FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Rural School Advocates Set 2019 Legislative Agenda**

*FFA Enrichment Center, DMACC Campus, Ankeny, Iowa October 24, 2018*

Representatives from member school districts of the Rural School Advocates of Iowa convened their Annual Meeting on Wednesday, Oct 24, at 4:30 PM at the FFA Enrichment Center in Ankeny. RSAI is beginning its sixth 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 over 100 Iowa school districts, but a few are actually larger districts, such as Davenport. 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. Dennis McClain, Superintendent from Clay Central-Everly 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?”

Tim Mitchell, Superintendent from Riverside Community School District, NW Representative on the Legislative Group, weighed in on the priority of extending the state penny sales tax for school infrastructure and property tax relief. “The pending sunset restricts our ability to borrow. Schools that need to borrow to do work in the district, will only have property taxes as a funding resource if the penny tax is not extended.” Many districts buy 1-1 computers out of sales takes fund. A lot of districts have elevated student learning out of this fund. Some districts have been able to lower their physical plant and equipment levy property tax (PPEL) and their taxpayers appreciate that. All districts are thinking about staff and student security, and the state penny provides a resource for safer entrances, monitoring technology and other safety improvements.

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. Sandy Dockendorff, school board member from the Danville Community School District and SE Representative to the RSAI Legislative Group, explained, “This $170 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 issue of formula equality is about fairness,” Dockendorff continued. “The way the formula works today, some students generate more than others. . . . SF 455 was signed into law during the 2018 Session. The state has made a small but lasting commitment to close the gap by $5. The state has a long way to go to close the rest of the gap.”

RSAI members discussed the resources needed to provide a good education for students, including a meaningful increase in the state cost per pupil to make up for lost ground and resurrect education as the number one priority of the legislature. “We have 44 fewer school districts than we did just 20 years ago,” stated McClain. “School funding primarily pays for people. The teachers, counselors, librarians, administrators, nurses, secretaries, coaches and custodians in our schools. Low funding inhibits our ability to attract and retain staff and to remain competitive with the private sector in Iowa’s growing economy.”

RSAI members also included the following issues as additional priorities for the 2019 Legislative Session:

* Funding adequacy and equity for students at-risk of not succeeding in school
* 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
* Improved instruction and educator shortage, including additional staffing flexibilities, to ensure students in rural Iowa have access to great teachers and multiple opportunities to meet their needs.
* Extension of the reorganization and whole grade sharing incentives scheduled to expired in 2020.
* Student mental health services, especially for Iowa’s rural students living in communities without mental health providers.

Position papers on key issues and a Digest of the 2018 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

Contacts:

Dr. Robert Olson, Superintendent, Clarion-Goldfield-Dows, Chair, RSAI Leadership Group, Robert.olson@rsaia.org, (515) 532-3423

Dennis McClain, Superintendent, Clay Central-Everly, Vice Chair, RSAI Leadership Group

dmcclain@claycentraleverly.org (712) 933-2242

Duane Willhite, Superintendent, North Fayette Valley, Secretary/Treasurer, RSAI Leadership Group

dwillhite@nfv.k12.ia.us (563) 422-3851

Dan Smith, Board Member, Harmony, Chair, RSAI Legislative Group

dan.smith@rsaia.org

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