**RSAI 2021 Legislative Priorities & Status**

The following **2021 Legislative Priorities** originated as key priority issues during the 2020 Summer RSAI Regional meetings. The Legislative Group reviewed and refined the Regional meeting activity, then submitted this language to the RSAI members at the Annual Meeting. The members at the Annual Meeting approved the following slate of priorities on Oct. 21, 2020. The RSAI 2021 Annual Meeting is scheduled for Oct. 26, 2021, at the FFA Enrichment Center, DMACC Ankeny Campus, 4:30 p.m., including a working dinner, where the members will set the 2022 Legislative Session Priorities. See the RSAI website meeting tab for more information: <http://www.rsaia.org/>

**Key:**

Mission Accomplished



Some Action, but More is Needed



No Progress Made

Status of this year’s activity is summarized:

**Adequate School Resources:** RSAI supports adequate base funding.The increased per pupil cost known as SSA is especially critical to rural students due to distance from school/opportunities, economies of scale, mandates, the need for AEA support, and the ability to attract and retain staff. Rural schools depend on an investment of meaningful new resources to prepare students for a successful future. COVID-19 experience has created additional financial burdens for connectivity, staffing, social distancing practices, virtual curriculum and protective equipment, while potentially diverting resources away from the district due to open enrollment or home school choices which may be temporary. The rate of increase in SSA should be no lower than anticipated growth in state revenue (adjusted for legislated tax cuts), but not lower than 3.75% in FY 2022 regardless of estimated revenues due to abundant FY 2020 state surplus, should keep up with other economic factors such as personal income or state gross domestic product over the long term, should maintain a balance of state and local property taxes, provide predictability, and be set timely to assure adequate notice for budget planning and staffing.

**Formula and Transportation Equity:** RSAI supports formula and transportation equity.The Legislature should continue the commitment to close the $155 gap between the state and district cost per pupil within ten years and continue transportation equity support, bringing down all districts to no more than the state average per pupil transportation cost, without requiring burdensome reporting requirements from school districts.

**Priority Action:** [**SF 269**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf269) **School Funding** set the SSA rate set at 2.4%, for both regular program district cost and categorical supplements, which is the second highest in 12 years, yet still below the cost increases that schools typically experience. The bill also increased the base to promote formula equity by $10 per student (either more spending authority or property tax relief for school districts.) The bill continued property tax replacement by which the state assumes what would otherwise be a property tax increase due to the state cost per pupil increase. The bill also appropriated additional funds for transportation equity to reimburse all school districts for transportation costs above the state average. The House passed the bill 56-36, Senate passed it 31-18. Governor Reynolds signed it on Feb. 23, 2021, just a few days past the statutory deadline for enacting school aid within 30 days of the release of the Governor’s budget.

The total cost to the state of school aid and transportation and formula equity, however, after enactment of the Standings Appropriations bill which cut the AEAs by $15 million, was $28 million, well below the average state increase of $95 million experienced over the last decade. Additionally, the House, Senate, and Governor did not come to consensus on HF 532 which would have provided an additional $27 million for COVID-19 pandemic costs, distributed based on students served at school (not virtually) during the first semester of the 2020-21 school year.

***RSAI opposed this bill, since the 2.4% and total funding provided to public schools was below what was requested by Rural School Advocates of Iowa members.***

**Assessing and Addressing Staff/Student Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health:** RSAI supports access to and funding for mental health services for children and supports for staff. July 1, 2020 Return-to-Learn Plans required school leaders to determine how to meet an increased demand for social emotional supports anticipated due to school closure. RSAI thanks the Legislature and Governor for addressing telehealth services at school without creating an undue administrative burden for schools and the addition of a social worker position to operational sharing. Despite these advances, our educators are neither prepared nor qualified to become providers of mental health services for children. Iowa needs to address a shortage of qualified mental health professionals and provide resources over the next two years for local districts to determine how best to train school staff based on a local assessment of need and consideration of local community tools and capacity to collaborate for a collective solution.

* **Priority Action:** [**SF 2360**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=sf2360) in 2020 Classroom Management/Therapeutic Classrooms mirrors federal law in Least Restrictive Environment and sets up a grant process for additional therapeutic classrooms. Funding of $2.1 million to implement these classrooms was included in HF 868 Education Appropriations. RSAI supported this bill and subsequent appropriation.
* Funding to AEAs for mental health training and student supports and services was increased to $3.2 million, also included in [HF 868](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf868). Of that, $83,936 goes to DE to collaborate with a statewide nonprofit health care organization a children’s grief and loss rural pilot program. The program is to submit a report about expenditures and outcomes by Sept. 30, 2022. RSAI supported this provision.
* [**SF 619**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=sf619) **Tax Omnib**us included policy language requiring parity for insurance payments for telehealth services and state funds to reduce property taxes which currently fund Iowa’s mental health system. RSAI supported this provision, although registered opposed to the bill that provided significant tax relief which will challenge the ability of future legislatures to adequately fund public schools.
* [**HF 868**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf868) **Education Appropriations** also included policy language for mental health professionals with a statement of professional recognition from the Board of Education Examiners (BOEE) to qualify for Operational Sharing Incentives. RSAI supported this provision.

**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 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.

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* **Priority Action:** Several ideas moved forward to continue to build flexibility in staffing. Although we expect staff shortages, especially in rural areas to continue, this track record of expanded flexibility is celebrated today. There is still, however, work to be done.
* [**HF 2627**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=hf2627) **Licensure Reciprocity:** this bill was enacted in the 2020 Session. The bill requires reciprocity with other states for applicants with 1 year of experience. BOEE is in the process of implementing this statute, which will apply to teachers, administrators, and other licensed staff positively impacting the ability of Iowa schools to recruit from other states. RSAI supported this provision in the 2020 Session.
* [**SF 466**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=sf466) **Occupational Therapists:** this bill expands the list of providers whichallowed to provide concussion services for extracurricular events. RSAI supported this bill.
* [**SF 532**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=sf532) **Licensed Behavior Therapists and Mental Health Professionals:** this bill requires the BOEE to create aStatement of Professional Recognition for these positions. RSAI supported this bill.
* [**HF 675**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf675) **Substitute Authorization:** this bill carries forward the flexibility that Governor Reynolds provided to school districts during the pandemic public health state of emergency declarations, allowing additional flexibility for substitute teachers. It allows an AA degree for substitutes or 60 hours of post-secondary credit and a process to extend beyond a 10-day assignment to one classroom under certain circumstances. RSAI supported this bill.
* [**HF 770**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf770) **Professional Development CEU’s:** this bill allows specified PD to count for ½ of required continuing education units (CEUs,) required for licensure renewal. The BOEE is required to allow either work on individual PD plan or courses offered by BOEE approved provider (AEAs, MISIC, etc.) to count for this credit. RSAI supported this bill.

***Funding Footnote:*** *staff shortages will continue if adequate funding for education is not restored. Schools compete for labor in Iowa’s strong economy. As private sector and other employers can offer competitive benefits packages and higher pay than what schools can provide, school staff will continue to be in short supply.*

**Opportunity Equity:** RSAI supports resources for at-risk students. Resources should be based on need, such as the percentage of students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), in addition to enrollment of the district. The current disparity in dropout prevention capacity, (some districts held to 2.5% and others allowed to access up to 5% of regular program district cost) is arbitrary, based on history no longer relevant to supporting student needs. All school boards should be able to realize the full 5% dropout prevention funding. The formula must further recognize the disproportionate cost of providing equal educational opportunities to low-income students. School districts should be granted spending authority for FRPL eligible students’ fees mandated to be waived by state and federal law. The COVID-19 experience has also shown us glaring differences among student home support. This includes both the ability to engage in learning based on lack of internet connectivity, as well as parents not being able to stay home to support required continuous learning because of work requirements to support their families. Experts anticipate a COVID-19 ripple effect which will increase achievement gaps. RSAI supports full attention to and implementation of the December 2019 School Finance Interim Committee recommendation to study the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, including other states’ formulas that provide resources for students from low-income families which are showing successful student achievement outcomes for at-risk students. [HF 2490](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=hf2490) Poverty Weighting Studywas approved with strong bi-partisan support in the House Education Committee in the 2020 Session serves as a good starting point for continued conversation.



* **Priority Action:** Despite the School Finance Interim Committee recommending and the House Education Committee approving a bill, [**HF 2490**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=88&ba=hf2490), the study of the impact of poverty on education and funding formula options to meet the needs of students did not advance out of House Appropriations Committee in 2020. No bill was moved forward in either the House or Senate in 2021, taking a step backwards in the policy discussions.
* FYI: Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the poverty level are eligible for free lunch and those with income from 130-185% are eligible for reduced lunch.

**Sharing Incentives and Efficiencies:** RSAI supports extension of sharing and efficiency incentives.Rural students benefit from opportunities to achieve efficiencies, share capacity to operate, and redirect resources to educational programs. The 2019 addition of a licensed social worker position to qualify for operational sharing incentives is appreciated. RSAI supports additional critical school staff, such as additional mental health professionals, school safety personnel and work-based learning coordinators. Additional positions are welcomed, but the cap of 21 students should be increased to allow all districts to access any new flexibility. Whole Grade Sharing, Reorganization, and Operational Sharing Incentives should be extended.



**Priority Action:** Several proposals were introduced and some enacted that expand positions for sharing incentives, but compromises on the weighting offset what would otherwise be considered a solid win for rural schools:

[**HF 847**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf847) **Flexibility/Education Provisions** adds a work-based learning coordinator position for operational sharing at 3 student weighting and adds a special education director position at 3 student weighting. RSAI supported this provision.

[**HF 868**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf868) **Education Appropriations** adds a mental health professional who holds SPR issued by the BOEE as an allowable operational sharing position at 3.0 student weighting. RSAI supported this provision by was registered as undecided on the bill which did many other things, too.

However, HF 847 also lowered all 3-student weighted positions to 2 and all 5 student-weighted positions to 4, for the remaining three years of the program (FY 2022-24), which first impacts school budgets in the 2022-23 school year. Two other bills, [SF 156](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SF%20156) which would have added an information technology position to operational sharing and [SF 74](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SF%2074) which would have added a School Resources Officer position, both died in Senate Committees. RSAI has concerns about lowering the weightings and supported the other two bills which remained in committees at the close of the 2021 Session.

**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 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 day care, 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 which should be 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.

**Priority Action:** **HF 868 Education Appropriations** allows districts with increased PK enrollment on October 1, 2021 compared to Oct. 1, 2020 to apply to the School Budget Review Committee (SBRC) for spending authority for the increased enrollment at the 0.5 PK weighting. The SBRC will automatically grant the spending authority if the PK ending balance for the prior year is less than 25%. The SBRC will allow a request and appearance to explain why additional spending authority is necessary if the ending balance is greater than 25%. The intent is that the Governor’s Education Emergency Recovery (GEERs) federal funding will over the costs of the spending authority. If federal funds are insufficient to cover the demand, the SBRC is required to prorate the amount. This language was originally in HF 532 Qualified Instructional Supplement which died on the Senate Calendar, thus was added to the appropriations bill late in the Session. RSAI supported this provision.

Note about COVID-19 Impact: PK enrollments fell in the Fall 2020. PK does not have an on-time funding component or budget guarantee, so the Oct. 1, 2021 PK budget will be based on the Oct. 1, 2020 enrollment count. DE guidance prohibits school districts from using general fund for PK expansion. Note: Federal ESSER or ARP funds could be used for PK if funding from HF 868 process is not sufficient.

[HF 318](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf318) would have allowed districts to serve and count young 5-year-olds in PK, was approved by the full House, Senate Education Committee and Senate Appropriations Committee, but died on the Senate Calendar. This bill remains alive for consideration in the 2021 Session. RSAI supports this bill.

No bills were discussed or moved forward regarding 1.0 weighting (rather than 0.5 weighting) for full-day preschool school, for either limited populations such as ELL students or students from low-income families, or for preschool in general.

**School Safety:** RSAI supports school safety investments. Rural schools need the resources, training and support necessary for Iowa student and staff safety at school, including additional funding for security personnel and training to protect against emergency situations presenting harm. For rural schools in particular, distance from emergency support compounds an already stressed situation lacking sufficient resources to fully train staff and provide security supports.

**Priority Action:** although bills were proposed regarding safety at school, no action made it to the Governor’s desk. [SF 74](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SF%2074) would have added a School Resource Officer position to operational sharing, but did not advance out of the Senate Education Committee.

[SF 258, which](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=sf258) would have allowed an increase in Instructional Support Levy (ISL) funding for the costs of a School Resource Officer (SRO) position, was approved by Senate Education Committee, but did not move forward out of the Ways and Means Committee. RSAI was registered in support of these two bills. Identical “Safe and Sound at School” bills, authored by the Department of Public Safety, were introduced in both chambers [SSB 1070](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SSB%201070) and [HF 585.](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=HF%20585&ga=89)  These proposals would have set up a 24-hour anonymous hotline for tips, managed by the DPS, but would have created some expectations for schools to monitor and address complaints without any additional funding. RSAI opposed [SSB 1070](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SSB%201070) and [HF 585.](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=HF%20585&ga=89) .

**Bonding Capacity**: RSAI supports a simple majority, 50% plus 1, voter approval for school bond issues. Additionally, RSAI supports the 5% calculation of property valuation which limits a district’s bonding capacity to be limited to property tax debt issues and not include debt backed by the school infrastructure state sales tax revenues.



[SF 568](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=sf568) Elections Omnibus: this bill originally required entities requesting the public measure on a special election date (not the school board election in November) to mail notifications to all households that include a registered voter eligible to vote on the public measure. The notification must include 1) Election date. 2) Hours during which the polls will be open. 3) Information on finding the voter’s polling place. 4) Internet site and telephone number of the county commissioner of elections. 5) Internet site of the State commissioner of elections. RSAI was opposed to these provisions, which were removed from the bill in a late amendment in the process. No other legislation to address bonding capacity was advanced.

**Internet Connectivity and Access:** RSAI supports continued state and federal efforts at expanding access to high-speed internet geographically to all Iowans for student and staff access to critically needed information. Access to virtual learning and information is required for rural students to fully experience quality STEM programs. The future of rural quality of life, entrepreneurship and access to a whole host of critical services depend on citizen access to high-speed internet. RSAI supports incentives, investments, and creative solutions to close the technology gap for all students, their families, and businesses and community members in rural Iowa. Lack of sufficient income should not be a barrier to internet access.



[**HF 867**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf867) **Administration and Regulation Appropriations** included $100 million to the Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant Fund. Governor Reynolds signed [**HF 848**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf848) which creates a statutory framework for the grants, on April 28. Governor Reynolds made increasing upload and internet speeds in rural Iowa a priority for the session and asked for $150 million in funding for broadband grants in the first year, and $450 million over three years. On signing the bill, Governor Reynolds said:

*“This bill provides a historic $100 million investment in broadband that will transform our infrastructure into a powerful network, enabling fast, high-quality connectivity statewide and opening doors to new opportunities for communities large and small. I want to thank the Legislature for their commitment to funding the broadband grant program and to the providers for their dedication to this initiative.”*

RSAI supported the policy bill, HF 848, and we are grateful for the down-payment appropriation for it, which was the above referenced provision in HF 867.

**Remote Learning and Instructional Time:** RSAI supports the ability for local leaders to determine when school should close, for emergency situations and safety, including but not limited to weather cancellations, emergency infrastructure conditions, or for purposes of public health, as long as engagement in virtual learning opportunities is required for students and staff and needs of all students are anticipated and met. Under such conditions, instructional time delivered during the closure counts toward minimum instructional days or hours and is not required to be made up at the end of the school year.

* **Priority Action:** The Governor’s interpretation and implementation of SF 2310 Return to Learn Plans from the 2020 Session inserted steps of state approval into the process of pandemic decision-making, after school districts had submitted their original RTL plans, which usurped local control. RSAI advocated for allowing school boards to make the best decision for their districts.
* [SF 160](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SF%20160) **Instructional Time** was signed by the Governor Jan. 29. This bill required schools to offer parents an option for 100% in-person learning beginning Feb. 15. The option for 100% virtual or hybrid less than 50% was still allowed by waiver from the DE due to COVID outbreak after Feb. 15 and additional metrics for the DE to consider a waiver included shortage of key staff (substitute teachers, bus drivers and food service workers). RSAI was registered as undecided on SF 160.
* [SF 467](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=SF%20467) **On line Learning and Snow Days,** was approved in the Senate but died the House Education Committee. The online learning flexibility provisions are moving forward with DE rulemaking. Note: There is no bill or statute requiring school districts to offer 100% virtual option to parents/students, which respects the local control of school districts to determine what is best for their communities. However, the authority for a local school board to allow up to five virtual learning days rather than make-up days at the end of the school year due to emergency or inclement weather did not move forward. This bill remains in the House Education Committee for consideration in the 2022 Session. RSAI supported SF 467.

**Local School Board Authority:** RSAI believes that those locally elected leaders closest to the community care most about constituents impacted by their decision making and are in the best position to determine the best interest of students, staff and stakeholders. In education policy, one size does not fit all school districts, classrooms or students. District leaders need maximum flexibility to provide a great education to all students. The state role is to define what outcomes are necessary for all students, leaving flexibility to schools in expenditures and policy to best determine how to deliver those intended outcomes. Statutory Home Rule, articulated in Iowa Code 274.3, gives locally elected school boards broad and implied authority. The Legislature, the Governor/executive branch and the courts should follow the law and liberally construe the Iowa Code and legislation to effectuate local control.

* ****[**HF 847**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf847) **Mandate Prohibiting Local Mask Mandates:** an amendment on the final day of session to HF 847included a last minute amendment prohibiting schools (and cities and counties) from requiring masks unless it was otherwise required by law. The amendment was filed to the bill on Wed., May 19, debated and approved in both the House and Senate, and the Governor signed the bill just after midnight. School leaders awoke on Thursday morning to changed law, confusion about CDC federal requirements on buses, and general disruption of processes that had been running smoothly. The process of amendment to signage in only a few hours does not respect the input of school leaders or local control decisions made to balance competing needs in communities and schools. RSAI opposed this provision but was registered as undecided on the bill.

[**HF 847**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf847) **Education Flexibility Provisions:** this bill included a new flexibility student and school support (FS3) program allowing school districts to define programs of innovation or targeted toward student needs, allowing waiver of regulations. The bill also expands the ability to transfer ending categorical fund balances for the flexibility account to include teacher leadership and compensation (TLC) ending balances. RSAI supported these provisions which expanded district flexibility for student centered programs, but was registered as undecided on the bill.

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