



RSAI 2026 Legislative Priority: Rural School Staff Shortage and Educator Quality

Background: Although rural Iowa schools have excellent teachers dedicated to student success, it is still difficult to attract and retain great teachers, in addition to school employees in many different job roles.

Official Shortages: The Iowa Department of Education compiles a list of areas with staff shortages annually. The list of Teacher Shortage Areas by Endorsement Title for 2025-26 is posted on DE's website: <https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/educator-quality/practitioner-preparation/teacher-shortage-areas>

The top 10 shortage area position titles for 2025-26, comprised of 50 separate teaching endorsement credentials, are: 1) Special Education – All Exceptionalities, 2) General Science, 3) English Language Arts, 4) Mathematics, 5) Music, 6) Elementary Education, 7) World Languages, 8) English as a Second Language, 9) Art, and 10) Industrial Technology. The remaining 18 shortage area titles, comprised of an additional 43 separate teaching endorsement credentials, include some positions that have been short for a long time (e.g., biology, physics, chemistry, business, family and consumer science, world languages, school nurses and counselors) but others may be more surprising (e.g., physical education, reading, social sciences, early childhood, career and technical education and computer science).

The School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) conducted a detailed survey of staff shortages in August 2023. With 78% of districts responding, they estimated nearly 1,500 vacant or not appropriately filled positions as school started. See the [SAI Staff Shortage 2023 Flyer](#).

Conditions have improved in the last two years. According to the [DE in September 2025](#), Iowa schools filled over 98% of vacancies in the last school year. That state average is a good number compared to the rest of the nation; however, there are many districts, 42 (mostly rural), still experiencing over 5% (or even more than 10%) of vacancies unfilled. During this same time, with low per pupil funding increases, many districts have intentionally not replaced retirements with new positions in order to balance budgets or provide online learning options when unable to recruit a teacher. These solutions are not officially recognized as vacancies, but can negatively impact school systems and students. Additionally, almost all districts in Iowa are struggling to find bus drivers, paraprofessionals, office staff, and food service workers. The Future Ready Workforce list of High-Demand Jobs includes educators.

Impact:

When there are shortages, few and sometimes no qualified candidates apply to fill vacant and mandated positions. Existing teaching and administrative staff carry the load, sometimes teaching in areas under conditional licensure, creating larger class sizes or dropping course offerings when positions are unfilled.

Although competition is fierce in both public and private schools, other non-school private-sector competition is also compelling. Iowa's employers are looking for a strong work ethic, communication skills, and the ability to get to work on time. They can often pay employees with similar qualifications more. Iowa was facing a teacher shortage before 2020, which was amplified by the pandemic due to early retirements, increased absences and fewer substitutes. Even five years beyond COVID, the shortage continues.

Teacher Shortage Data:

Data comparing Iowa teacher pay with the rest of the nation, to show the impact of teacher pay minimums enacted in 2024 and 2025 Sessions, will not be available for a few years. Although this significant investment

will help, especially in rural Iowa, other states also invest in teacher pay to address a national shortage. The following is the latest data currently available:

The gap between Iowa's Average Teacher Salary and the National Average grew, as reported in the 2024 [Iowa Condition of Education Report](#):

"Iowa's average regular teacher salary increased slightly to \$62,360 in 2023-24 compared to \$61,162 in 2022-23.

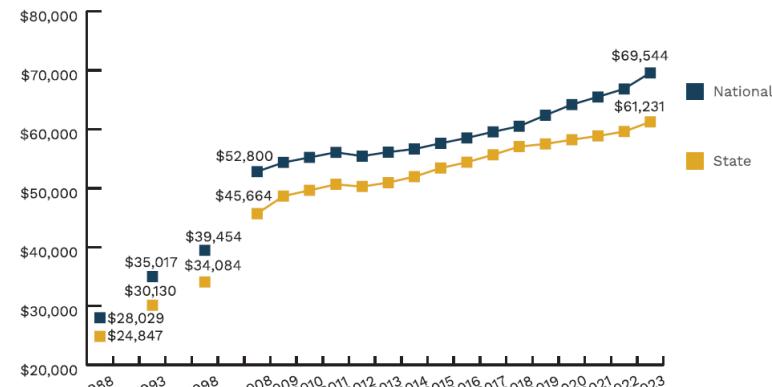
Iowa's average public-school teacher salary decreased in national rankings to 28th in the 2023-24 school year, down from 27th in the 2023-24 school year".

The Report also provides comparison data for teacher salaries in the Midwest: Iowa's ranking maintained its place at 6th in the 2022-24 school year compared to other Midwest states as Iowa was also ranked 6th in the prior two school years.

Please note: the national rankings are typically available one year after the state data is available.

Geography matters. With Iowa's neighbors, IL and MN ranking 1st and 2nd and WI ranking 5th in the Midwest, school districts on those borders must compete with significantly higher compensation for just a short commute.

Figure 5-10: Average Salaries of Public School Teachers for Iowa and the Nation, 1987-88, 1992-93, 1997-98 and 2007-08 to 2022-23



Source: National Education Association, Rankings and Estimates of School Statistics.

Table 5-17: Average Salaries of Public School Teachers for Iowa, Midwest States and the Nation, 2021-22 and 2022-23

Nation and State	2021-22			2022-23		
	Salary	National Rank	Midwest Rank	Salary	National Rank	Midwest Rank
Nation	\$66,805			\$69,544		
Illinois	\$72,315	12	1	\$73,916	12	1
Indiana	\$54,625	39	10	\$57,015	36	8
Iowa	\$59,581	27	6	\$61,231	28	6
Kansas	\$55,250	35	9	\$56,481	39	10
Michigan	\$64,884	17	3	\$67,011	17	3
Minnesota	\$67,600	14	2	\$70,005	15	2
Missouri	\$52,481	47	11	\$53,999	47	11
Nebraska	\$57,420	31	7	\$58,763	34	7
North Dakota	\$54,364	33	8	\$56,792	37	9
Ohio	\$64,353	18	4	\$66,390	19	4
South Dakota	\$50,592	49	12	\$53,153	49	12
Wisconsin	\$60,724	24	5	\$62,524	25	5

Source: National Education Association, Rankings and Estimates of School Statistics.

Relationship to School Funding/Per Pupil Funding Gap: Iowa's investment in education is determined based on a per pupil increase set annually by the Legislature. Although never below zero in 15 of the last 16 years, the per pupil increase has been lower than the cost increases schools experience. Since schools spend an average of 80% of general fund budgets on staff, it's no surprise Iowa is not keeping up. [US Census Data](#) reporting on FY 2023 expenditures shows that Iowa spent \$13,792 per student, compared to the US Average of \$16,526. Iowa's per student expenditures fell short by \$2,734, ranking Iowa 9th out of 12 midwestern states and 34th in the nation. About every decade, as Iowa has fallen behind, the State has turned to higher teacher pay minimums funded now through Teacher Salary Supplement (TSS) categorical funding, to make up ground. If per pupil funding increases do not keep up with inflation or other states' investments in education, Iowa's teacher pay ranking among the states will not rebound as high as anticipated during the 2024 Session action.

Rural school leaders are concerned that the gap continues to widen. Successive years with low increases in per pupil funding have prevented districts from increasing compensation for teachers and staff sufficient to keep up with the economy or pressures from other states also experiencing a teacher shortage, but investing more.

Current Reality: The qualified worker challenge impacts all schools in Iowa:

- Some rural schools have been able to help a willing and capable teacher obtain certification in a shortage area of content, but the rules limit provisional licensure status to two years. Access to fewer colleges and universities within a short distance adds to this burden. Tuition and the 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 ongoing college loan payments. RSAI was excited to participate in Gov. Reynolds' Teacher and Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Program, with a consortium of over 30 school districts accessing federal pandemic funds to help participants become certificated or degreed over 2-3 years through paid internships as paraeducators, developing teaching skills on the job as an apprentice. TPRA dedicated \$45 million statewide over three years, but concluded on Dec. 31, 2025. Additional state appropriations or another funding source may be necessary to keep this program going. Other teacher-intern models would be helpful, but must include student teaching and ongoing mentoring and support to provide new teachers with the practicum experience they need.
- New teacher-pay minimums: now \$50K for new to 11-year teachers and \$62K for 12+ years of teaching, enacted by HF 2612 in 2024. Funding to initiate the program was formula-driven based on DE data. Some districts are struggling with enough funding to meet the new minimums and also address salary "compaction", which is a term describing when there is no salary increase for several years for an employee (e.g., all teachers in some schools make \$50K whether they have 1 or 11 years of experience). If done right, this program should encourage more college students to go into education and may attract teachers from other states. Iowa's average teacher pay was \$7,035 behind the national average. HF 2612 invested \$73 million in teacher pay for the 2024-25 school year. Although that is progress, the increase applied to 38,190 Iowa teachers will increase Iowa teacher pay an average of \$1,911, well below the \$7,035 salary gap compared to the national average (sources: Iowa Condition of Education [Report](#) and the [National Education Association Rankings and Estimates](#)).
- Licensure and Loan Forgiveness: Since January 1, 2022, educators new to Iowa can receive licensure reciprocity for a valid teaching, administrator or coaching license from any other state. Competitive pay and benefits help districts compete with other states also vying for qualified staff. Additional authority and a funding stream for recruitment programs, such as loan forgiveness, are critical to help address the teacher shortage.
- Recent changes to IPERS: a retired teacher may return to the classroom without impacting retirement income with a shortened bona fide retirement period of one month through 2027. Both are showing some promise. In 2025, the legislature enacted a minimum salary for returning retirees of \$55,000, which is the maximum income one can earn before negatively impacting IPERS income.

Staff Shortages: In both the short and long term, RSAI supports policies based on trust that champion teaching as a valued profession and improve compensation and benefits for educators. Iowans, especially our state leaders, must foster respect for the education profession, which is well deserved, to attract more Iowans into teaching and retain more teachers in Iowa.

In addition to sufficient SSA and supportive messages, strategies to rebuild Iowa's education workforce must address these areas during a continuing staff shortage:

- **Candidate Pool:** dwindling for high needs areas (especially special education, CTE, fine arts, math and science, most secondary areas), fewer applicants, concerns about quality of candidates, difficulty in obtaining the right credentials (for example, work-based learning coordinator), and specific content areas that are challenging to nearly all rural districts.
- **Recruitment:** to rebuild the pipeline of interest into education, schools need additional flexibility and resources to provide hiring incentives, ongoing investment in CTE and internship programs for high school students to build skill and experience in education fields, resources for grow-your-own educators, tuition assistance and pay for student teaching, and resources to offset student loans. The Governor and Legislature should sustain and simplify successful programs like the Teacher and Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Grant Program, TPRA, funded initially by state pandemic funds.
- **Retention:** to slow the out-migration of staff from schools to other professions or retirement, school districts need maximum flexibility such as use of the Management Fund for recruitment and retention incentives, flexibility to meet offer and teach requirements, opportunities for teaching expanded courses within existing and/or competency-based licensure, social studies and other content generalist credentials, a shorter bona fide retirement period for schools to rehire all retired employee categories (such as bus drivers, coaches, paraeducators and others), increased state funding for teacher salary supplement to avoid salary compaction, and maintaining resources for mentoring, training and supporting staff.
- **Competitive and Adequate Compensation:** school funding primarily pays for quality staff and employees to provide a great education for students. State investment in higher teacher pay minimums is a great start, but must grow to keep up with other states and the Iowa economy. If funding is not sufficient, mandated minimums further stress the ability of school districts to adequately pay teachers between or above the minimums and nonteaching staff. Inadequate funding through Teacher Salary Supplement (TSS) has created salary compaction issues. School leaders are concerned about inequities of funding when not sufficient for all schools to pay staff. The Legislature is encouraged to provide resources to address salary compaction and hourly pay shortfalls, while minimizing per pupil inequities in the formula.