



## **RSAI 2026 Legislative Priorities (Draft from Legislative Committee for Annual Meeting)**

**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 2026-27 school year and requires a consistent and sustainable commitment.

**Rural Access to AEA Services:** Due to changes in economy of scale and AEA staffing challenges, rural schools may face both unaffordable costs and growing inequities in access to essential services. Education services such as crisis support, instructional materials, and professional development, along with media services such as software, technical equipment, and virtual libraries—once provided by AEAs—may now come at prices rural districts cannot sustain. Without sufficient increases in SSA to cover these new expenses, and with fewer dollars flowing to AEAs, rural students and staff risk losing access to necessary support and services, creating a widening gap in educational opportunities and resources.

**Staff Shortages:** In both the short and long term, policies based on trust that 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:

**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.

**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. Local districts should have the authority to determine what level or combination of programming is best for their community based on student needs and staff and facility capacity.

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 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.

**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.

New state programs or mandates should be given adequate time to study, plan and implement. Local leaders have been required to redirect energy away from established plans for student outcomes and instructional work to implement mandates prior to support, administrative rules, and guidance from the state, being forced to make big changes after an immediate effective date, only to revisit the details down the road. Thoughtful timelines based on input from schools, respecting the school cycle, would allow rural school leaders to be willing partners and advocates for state-driven improvements.

Additionally, local school boards should be given flexibility to determine when best to start school based on student and community needs.

**Public School Priority:** As Iowa public schools are the first choice of over 90% of Iowa families, they must be adequately funded and supported by the State, including adequate funding and needed flexibility.

1) RSAI supports the following changes to Education Savings Accounts (ESA) policy and mandates on public schools to support nonpublic schools and students.

- a. Local school districts should receive all categorical funds based on the ESA student count. Those funds should be allowed for any use directed by the school board to best meet the needs of students enrolled in the public school.
- b. Public schools should be relieved of the mandate to reimburse private school parents or provide transportation for private schools.
- c. Private school students returning to public school after the October enrollment count date should be funded in a timely manner.
- d. ESA applications should be submitted by the March 1 open enrollment deadline and approved timely to inform both public and private schools for staff and budget planning.

2) ESAs should not be expanded to homeschool students or nonaccredited private schools. The state should require a rigorous accreditation process to maintain high standards of education for Iowa students enrolled in private schools.

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 ESAs should be subject to an audit and financial review to ensure taxpayer dollars 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. The legislature should continue to address the shortage of mental health professionals statewide and to 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.

**Whole Grade Sharing & Reorganization Incentives:** Iowa rural districts are likely to experience another round of consolidation given trends in declining enrollment, increased accreditation expectations and low funding. Whole Grade Sharing and Reorganization incentives, expired last 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 experience for students. These incentives should be extended for at least ten years.

**Operational Sharing Incentives:** Operational Sharing Incentives should continue and be increased. Weightings should be sufficient to encourage and support sharing opportunities, with a 3-student weighting at a minimum per position. 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, including school resource officers, and expanded sharing options with AEA staff to replace services stressed by economics of scale and AEA restructuring, should be exempted from the cap.

**Formula Equity:** Investments in formula equity should continue, closing the \$135 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.

**(New priority) Property Tax Reform:** RSAI supports the following principles to guide property tax legislation: 1) preserve state general fund capacity to adequately fund lowans' priorities including a quality public education for all children, 2) retain local school board and voter authority to fund infrastructure, technology and school safety via PPEL, SAVE and Debt levies, 3) provide local school board authority to continue pre-reform voter-approved amounts (levies and total dollars anticipated) through transition periods, and 4) move toward a more transparent system, require clear and simple property tax statements, remove rollbacks and provide clearly understood property valuations and TIF impacts on taxpayers.

The Tax Foundation's Study, "Securing Property Tax Relief in Iowa," 2025, supports some of Iowa's proposed legislation to limit levies rather than assessments, phaseout of existing rollbacks, excluding new property in calculating limits on the new mill levy, and incorporating voter overrides from the 2023 reforms. These experts also advise Iowa to:

1. incorporate inflation into the levy limit (not a fixed 2% growth limit, for example),
2. tie future limitations to legal taxing authority maximums and not to actual tax revenue in the prior year, "levy limits should neither force nor inhibit lower taxes by local governments", and
3. future limits should be recession proof (tie to a baseline rather than a lower valuation if property values fall).

The study also recommends local governing bodies should be allowed to ask voters to approve increases above the limit. "These voter overrides force the increase to be a conscious choice, not one implemented merely through valuation growth."

Although RSAI is not enthusiastic about management fund limits, preferring local control, in the event of legislation limiting school management fund levies based on prior year expenditures, RSAI supports SBRC authority to review local district situations, allowing SBRC to grant a reasonable exception. If a limitation is set, there must be a backstop process for a school district to justify the need for the management fund levy in the next budget year.

Regarding debt levies and bond issues, 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. Bond issues should be approved by a simple majority of voters (50% +1), rather than a super majority (60% +1), school districts should be given options of multiple election dates yearly, and only one vote should be required regardless of the levy amount, up to the \$4.05 maximum levy.