<http://www.rsaia.org/legislative.html>

**2021 RSAI Legislative Priorities**

(As approved by the membership at the RSAI Annual Meeting on October 21, 2020)

**Adequate School Resources:** RSAI supports adequate base funding.The increased per pupil cost known as SSA is especially critical to rural students due to distance from school/opportunities, economies of scale, mandates, the need for AEA support, and the ability to attract and retain staff. Rural schools depend on an investment of meaningful new resources to prepare students for a successful future. COVID-19 experience has created additional financial burdens for connectivity, staffing, social distancing practices, virtual curriculum and protective equipment, while potentially diverting resources away from the district due to open enrollment or home school choices which may be temporary. The rate of increase in SSA should be no lower than anticipated growth in state revenue (adjusted for legislated tax cuts), should keep up with other economic factors such as personal income or state gross domestic product over the long term, should maintain a balance of state and local property taxes, provide predictability, and be set timely to assure adequate notice for budget planning and staffing.

**Assessing and Addressing Staff/Student Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health:** RSAI supports access to and funding for mental health services for children and supports for staff. July 1, 2020 Return-to-Learn Plans required school leaders to determine how to meet an increased demand for social emotional supports anticipated due to school closure. RSAI thanks the Legislature and Governor for addressing telehealth services at school without creating an undue administrative burden for schools and the addition of a social worker position to operational sharing. Despite these advances, our educators are neither prepared nor qualified to become providers of mental health services for children. Iowa needs to address a shortage of qualified mental health professionals and provide resources over the next two years for local districts to determine how best to train school staff based on a local assessment of need and consideration of local community tools and capacity to collaborate for a collective solution.

**Educator Shortage and Quality Instruction:** RSAI knows that rural school leaders are driven to find the very best staff they can to engage students in rigorous learning.RSAI supports maximum flexibility to hire staff to provide great instruction and support to all Iowa students. RSAI supports   
1) district flexibility to meet offer and teach requirements, 2) teacher or other staff shortage loan forgiveness programs and incentives to encourage staff to work in rural schools, 3) a special education generalist credential to teach special education across all grades, 4) creation of a Public Service strand in Iowa’s CTE system to prepare Iowa’s future teaching workforce and minimize college student loan debt of future teachers, 5) flexibility to hire retirees without negative IPERS impact, and 6) elimination of barriers to licensure for educators. RSAI supports continued BOEE focus on greater flexibility for substitute licensure. Licensure reciprocity with other states is of great benefit. The BOEE should accept evidence other than strict transcripts to show skill mastery for educators from other professions. Colleges of teacher preparation and the BOEE are encouraged to lessen the college course requirements for new teachers, to make them no more burdensome than those of other professions.

**Formula and Transportation Equity:** RSAI supports formula and transportation equity.The Legislature should continue the commitment to close the $155 gap between the state and district cost per pupil within ten years and continue transportation equity support, bringing down all districts to no more than the state average per pupil transportation cost, without requiring burdensome reporting requirements from school districts.

**Opportunity Equity:** RSAI supports resources for at-risk students. Resources should be based on need, such as the percentage of students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), in addition to enrollment of the district. The current disparity in dropout prevention capacity, (some districts held to 2.5% and others allowed to access up to 5% of regular program district cost) is arbitrary, based on history no longer relevant to supporting student needs. All school boards should be able to realize the full 5% dropout prevention funding. The formula must further recognize the disproportionate cost of providing equal educational opportunities to low-income students. School districts should be granted spending authority for FRPL eligible students’ fees mandated to be waived by state and federal law. The COVID-19 experience has also shown us glaring differences among student home support. This includes both the ability to engage in learning based on lack of internet connectivity, as well as parents not being able to stay home to support required continuous learning because of work requirements to support their families. Experts anticipate a COVID-19 ripple effect which will increase achievement gaps. RSAI supports full attention to and implementation of the December 2019 School Finance Interim Committee recommendation to study the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, including other states’ formulas that provide resources for students from low-income families which are showing successful student achievement outcomes for at-risk students. [HF 2490](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=hf2490) Poverty Weighting Studywas approved with strong bi-partisan support in the House Education Committee in the 2020 Session serves as a good starting point for continued conversation.

**Sharing Incentives and Efficiencies:** RSAI supports extension of sharing and efficiency incentives.Rural students benefit from opportunities to achieve efficiencies, share capacity to operate, and redirect resources to educational programs. The 2019 addition of a licensed social worker position to qualify for operational sharing incentives is appreciated. RSAI supports additional critical school staff, such as additional mental health professionals, school safety personnel and work-based learning coordinators. Additional positions are welcomed, but the cap of 21 students should be increased to allow all districts to access any new flexibility. Whole Grade Sharing, Reorganization, and Operational Sharing Incentives should be extended.

**Quality Preschool:** RSAI supports full funding of quality preschool. Quality preschool has been proven to minimize negative student outcomes (special education, dropout, limited lifetime wages, home and car ownership, for example) while maximizing student academic success. Preschool is the ounce of prevention that is saves future taxpayers a pound of cure. Additionally, expansion to provide quality preschool for three-year-olds would benefit parents, the business community and the economy, in addition to the student. Due to changing demographics in rural Iowa, significant transportation costs, and lack of quality day care, preschool should be fully funded at the 1.0 per pupil cost. The 2020 bill, [HF 2490](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=hf2490) Poverty Weighting Study, should be moved forward in the 2021 Session and include a discussion of weightings which should be applicable to preschool students’ programs.

**School Safety:** RSAI supports school safety investments. Rural schools need the resources, training and support necessary for Iowa student and staff safety at school, including additional funding for security personnel and training to protect against emergency situations presenting harm. For rural schools in particular, distance from emergency support compounds an already stressed situation lacking sufficient resources to fully train staff and provide security supports.

**Bonding Capacity**: RSAI supports a simple majority, 50% plus 1, voter approval for school bond issues. Additionally, RSAI supports the 5% calculation of property valuation which limits a district’s bonding capacity to be limited to property tax debt issues and not include debt backed by the school infrastructure state sales tax revenues.

**Internet Connectivity and Access:** RSAI supports continued state and federal efforts at expanding access to high-speed internet geographically to all Iowans for student and staff access to critically needed information. Access to virtual learning and information is required for rural students to fully experience quality STEM programs. The future of rural quality of life, entrepreneurship and access to a whole host of critical services depend on citizen access to high-speed internet. RSAI supports incentives, investments, and creative solutions to close the technology gap for all students, their families, and businesses and community members in rural Iowa. Lack of sufficient income should not be a barrier to internet access.

**Remote Learning and Instructional Time:** RSAI supports the ability for local leaders to determine when school should close, for emergency situations and safety, including but not limited to weather cancellations, emergency infrastructure conditions, or for purposes of public health, as long as engagement in virtual learning opportunities is required for students and staff and needs of all students are anticipated and met. Under such conditions, instructional time delivered during the closure counts toward minimum instructional days or hours and is not required to be made up at the end of the school year.

**Local School Board Authority:** RSAI believes that those locally elected leaders closest to the community care most about those impacted by their decision making and are in the best position to determine the best interest of students, staff and stakeholders. In education policy, one size does not fit all school districts, classrooms or students. District leaders need maximum flexibility to provide a great education to all students. The state role is to define what outcomes are necessary for all students, leaving flexibility to schools in expenditures and policy to best determine how to deliver those intended outcomes. Statutory Home Rule, articulated in Iowa Code 274.3, gives locally elected school boards broad and implied authority. The Legislature, the Governor/executive branch and the courts should follow the law and liberally construe the Iowa Code and legislation to effectuate local control.