FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Rural School Advocates Set 2020 Legislative Agenda**

*FFA Enrichment Center, DMACC Campus, Ankeny, Iowa October 16, 2019*

Representatives from member school districts of the Rural School Advocates of Iowa convened their Annual Meeting on Wed., Oct 16, at 4:30 PM at the FFA Enrichment Center in Ankeny. RSAI advocates 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 over 100 Iowa school districts but several are among the largest geographic school districts in the state. As Dr. Robert 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.”

The priorities to Adequate School Funding, Formula and Transportation Equity, Student Mental Health and Educator/Staff Shortages received the most votes in the group for the top four issues of significance to rural schools.

School Funding, known as State Supplemental Assistance (SSA), was a clear priority for RSAI members. Superintendent Barb Schwamman, shared between the Osage and Riceville Community School Districts, said this funding is not just a priority, but supports the very survival of rural schools. “We have 47 fewer school districts than we did just 20 years ago,” she stated. School funding primarily pays for people. The teachers, counselors, librarians, administrators, nurses, secretaries, coaches and custodians in RSAI schools. According to Ms. Schwamman, “Low funding inhibits our ability to attract and retain staff and to remain competitive with the private sector in Iowa’s growing economy.” Dennis McClain, shared superintendent in Adair-Casey and Guthrie Center, advocated for RSAI to insist on a specific increase of at least 3.75% per pupil. “In 9 of the last 10 years, the increase per pupil has not been enough to cover our schools’ cost of doing business. We simply can’t continue with 1% and 2% increases and be expected to meet student needs and compete with Iowa’s private sector employers.”

Tim Mitchell, Superintendent from Riverside Community School District, SW Representative on the Legislative Group, weighed in on two rural equity issues. 1) transportation funding in Iowa’s formula. “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. The legislature made a good faith effort to close this gap. We are urging them to keep up the good work and get all districts down to the state average.” 2) per pupil formula equity, which progressed in the last two legislative sessions. “Although grateful for this recent investment, if they keep the pace of $5 per year, it will take another 33 years before student equity is achieved. We respectfully ask them to phase out the $165 per pupil gap within the next 10 years.”

RSAI members also included the following issues as additional priorities for the 2020 Legislative Session:

* Opportunity equity for students from low-income families, with funding to help cover mandated fee waivers and to provide services that these students need for success.
* Quality Preschool, including funding for 3- and 4-year old preschool at a 1.0 weighting, to help provide full day service and cover transportation costs in rural schools
* Staff and educator shortage, including additional staffing flexibilities, to ensure students in rural Iowa have access to great teachers, bus drivers and all of the supports to meet their needs.
* Student mental health, including the ability to access virtual mental health services, especially for Iowa’s rural students living in communities without mental health providers.
* School safety resources including funds for development of school safety plans, staff and training costs.

Resources:

Position papers on key issues and a Digest of the 2020 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 or 515.201.3755

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Quotes/Notes:

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