

Madison schools could lose money with proposed changes to state program

By GAYLE WORLAND gworland@madison.com 608-252-6188 | Posted: Wednesday, April 21, 2010 7:00 am

The cash-strapped Madison School District expects to lose out under proposed changes to a state program aimed at reducing class sizes in elementary schools with large numbers of poor children.

The changes to the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education program, which has passed the state Assembly and is expected to be voted on Thursday by the state Senate, would increase maximum class sizes in SAGE schools from 15 to 18 students, making the program more affordable for some school districts, particularly those in rural areas.

But it also would eliminate an option Madison has used — with state approval — to direct SAGE money to some courses but not others. In four of its 20 SAGE schools, the district caps morning math and reading classes for kindergarten through third grade at 15. In the afternoon, the students attend larger classes for other subjects, which saves the district money.

"The complication with the new bill is that it does not allow waivers" of the state rules, said Sue Abplanalp, assistant superintendent for elementary schools. "We would have to run those classrooms at an 18-to-1 ratio all day long, so it would be more costly for us."

The bill also opens up SAGE to more school districts, "which could affect the distribution of SAGE aid," according to a fiscal estimate by the Department of Public Instruction. However, the financial impact on local districts such as Madison is "indeterminate," the report says.

Twenty of Madison's 32 public elementary schools, whose poverty rates range from 38 percent to 83 percent, receive about \$2,000 per low-income pupil in annual SAGE funds, said district lobbyist and spokesman Joe Quick. Madison taxpayers supplement that amount with close to \$2 million a year for SAGE, he said.

Doing away with the waiver option "is of great significance to us," said Madison Superintendent Dan Nerad. "It's a struggle enough to keep up with the costs of this program, knowing that it's a critically important program in terms of dealing with our high-poverty schools.

"Other districts are making the decision to no longer participate, and I hope that isn't what we have to face," Nerad said.

Already faced with a \$17 million decline in state aids for 2009-10 and 2010-11, the Madison School Board is working to close a nearly \$30 million budget gap for the next school year through property tax hikes and budget cuts. Any changes to SAGE funding would have to go into the mix when the board resumes budget talks Monday night, Abplanalp said.

A final budget vote is expected May 4.

"This is one of those unexpected things that came up that they (board members) didn't know," said Abplanalp, who will release a cost analysis on the changes later this week. "Now it's going to be part of the budget process."

This year 212 Wisconsin districts are participating in SAGE, down from 218 in the 2007-08 school year, according to DPI. Participating schools have a five-year renewable contract with the state, but DPI is not accepting new applications for the 15-year-old program.

The state Assembly approved the SAGE changes on April 15, with state Reps. Mark Pocan, D-Madison, and Sondy Pope-Roberts, D-Middleton, voting yes. A spokeswoman for Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker, D-Weston, said the bill is scheduled for a Senate vote on Thursday.

Sen. John Lehman, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, said Tuesday that he was unaware that the Madison School District had registered in opposition to the bill. Lehman, D-Racine, said the legislation appears to have broad support among Senate Democrats.

Rep. Kristen Dexter, D-Eau Claire, testified March 9 that raising class sizes to 18 and phasing out the waiver program "will lead to a more uniform program which more accurately reflects the original intent of SAGE."

But Madison School Board member Marj Passman said the changes will not benefit students.

"We must keep our numbers low in these classrooms if we are ever to narrow the achievement gap," Passman said. "(And) it is inconceivable that we would even consider adding an additional burden on elementary teachers, who already have the most challenging job of educating our neediest children."