

Evaluation of the Achievement Gap Reduction Program

for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction | 2023-24

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.

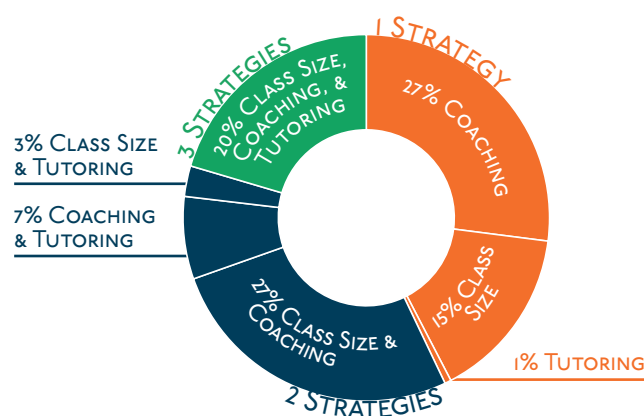
Acts 53 and 71 provide for an annual evaluation of AGR. This brief includes results from the sixth annual evaluation, focusing on programmatic impacts on test score growth during the 2015-16 through 2022-23 school years.

Implementation of Strategies

Schools implemented a wide variety of strategies. Figure 1 shows that about 57 percent of students attended schools

that used multiple strategies. Instructional coaching and reduced class size were most common, while comparatively few students attended schools that used tutoring alone or in combination with other strategies.

FIGURE 1: AGR STRATEGIES



AGR Principal Interviews

This year's evaluation identified AGR schools with high math and reading growth and interviewed principals at those schools in an attempt to identify best practices. Principals interviewed are grateful for the funding and think that it has substantial impacts on their schools: "we are so successful ... we score so well on any measure, standardized and non-standardized of reading and math



70,714
AGR STUDENTS



400
AGR SCHOOLS

... there's no doubt that AGR is a big part of it." Also, principals see AGR funding as helping the students who need it most. They report that reduced class sizes allow both classroom teachers and interventionists to work more closely with individual students. Schools using one-to-one tutoring focus their efforts on the neediest students. Finally, AGR funding, though helpful, is not sufficient to meet current needs in some schools. One principal notes that AGR funds have remained stable over time while staff health care costs have increased, meaning that fewer staff can be hired with the same dollars.

Impacts

The impact analysis examined how AGR students performed relative to non-AGR students in similar schools, while controlling for student and school characteristics. Figure 2 shows that AGR impacts on third grade Forward reading and math are small and not statistically different from zero, for both the statewide sample and for students receiving free/reduced lunch. Results for fourth and fifth grades were similar.

Impact estimates should be interpreted with caution. Inconsistent testing patterns in grades K-3, including diminishing use of kindergarten PALS, a lack of testing in spring 2020, and reduced testing participation in spring 2021, restricted the sample of AGR and non-AGR schools included in the growth analysis samples. The evaluation also limits cohorts to schools that were mostly in-person during 2020-21. All of these sample restrictions potentially limit the extent to which growth impact estimates can be generalized to all AGR schools.

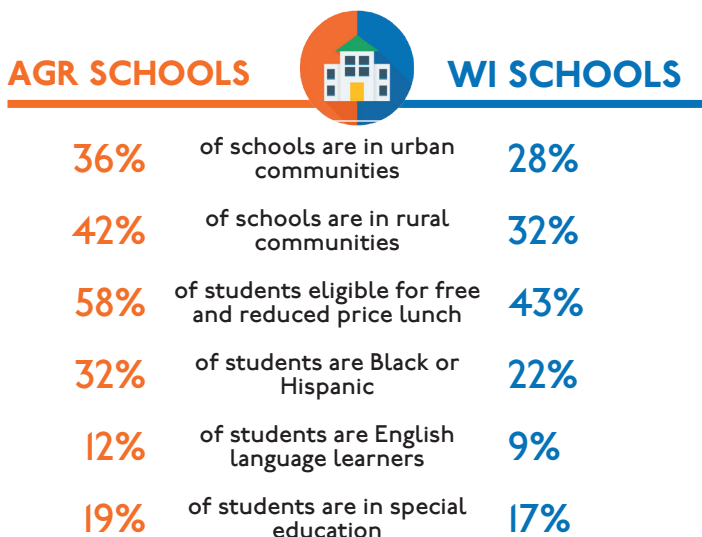
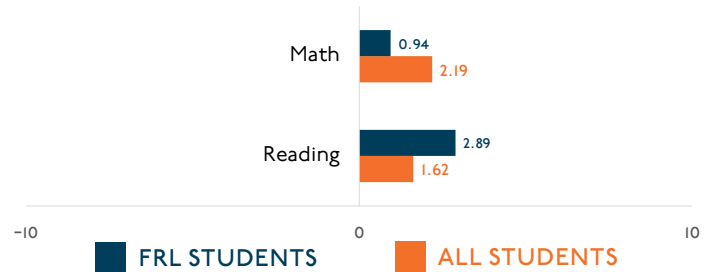


FIGURE 2: IMPACTS ON TEXT SCORE GROWTH
Measured in Forward Scale Score Points



These results, particularly for reading, stand in contrast to previous evaluations' findings that AGR has strong impacts on PALS reading growth in kindergarten, suggesting that either AGR impacts fade out by third grade and/or that PALS and Forward reading are not well aligned. Fade out of test score impacts is a common phenomenon in early education programs, including those that have been shown to impact later-life outcomes. Evidence of fade out is also consistent with school finance research that finds mixed evidence of school funding impacts on test scores but substantial impacts on long-term outcomes such as high school completion. Indeed, previous evaluations of SAGE found large impacts on eventual high school persistence and completion.

Methodology

Because AGR targets higher poverty schools where outcomes are typically lower than Wisconsin averages, WEC used a two-part statistical method in order to address selection bias. The first part of the analysis used propensity score matching to identify non-AGR Wisconsin schools that were similar to those receiving AGR funding. These observationally similar schools then acted as a comparison group for the second part of the analysis, estimating the impact of AGR through multivariate regression techniques.

About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (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 <https://wec.wceruw.org/>. The full evaluation report can be found at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sage/WEC_AGR_Report2024_FINAL_11.12.2024.pdf. Please direct questions to WEC Principal Investigator Jed Richardson at jed.richardson@wisc.edu.