

Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance

Promoting Student Achievement

January, 2006

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance is a coalition of public school districts in southeastern Wisconsin formed to study educational issues and respond to policy decisions that affect public education.

Background Information

Wisconsin historically has the highest achievement in the nation as measured by ACT scores for the past nine years. Other indicators of progress indicate that Wisconsin ranked above the national average on the National Assessment of Education Progress in reading and math the last ten years (in all years tested) and ranked above the national average on SAT scores in reading and math the last ten years. In the last six years, there has been approximately a 50% increase in the number of students taking Advanced Placement exams, with a corresponding steady rise in the scores as well. Wisconsin's high school graduate rate has consistently been in the top 10 in the nation in the last 10 years.

Despite high composite achievement, gaps are evident when the achievement data is disaggregated.

- Schools with a higher percent of students in poverty have lower reading achievement as measured on state 4th, 8th, and 10th grade assessments as well as lower graduation rates (DPI data, 2003).
- There is little difference between achievement in urban and rural schools until the poverty level within the school reaches more than 50%. When poverty levels exceed 50%, reading achievement is lower in urban schools than rural schools.
- The percent of Wisconsin Caucasian students scoring proficient and advanced is consistently higher than the percent of minority students in reading and mathematics on the state 4th, 8th, and 10th grade assessments (Department of Public Instruction WINNS data, 2002).
- Wisconsin scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate achievement gaps at the 4th and 8th grade for minority students and English language learners. The gaps increase as students advance through the grades.
- In 8th grade reading and in 4th grade math, the gaps between black and white students were larger than in any other state in the country. (NAEP 2005)

Key Issues

- State demographics indicate that Wisconsin school children are becoming more impoverished, more minority, and more limited English proficient. The number of schools with 50% or more economically disadvantaged students has increased from 10% in 1998 to 16% in 2003. Several factors or barriers to high achievement of all children have been suggested including: biased standardized tests, tests that do not match the learning styles of minority students, less money spent on educating minority students, socio-economic differences, lack of motivation, negative peer pressure, lack of family support for education, and teacher biases.
- Wisconsin Public Schools have operated under revenue caps for 10 years. Increases in costs borne by school districts have exceeded increases allowed under the revenue caps during this period causing reductions in: 1) student

- programs, i.e., library media, art; 2) support services for at-risk or gifted and talented students; 3) professional development activities to improve instruction and assessment; and 4) classroom staff, resulting in increased class sizes.
- NCLB requirements have heightened the need to ensure achievement of all students to high standards of performance.
 - “A literate populous must include technology-based skills and abilities that will enable students to function in an increasingly technological world.” (The International Information and Communication Technologies Literacy Panel, Ed. Testing Service, 2002) Integrating technology into teaching and learning can have a positive effect on student outcomes when compared to traditional instruction.

Recommendations

- Promote on-going high quality staff development, especially for urban and rural teachers in best practices, assessment for learning, and content knowledge.
- Provide incentives for outstanding teachers to teach in high-poverty academically-challenging situations, including forgiving student loans, incentive stipends, or state subsidy for attainment of a master’s program.
- Fund summer school. Sustain achievement by preventing summer achievement loss.
- Increase funding for SAGE to reduce class sizes, maximize achievement, and close the achievement gap.
- Fully fund four-year-old and five-year-old kindergarten including financial incentives for involving the parent or significant adult in associated parent education. Quality early education is essential to closing achievement gaps.
- Restore state funding for technology grants to support integration of technology to enhance achievement and manage student progress data.
- Advocate for incentives to support responsible, innovative, evidence-based initiatives to improve student achievement in math and science.
- Support efforts at all levels to reduce the presence and impact of poverty among children and youth.

Research

- The impact of high quality high school curriculum has a disproportionately positive affect on students from groups that traditionally underachieve, including black and Latino students. This approach consistently overwhelms such demographic variables as gender, race, and socio-economic status (Clifford Adleman, United States Department of Education, 1999).
- The highest level of mathematics a student has studied has the strongest effect on completion of a Bachelor’s degree. As example, finishing a course beyond the level of algebra II more than doubles the odds that a student who enters college will complete a Bachelor’s degree (Adleman, 1999).
- Sustained induction and professional development, including collaborative study, observation, knowledge of curricula and lesson refinement for staff are key to promoting high-level achievement of all students (Shoenfield, Analysis of Pittsburgh Schools as reported in The Achievement Gap, Myths and Realities, April, 2003).
- The benefit of high teacher expectations is three times as great for blacks as for whites and also for girls and children from low-income families. Effective teachers produce as much as six times the learning gains produced by less

- effective teachers (Haycock and Huang as reported in Phi Delta Kappa, The Achievement Gap: Myths and Realities, April 2003).
- Reducing the student/teacher ratio in grades K-3 to 15:1 positively influences student achievement (SAGE Project Evaluation – UWM, 2002).
 - Family income based summer learning differences accumulate over the elementary school years, such that poor children’s achievement scores without summer school fall further behind the scores of middle class students as they progress through school grade by grade (Alexander & Entwistle 1996, John Hopkins University)
 - Children from low-income backgrounds can suffer up to two months achievement loss over the summer break. Summer reading loss is prevented by participation in summer school (Cooper, 1996). Children from upper to middle income levels sustain achievement or grow as a result of participation in summer school.
 - The achievement gap may be most directly associated with variations in the time use habits of students (in and out of school) and with the involvement of parents, teachers, and adult mentors in students’ activities (Clark/North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004)
 - Students in technology-rich environments experienced positive effects on achievement in all major subject areas. (Sivin-Kachala, 1998). Students learn more in less time when they receive computer-based instruction (Kulik-Meta Analysis Study, 1994) Effective technology use requires long-term planning and support and teachers must be adequately trained to use technology (Ringstaff & Kelley, 2002).
 - Integration technology can benefit students in four areas: 1) student preparation to enter the workforce or higher education, 2) student motivation, 3) student learning or increased academic achievement and 4) teach student access to resources (Earle 2002 reported by Odden in background materials for School Funding Task Force)
 - English language learners need a solid and rigorous curriculum as the basis from which to provide extra services to achieve high performance standards, including qualified teachers, adequate instructional materials and good school conditions, good assessments detailing English language, reading and other academic skills, rigorous curriculum and decrease affirmative counseling to take courses, and professional development focusing English teaching skills. (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly & Callahan, 2003 as reported by Odden in background materials for School Funding Task Force)
 - ELL students in bilingual programs out performed their non-bilingual program peers on reading achievement with an effect size of +.45 (Slavin & Cheung 2005 as reported by Odden in background materials for School Funding Task Force)
 - What happens in summer can significantly impact the achievement of students from low income and at risk backgrounds and thus reduce the poor and minority achievement gaps in the United States (Heyns 1978 as reported by Odden in background materials for School Funding Task Force)
 - Also see Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance position paper on Early Childhood Education. (January, 2006)