 for each low-income student enrolled in grades eligible for SAGE funding. Current law also permits DPI to waive SAGE program requirements in a contract between DPI and a school board.

If enacted, AB 808 would allow existing SAGE schools to satisfy the class size requirement by reducing the class size to no more than 18 pupils, and combine two classes with two teachers to achieve a total class size of 30 pupils. The bill also, in the 2010-11 school year, opens the program to schools not currently in the SAGE program if a number of criteria are satisfied. Finally, under the bill, DPI may not waive SAGE requirements in any SAGE contract entered into or renewed after the effective date of the bill.

Since joining the SAA a little more than eight years ago, I have been struck by the number of school districts seeking SAGE flexibility. These districts are caught between the twin fiscal crunches of the revenue cap and the classroom space necessary to operate the SAGE program at the 15:1 student-teacher ratio in all four grades. If these districts did not support the program, they could have simply discontinued SAGE in their districts. Instead, in these difficult fiscal times, they continue seeking a way to keep operating the program for the benefit of their K-3 students. Simply put, AB 808 is designed to help save the SAGE program in many Wisconsin school districts.

We urge your support of AB 808. If you should have any questions regarding the SAA's support for AB 808, please call me at (608) 242-1370.

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