

# SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH LEGISLATORS



## GENERAL TIPS

- If you can, share the issue areas, list of priorities and even questions ahead of the forum or discussion. Don't try to put someone on the spot.
- Keep questions balanced and nonpartisan.
- Add an element of local impact – what does your data or students' experience suggest?
- These questions are suggestions (not scripts), so feel free to edit or rewrite so the question fits your concerns, local issues and priorities.
- Listen to the answers with an open mind and determine what follow-up is required; provide more information, schedule another meeting on just a single issue, invite others to the conversation.
- Circle back with your RSAI Professional Advocates to debrief and plan next steps.
- Remember to always start and end with a thank you.

## QUESTIONS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

(aka, learn more about your legislators, whether they are new or just new to you)

1. What is the best way to reach you during the legislative session? Do you prefer email, text, cell phone or phone message to the Statehouse switchboard? What about when you are at home or the legislature is not in session?
2. What is your vision for education?
3. What experiences from your own education, and those of your family's involvement in school, frame your educational priorities today?
4. How important is public education to the success of families, business and our community?
5. Why did you agree to run for office and what drives you to keep representing the people in our school district?
6. How do you feel about the balance of decision-making? How much should come from the state and how much be decided at the local level?

## QUESTIONS ON ISSUES

For returning legislators, include a thank you for policy progress in several of these areas throughout the conversation. See the successes list for the 2022 Session posted here: [2022 RSAI Legislative Session Successes](#).

For new candidates, it is more about testing the waters to learn about their position and determining if they need more background and information about the issue.

1. In September, the Governor's press release indicated that Iowa finished FY 2022 with about \$3.8 Billion in the bank (surplus, economic emergency fund and taxpayer trust fund combined). Schools, however, received a 2.5% increase per pupil last year and the Senate failed to pass a House bill to provide an additional \$19 million for inflationary costs. As the Iowa Economy and competitive hiring market continue to be strong, schools are struggling

to fill positions (teachers and noninstructional staff). **Will you commit to setting the SSA rate within the first 30 days of the session and for an amount that keeps up with the basic cost of the business of education?** (RSAI asked for 3.75% in FY 2023 based on the significant budget surplus ending FY 2021. Legislature set 2.5% for FY 2023 despite 8-9% inflation. RSAI draft language for FY 2024 indicates that a 10% increase in SSA would be a down payment on restoring Iowa to number 1 in the nation.) See that draft priority and others on the RSAI Annual Meeting tab here: <https://www.rsaia.org/annual-meeting.html>

2. **Iowa has a worker shortage.** It's been evident in the education field for years, although the pandemic created additional stress. In our district \_\_\_\_\_. Iowa DE compiles a list of [shortage area positions](#), which for 2022-23 includes all science, all math, all social studies, family consumer science, agriculture, industrial technology, business, all world languages, English-as-a-second language, special education, school counselors and teacher librarians, music, early childhood and art. Almost all districts in Iowa are struggling to find bus drivers, paraprofessionals, office staff, and food service workers. Nearly all districts face a shortage of substitutes. The 2022-23 school year started off with unprecedented vacancies at an alarming rate. Some of this is due to low increases in SSA combined with declining enrollment, as schools lack the resource to pay a competitive wage with the private sector. Some may be due to the increasingly negative rhetoric about teachers and public schools. **What will you do to turn the tide, so we can recruit more people into education and restore the respect that the profession deserves?**
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on many parts of our economy and our society, including student learning and school responses. Federal pandemic funds, which are to be spent over three years through Sept. 2024, have helped, but those were distributed based on census tract poverty, with not every district receiving commensurate support. **What discussions have you had with other legislators about how to adjust next year's budget for the continued impacts of the pandemic?**
4. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch is a measure of poverty used in school policy-making. In 2001, 27% of Iowa students were eligible for FRPL. Today, that percentage has grown to over 40%, which means almost 200,000 students in the 2021-22 school year were living and learning in low-income environments. Not all poverty is equal, but poverty is a factor in adverse childhood experiences, mental health and access to services, parental capacity for support, and access to instructional materials and enriching experiences. For many students in low-income families, schools must provide them with the resources and supports they need. Iowa is one of the small minority of states without a poverty factor in our funding formula. Our dropout prevention local funding is based on enrollment rather than the percentage of students at-risk or from low-income households. The cap on Dropout Prevention is based on an old formula, somewhere between 2.5% and 5% of regular program district cost. Some districts at the lower cap have more low-income students today. **Will you work with us to change Iowa's formula more in alignment with what other states do to provide resources for their**

**neediest students? Are you committed to more equitable spending authority for Dropout prevention?**

5. The Legislature and Governor have worked over the last five years to include transportation expenditure reimbursement in the formula and to make progress on the inequity in the district cost per pupil and state cost per pupil. There is still a gap of \$140 per student remaining in the formula. We appreciate the commitment to close that gap by \$5 last session and are asking for a continued commitment to work on that over the next several years. **Will you support continuing the formula equity effort at an increased per pupil amount, so that we can eliminate this gap entirely over the next 8 years?**
6. In addition to adequate funding, schools need some flexibility in staffing and creative solutions. The 2022 session increased the IPERS earnings threshold to help bring retirees back into shortage area positions and eliminated the need to serve one year in a position in another state for licensure reciprocity. SF 2377 Teacher Recruitment Omnibus would have allowed school districts to use Management Fund for teacher recruitment costs and included a teacher intern license to help school districts provide “grow-your-own” teaching recruitment programs. It was approved in the Senate but did not advance in the House. **What solutions have you been discussing to address the staff and educator shortage for Iowa schools, and can you commit to support SF 2377 in the 2023 Session?**
7. Just like you, local school board members are elected to represent the interests of constituents, taxpayers and students in our district. Iowa Code 274.3 was amended in the 2017 Session to require a liberal interpretation of the Iowa Code to effectuate the purposes of local control, trusting school board members to make the best decisions on behalf of their students, parents, staff and communities. **Do you agree with this philosophy of local control, and will you work to consider the importance of local control in your decisions at the statehouse?**
8. The Legislature has required the state to assume more of the education funding formula costs over time, bearing more of the cost of educating students as compared to the national average. Meanwhile, national comparisons show the contribution of Iowa local funding well below the national average. Historic income tax cuts made in the 2022 Session are estimated to reduce state General Fund revenue by over \$1.8 billion annually when phased in (likely impacted budgets for 2027 and 2028). **What tax policy decisions will be considered this year to ensure stable and adequate state funding for education over the long haul? How will you work to keep a reasonable mix of state and local funding for education?**
9. Iowa was ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the nation in School Choice by the conservative Heritage Foundation’s Freedom Report Card based on policies in place before recent choice expansions. Recent policies include supporting homeschool (eligibility for tuition and textbook tax credit) and private school (doubling the above tax credit plus expansion of School Tuition Organization scholarship caps to \$20 million) and a new charter school law in 2021. In the 2022 Session, the deadline to open enroll into a neighboring public school

was eliminated. Many other states have created vouchers or education savings accounts to provide more access to private schools, sometimes for certain populations (students with disabilities or low-income families), but typically requiring private schools who accept the funds to accept all students, submit to state testing and accounting oversight. **Do you think that Iowa’s current extensive open enrollment policy and state funding support for tax credits and scholarship tuition for homeschool and private school are enough school choice? If not, what eligibility criteria, accountability and oversight policies should be part of the discussion? Lastly, how can the state adequately fund two educational systems when funding for public schools has been a challenge and tax cut impacts are looming?**

Additional information about school choice:

- Des Moines Register reporting on the Iowa Poll, August 22, 2022: *“While majorities of Iowans see education as critical, fewer see ‘school choice’ as such, according to the recent Iowa Poll. Only 30% of Iowans, including just 35% of Republicans, said that issue was critical to them personally.”* <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2022/08/22/education-key-iowa-governors-race-heres-what-candidates-saying/10203180002/>
- Another Des Moines Register Poll, August 12, 2022, shows the majority of Iowans oppose Governor Reynolds’ ESA Plan, too: *“Similarly, a 60% majority of Iowans oppose Reynolds’ proposed policy to create state-funded scholarships for students to attend private schools.”* <https://iowastartingline.com/2022/08/12/poll-large-majority-of-iowans-oppose-reynolds-private-school-voucher-plan/>