**RSAI 2021 Legislative Priority:
Preschool**

**Background:** Iowa’s Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), first implemented in 2007-08, has grown to serve 31,468 4-year-olds in 2019-20. PK enrollment was lower than kindergarten by 8,364, meaning as many as 27% of kindergarteners may not have been served in SVPP. The importance of reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical.

**Why does preschool matter?** The Perry Preschool Project, 40 years later, documents $17 savings for every dollar invested (earlier findings of $8 saved for every dollar invested are also often cited). Once considered a strategy just to support working parents with child care needs, the majority of states now view access to high-quality PK programs as a critical long-term economic investment in the future workforce. Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014: *Six rigorous long term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were:*

* *25% less likely to drop out of school.*
* *40% less likely to become a teen parent.*
* *50% less likely to be placed in special education.*
* *60% less likely to never attend college.*
* *70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.*

Sarah Daily, *Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: A Policymaker’s Guide*, shows reductions in costly outcomes that quality preschool prevents. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014) [http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf](http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf.). The National Conference of State Legislatures quotes studies on long term return on investment. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/new-research-early-education-as-economic-investme.aspx>

**Barriers to Expansion.** Preschool funding in the formula is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year’s enrollment of four-year-olds in the program on Oct. 1. Although three-year-olds and 5-year-olds may be served, they are not counted for weighting/funding purposes. Unlike the regular program enrollment for K-12 budget purposes, there is no adjustment for enrollment changes; 1) no 101% budget guarantee if fewer students are served and 2) no on-time funding modified supplemental amount if more PK students are served than in the prior year. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Fall 2020 PK enrollment dropped significantly, which means that the 2021-22 PK budget will also drop significantly. Districts are prohibited from using general fund dollars to pay for PK expenses, so staff reductions are likely in the Fall of 2021. Although transportation costs may now be paid with PK funds, those costs eat into the 0.5 weighting assigned to preschool students very quickly in rural districts, especially for half-day programs.

**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 saves future taxpayers a pound of cure. Additionally, expansion to provide and fund 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 daycare, 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 applicable to preschool students’ programs. RSAI supports formula protections against budget and program impacts of preschool enrollment swings, such as budget guarantee and on-time funding spending authority.