Evaluation of the Achievement Gap Reduction Program

for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction | 2022-23

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 fifth annual evaluation, focusing on programmatic impacts on test score growth, absences, and out-of-school suspensions during the 2015-16 through 2021-22 school years.

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 1 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 grade were similar. The evaluation found evidence that the transition from SAGE (AGR's predecessor) to AGR was associated with a decrease in test score growth, a typical occurrence during implementation, but that AGR was associated with improving test score growth in the years after implementation. The net result of this "implementation dip" and subsequent improvement, however, is that overall AGR impacts are near zero. There are also several limitations that could impact results, including the continued phase out of PALS testing, which is used to control for achievement levels prior to AGR in the fall of kindergarten. This phase out results in an analysis sample of AGR schools that is less representative of the population of AGR schools.

FIGURE 1: IMPACTS ON TEST SCORE GROWTH
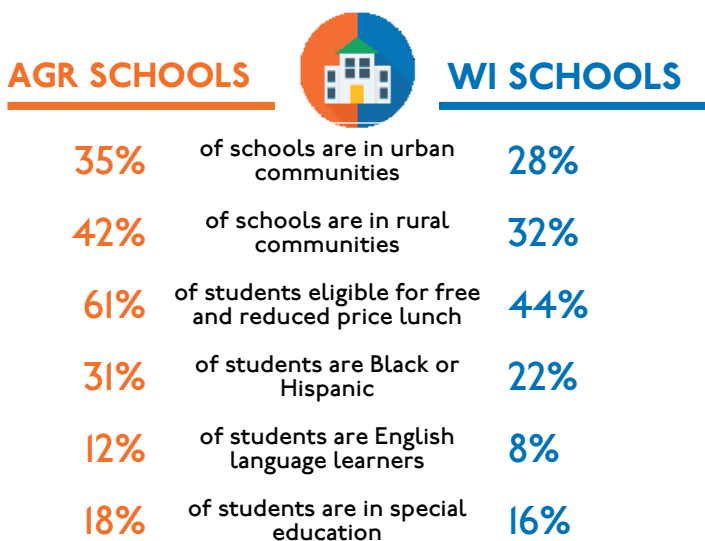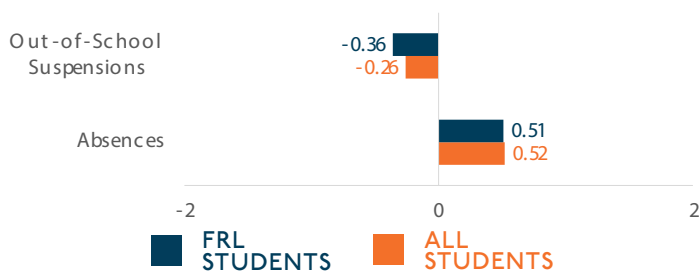Measured in Forward Scale Score Points
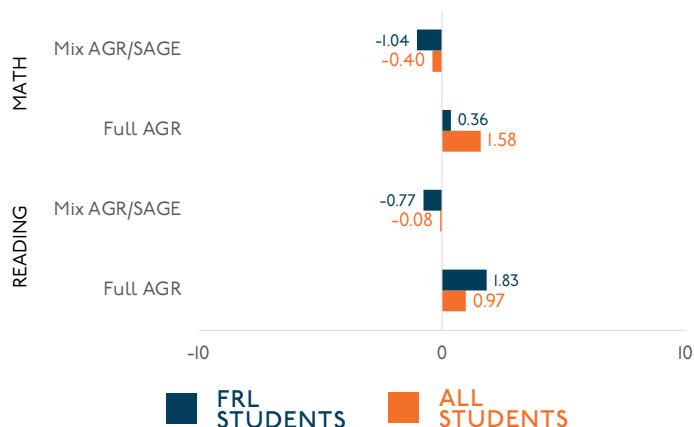
70,754 AGR STUDENTS

404 AGR SCHOOLS

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.

Figure 2 shows estimated AGR impacts on student absences and out-of-school suspensions. Both statewide and for low-income students, AGR impacts are not statistically significant and are not large enough to be meaningful for policy.

FIGURE 2: IMPACTS ON ABSENCES AND SUSPENSIONS
Measured in Percentage Points

AGR SCHOOLS | | **WI SCHOOLS**

35%	of schools are in urban communities	28%
42%	of schools are in rural communities	32%
61%	of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch	44%
31%	of students are Black or Hispanic	22%
12%	of students are English language learners	8%
18%	of students are in special education	16%

Implementation of Strategies

Schools implemented a wide variety of strategies. Figure 3 shows that about 53 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 3: AGR STRATEGIES
Percentage of AGR Students
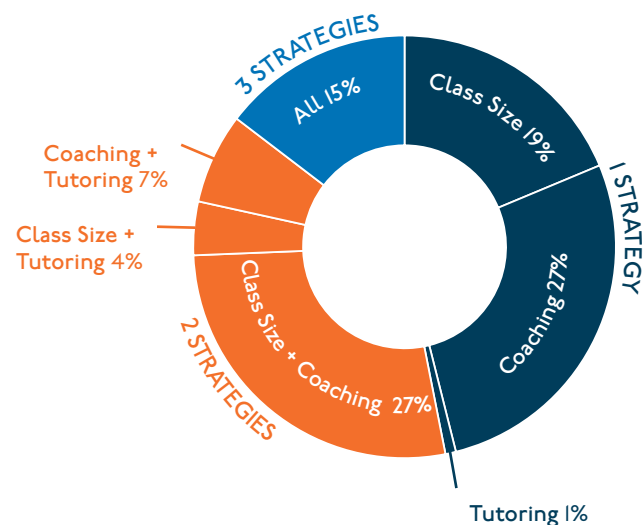
Methodology

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 http://www.wec.wceruw.org. The full evaluation report can be found at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sage/AGR_2023_Evaluation_Report_-_FINAL.pdf. Please direct questions to WEC Principal Investigator Jed Richardson at jed.richardson@wisc.edu.