



2025 RSAI Legislative Priorities – Draft from Legislative Committee

Adequate School Resources: the increase in SSA provides resources for Iowa schools to deliver an educational experience for students that meets the expectations of Iowa parents, communities, employers and policymakers. **Iowa's school foundation formula must maintain balanced state and local resources, be predictable, at least minimally exceed inflation, allow schools to compete for labor, and assure adequate time for budget planning and staffing.**

What schools can deliver is dependent on the level of funding provided, which begins with the 2025-26 school year and requires a consistent and sustainable commitment:

- **World-Class Education:** an investment of at least 10% SSA (\$783 per pupil, or \$4.35 per day of 180 days of instruction) would position Iowa schools and AEAs to deliver a world-class education, lower class sizes, attract and retain qualified staff, increase and individualize internships and other workforce experiences for students, and provide programs to close achievement gaps. Iowa per pupil expenditures fell seven places since 2021, now ranking 36th in the nation in 2022, \$2,374 short of the national average (source: 2022 Annual Survey of School System Finances, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances.html>). The 10% investment would be a down payment in closing Iowa's lagging funding gap unless other states commit even more to their students' education.
- **Sustain Current Status:** an investment of at least 5% (\$392 per pupil, or \$2.18 per day of 180 days of instruction) would position school districts and AEAs to maintain current status with Iowa's competitive economy, recovering partially from high inflation and increased student needs.
- **Continued Erosion:** an investment of 2.5% (\$196 per pupil, or \$1.09 per day of 180 days of instruction) will partially cover expected increased costs of the next fiscal year, including staff salaries and benefits, but will require schools and AEAs to scale back, provide part-time librarians, counselors and nurses, shift some classes to online learning, or take other actions to squeeze more out of the current system in order to set a salary sufficient to retain existing staff (teachers, bus drivers, custodians, paraprofessionals) and provide a rounded course offering and programs.
- **Impact of AEA changes:** rural schools may not be able to afford the services, especially education services (such as crisis support, instructional materials and professional development) and media services (such as software, technical equipment, and virtual libraries), which AEAs used to provide, given changes in economy of scale and AEA staffing challenges. Without sufficient increases in SSA to cover these costs combined with fewer dollars provided to the AEAs, rural school students and staff may not be able to access or afford the support that AEAs have provided in the past.

Staff Shortages: In both the short and long term, policies based on trust champion teaching as a valued profession, and improved compensation and benefits options for educators are necessary. 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:

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 dedicate resources to continue the Teacher and Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Grant Program, TPRA, funded initially by state pandemic funds that are soon to expire.

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 other retirees (such as bus drivers and paraeducators), 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. The investment in higher teacher pay minimums from HF 2612 is a great start, but it must grow to keep up with other states and the Iowa economy. Unfortunately, if funding is not sufficient, the new mandated minimums will further stress the ability of school districts to adequately pay nonteaching staff. The Legislature is encouraged to provide resources for hourly pay through a sufficient and sustainable funding vehicle.

Public School Priority: as Iowa public schools will always be the first choice of most Iowa families, they must be adequately funded and supported by the State.

- 1) Since the implementation of Education Savings Accounts, as enacted by HF 68 in 2023, is nearly complete, RSAI supports the following changes.
 - a. Public schools should be relieved of the mandate to reimburse private school parents or provide transportation for private schools.
 - b. Private school students returning to public school after the October enrollment count date should be funded in a timely manner.
 - c. ESA applications should be submitted and approved by the March 1 open enrollment deadline to inform both public and private schools in a timely manner for staff and budget planning.
- 2) ESAs should not be expanded to homeschool students or nonaccredited private schools. The state should resist a weakened accreditation process, which would encourage new private schools without high standards to come to Iowa.

Equity of expectations and regulations should be applied consistently to both public and private schools under an ESA environment. There should be a level playing field requiring acceptance of all students, consistent reporting, comprehensive services, mandated content and transparency. Private schools receiving payments from ESA's should be open to an audit and financial review to ensure funds are spent appropriately.

Increasing Student Needs Including Poverty and Mental Health: resources should be based on at-risk needs, not just enrollment. All school boards should be able to access up to 5% dropout prevention funding. School districts should be granted spending authority for FRPL-waived fees. Iowa should study the impact of poverty on educational outcomes and best practices of other states in closing associated achievement gaps, leading toward a significant and urgent update to Iowa's School Foundation Formula in funding programs for Iowa's neediest students.

Students in rural areas are often distanced from needed services. Iowa must continue to address improved access to funded community mental health services for children and the shortage of mental health professionals statewide (such as reciprocal licensing and access to out-of-state providers virtually). The State should provide resources for local districts to train school staff in mental health first aid and awareness and build community capacity to address the mental health needs of children.

Quality Preschool: funding of quality statewide voluntary preschool for three and four-year-olds should be set at the 1.0 per pupil cost for full-time or prorated proportionally. The formula should include PK protections against budget and program impacts of preschool enrollment swings similar to K-12. Districts need access to resources for start-up costs to expand enrollment or increase the number of sections.

Full-day programming increases the opportunity for parent workforce participation, allows Iowa's limited childcare workforce capacity to focus on younger children, prevents later special education consequences, improves literacy and prepares students for learning. Although all students benefit from quality preschool, Iowa's low-income and non-English speaking students face barriers to half-day programs, making them even more at risk of lower long-term achievement.

Additionally, if parents of a 5-year-old who did not attend PK would prefer their student delay kindergarten, and there is no transitional kindergarten option in their district, they should be allowed to enroll their student in PK and that student should be counted for funding purposes.

Whole Grade Sharing and Reorganization Incentives

- Whole Grade Sharing and Reorganization incentives, set to expire at the end of the 2024-25 school year, should be extended. These incentives bring taxpayers and parents to the table in support of expanded opportunities for students, most often in districts without the economy of scale necessary to provide a broad and varied academic and interscholastic experience for students. These incentives should either be included as an ongoing option for school districts in perpetuity or extended to at least June 30, 2035.

Operational Sharing Incentives

- Operational Sharing Incentives should continue and be increased. The 21-student cap should be increased to allow access to new flexibility. Weightings should be sufficient to encourage and support sharing opportunities, with a 3-student weighting at a minimum per position. Reductions in weightings should be restored and/or additional weighting provided for districts to flexibly support critical positions. The addition of new positions over the last few years, such as mental health counselors, work-based learning coordinators and school resource officers, demonstrates the value of continued sharing incentives for both efficiency and student opportunity. With recent significant pressures on schools for technology data protection and cybersecurity, an additional position of technology director should generate supplementary weighting within this program. Some positions, such as those to address mental health or school safety, should be exempted from the cap (following the 2024 precedent, which exempted work-based learning coordinators from the cap).

Local School Board Authority: locally elected leaders closest to the community are in the best position to determine the interests of students, staff, district and stakeholders. District leaders need maximum flexibility to provide a great education to all students. The Legislature, the Executive Branch and the courts should follow Iowa Code 274.3 and liberally construe laws and regulations in deference to local control. Additionally, new state programs or mandates should be given adequate time to study, plan and implement. RSAI supports changes to the school start date which would restore local decision-making to schools and communities.

Formula Equity: resurrect and continue investments in formula equity, closing the \$140 state and district per pupil gap within ten years. Inequities in the formula, based on no longer relevant historical spending patterns over 40 years ago, must be corrected to support resources for all Iowa students.

Bond Issue Dates: the restriction of bond elections to one annual date spikes the demand for providers, architects, bonders, and construction labor, while extending the time of completion, all increasing costs to taxpayers. Since bond issues are approved by a supermajority of voters (60% +1), rather than a simple majority (50% +1), school districts should be given options of multiple election dates yearly.

Area Education Agencies: Iowa's rural schools are critically reliant on Iowa's Area Education Agencies (AEAs), not only for special education services to students and training and support to staff, but also for instructional and media services. AEAs have provided rural school specialists to meet student needs or assist staff with the curriculum and materials necessary for student learning that would not otherwise be available or affordable. In addition, the economies of scale of the AEAs provide savings that schools would not otherwise be able to achieve. In addition to their central role of serving students with disabilities, the AEAs provide many needed services for schools, just to name a few: emergency support when a district loses a superintendent or school business official mid-year, virtual learning content, the printing of materials at affordable fees, training when districts undertake new instructional math or literacy initiatives, crisis supports and mental health services, etc. The Legislature should work closely with schools and AEAs in updating expectations and changing the funding or structure of AEA services in order to fully understand the impact on students and schools. Timelines to implement changes must allow for thoughtful planning and reasonable transitions.