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**Rural School Advocates Set 2017 Legislative Agenda**

*FFA Enrichment Center, DMACC Campus, Ankeny, Iowa October 12, 206*

Representatives from member school districts of the Rural School Advocates of Iowa convened their Annual Meeting on Wednesday, Oct 12, at 6:00 PM at the FFA Enrichment Center in Ankeny. RSAI is beginning its fourth year of advocacy on behalf of the students, parents and communities in rural Iowa, to ensure that all students have access to a great Iowa education, regardless of where they live. RSAI members include 69 Iowa school districts, ranging in enrollment from 97 to nearly 16,000 students. As Dr. Bob Olson, Chair of RSAI and superintendent of the Clarion-Goldfield-Dows school district reminded the members, “this is an organization of rural schools with a common mission of equality, not an organization of small schools.”

School transportation costs were a key focus of the group. Kevin Fiene, Superintendent from I-35 Community School District, and at-large representative on the RSAI Leadership Group, shared statistics of the miles traveled getting to and from school. “For us, those route miles we run to get students to school take away from the instruction we could provide. This is an equity issue. Our students are disadvantaged because of the funding we must spend getting them to the door. Isn’t their education just as important as all other Iowa students’ education?”

Duane Willhite, Superintendent from North Fayette Valley Schools, NE representative on the Legislative Group, weighed in on the priority of extending the state penny sales tax for school infrastructure and property tax relief. “We buy our 1-1 computers out of our sales takes fund. A lot of districts have elevated student learning out of this fund. Because our buildings are in good shape, we're going to drop our physical plant and equipment levy property tax (PPEL) and our taxpayers will appreciate that.” But he also expressed concerned for districts with unmet infrastructure needs. “The sunset restricts our ability to borrow. Schools that need to borrow to do work in the district, need that sunset repealed.”

Another key priority for rural schools was extending the operational sharing incentives, which Kerry Phillips, Superintendent, Harmony School District, explained. He shared that 160 school districts, mostly rural, obtained efficiencies or expanded opportunities for students in the prior year. “As the final year of the incentives nears in 2018-19, it’s critical for rural schools to advocate for an extension this (legislative) session,” Phillips emphasized.

Despite being one of the most complicated school finance issues discussed, student equality of Iowa’s school finance formula rose to a level of top priority for RSAI members. Olson explained, “This $175 difference per pupil has no rational explanation, other than the history of what schools spent when the formula was created in the early 1970s.” “This is a moral issue for us,” added Dr. Arthur Tate, Superintendent from Davenport Community Schools. “We are short $145 million since its inception. Our kids deserve this and we need it.”

The group stressed the importance of education for local economic development. Paul Croghan, Superintendent of East Mills and new RSAI Vice Chair stated, "We are eager to cut taxes to help out local businesses in the community, but what businesses are going to want to hire uneducated students?  There will be no businesses remaining in Iowa if we don't have educated workers."

Sandy Dockendorff, Board member, Danville, also weighed in on the impact of education job cuts in all communities.  "Teachers are losing their jobs, but while we're more than willing to subsidize local business to ensure jobs are not lost or moved from the community, why aren't we viewing teaching jobs in the same way as we view jobs in business? They live in our communities, buy things in our communities, pay taxes in our communities.”

RSAI members discussed the resources needed to provide a good education for students, including a 6% increase in the state cost per pupil to make up for lost ground and resurrect education as the number one priority of the legislature. They call on state lawmakers to set the amount quickly as the 2017 session convenes, explaining this funding as a survival issue for rural schools. If the legislature does not meet their legal deadline, the rural schools group is advocating for an automatic increase based on economic factors.

RSAI members also included the following issues as additional priorities for the 2016 Legislative Session:

* Funding equity and flexibility for students at-risk of not succeeding in school
* Aligned assessment, high standards and the technology required to administer the tests on line
* Funding for 3- and 4-year old preschool at a 1.0 weighting, to help provide full day and cover transportation costs in rural schools
* District flexibility, known as home rule, for authority to make decisions that best meet the needs of students and the community
* Rural teacher quality incentive program, to help attract, retain and reward great teachers in rural districts
* Local flexibility to provide cost-effective and research-based interventions rather than summer school if barriers to providing a good summer school program exist (such as transportation costs or inability to recruit qualified teachers in the summer.)

Position papers on key issues and a Digest of the 2016 Legislative Session are available on the RSAI legislative web page, <http://www.rsaia.org/legislative.html> or by contacting Margaret Buckton, Professional Advocate, RSAI Margaret.buckton@rsaia.org 515.201.3755

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