**RSAI 2021 Legislative Priority:   
Rural School Staff Shortage and Educator Quality**

**Background:** Although rural Iowa schools have traditionally been full of excellent teachers with flexibility and dedication to student success, conditions in rural Iowa are making it difficult to attract and retain great teachers, indeed school employees in many different job roles, and it’s getting worse.

Many content areas are experiencing a shortage, but especially at the secondary level. The Iowa DE compiles a list, which for 2020-21 included physics, family consumer science, agriculture, industrial technology, business, all world languages, all science, English-as-a-second language, special education, school counselors and teacher librarians. See the complete shortage list on DE’s web site: <https://educateiowa.gov/pk-12/educator-quality/practitioner-preparation/teacher-shortage-areas>

Rural school leaders would add math, music and even some elementary positions. Almost all districts in Iowa are struggling to find bus drivers, paraprofessionals, office staff, and food service workers.

When there are shortages, the market tends to draw teachers from rural areas lacking social amenities to higher paying urban and suburban districts. Fewer qualified candidates, and sometimes no candidates at all, are applying to fill vacant and mandated positions. Private-sector competition is also compelling. Iowa’s low unemployment rate means employers are looking for a strong work ethic, communication skills, and the ability to get to work on time. The Future Ready Workforce list of High-Demand Jobs includes educators. All of this information predates the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has encouraged earlier than planned retirement, reluctance for retired teachers to return as substitutes, needs for qualified staff to cover when teachers are out sick or in quarantine.

**Current Reality:** The qualified worker challenge is more difficult in rural Iowa:

* The implementation of the teacher leadership and compensation system increased demand for teachers to fill vacant positions to replace teacher leaders. TLC may also have slowed the pipeline of individuals willing to take on the work of school administration.
* Teachers in rural areas have multiple preps. A teacher in a rural district may teach and prepare lessons and activities across an entire content area, such as Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, Trigonometry, Calculus and a Statistics course. Despite lower class sizes, multiple preps increase the workload.
* Some rural schools have been able to help a willing and capable teacher obtain certification in a shortage area of content, but the rules require provisional licensure status no longer than two years. Access to fewer colleges and universities within a short distance adds to this burden. Tuition and costs of coursework may be unaffordable for lower-paid rural teachers and nearly unattainable for new teachers given the level of starting pay in a rural area and college loan payments.
* Some community members, dedicated to the rural area, may be willing to teach in areas of their expertise, but can’t afford to quit working for two years to become certified. Some programs in CTE areas have provided avenues to on-the-job training, which is a good start.
* Beginning January 1, 2021, educators new to the state should get reciprocity for their teaching, administrator or coaching license with sufficient experience. This is a welcome relief! However, it does not allow new college graduates from other states to begin their teaching careers in Iowa without having to take courses not required in their university’s school of education program.

**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 (non-teaching) 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.

**Policy Solutions Rural Schools Support:**

1. Set the state supplementary assistance (SSA) rate for FY 2022 no lower than 3.75% but as high as the Revenue Estimating Conference revenue estimate is set if higher than 3.75%.
2. Expansion of temporary licensure to three years for teachers working for shortage area licensure to achieve the necessary credit hours.
3. Flexibility to meet offer and teach requirements – via partnership with another district (28E, Shared Students/teachers or WGS), online, or through access to community college courses. Waivers from DE should be granted for more than one year to minimize administrative work in the following years.
4. Ability to start a school year or semester with a long term substitute if the position is a late vacancy without requiring a waiver from BOEE.
5. Special education general endorsement alternative, allowing teachers an alternative credential to meet special education licensure from PK-12.
6. Direct the BOEE to write rules regulating the hiring of new teachers just graduating from college in another state to minimize the additional coursework burden on these new teachers.
7. Alternative models of licensure for shortage area teaching positions in Iowa (build on the CTE model that allows completion of student teaching on the job, with support from TLC and instructional coaches.)
8. Education Loan Forgiveness to help pay student loan debt if teachers remain in rural school districts.
9. Define a CTE track for public service, including teaching (but could also include law enforcement, social work, criminal justice, etc.). Allow “internships” with teachers at school and completion of an associates degree or other course work to minimize college tuition and living expenses.
10. Use of management fund to pay for certification course requirement costs for teachers working toward licensure in shortage area positions, especially special education.
11. Soften the barriers of IPERs eligible employees returning to the workplace.
12. Allow individuals with an associates’ degree to substitute teach.