## **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 Legislative Advocate 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.

For new legislators, 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. We appreciate the legislature keeping its promise by not cutting education funding last year despite the pandemic. Thank you for keeping the 2.3% SSA increase in place, despite the uncertainty you faced regarding the pandemic’s impact on state revenues. In the last decade, the cost per pupil in the funding formula has not kept pace with the growth in our Iowa economy or with the cost of doing the business of school. The 2.4% per pupil increase set for the 2021-22 school year also did not keep pace with cost increases that schools experienced. Now that state revenues have continued to grow, despite the pandemic, are you prepared to set an SSA rate that keeps up with education costs? **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 2022 based on the significant budget surplus ending FY 2020. Legislature set 2.4% for FY 2022.)*
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on many parts of our economy and our society. The Oct. 2, 2020 statewide enrollment dropped by almost 6,000 students compared to the fall of 2019, most likely as parents delayed the start of school for 4 and 5 year olds, but also as some families may have temporarily relocated due to job loss or child care or safety issues. Our district’s enrollment is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ compared to the prior year. We expect those students to return this fall, but next year’s budget is based on this year’s enrollment count (Oct. 1). The highest SSA rate possible will keep the most districts off budget guarantee and help position us to serve returning students. **What discussions have you had with other legislators about how to adjust next year’s budget for the COVID enrollment dip and expected recovery?**
3. Preschool is a key investment, with studies showing a return of $17 for every $1 invested in quality PK. School budgets for PK do not have enrollment swing protections like budget guarantee or on-time spending authority for an increased enrollment. Across the country, school districts have seen a big drop in PK enrollment (kindergarten enrollments were down about 16% across the country, PK drops were likely even larger). In our district, PK enrollment on Oct 1 declined by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for including a process to fund PK enrollment growth this fall in the Education Appropriations bill HF 868 in the 2020 Session. The increase in modified supplement amount for PK enrollment growth is contingent on funding, presumably from the Governor’s federal GEERS funding. **If those funds are not sufficient to cover the additional PK students that we are serving on October 1, 2021, will you support additional funds so our districts can cover the costs of staff for a larger class? Additionally, do you support local flexibility to serve and count some 5-year-olds in PK to best serve students who may not have had a PK experience?**
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 students were eligible for FRPL. Today, that percentage has grown to 41.8%, which means 200,207 students in the 2020-21 school year, were living and learning in low-income environments. Not all poverty is equal, but Iowa educators can tell you that 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 without which, many of our students are not likely to live up to their full capacity, that is, unless schools provide them with the resources and supports they need. Iowa is one of small minority of states that don’t have a poverty factor in our 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. The 2020 Legislative Session proposed a bill, HF 2490 Poverty Weighting Study, which was approved with strong bipartisan support in the House Education Committee that year and would serve as a good starting point for continued conversation. No legislation moved forward in the 2021 Session on this issue. **Will you work with us to study the formula and what other states do to provide resources for their neediest students?**
5. Thank you so much for your work over the last four years to include transportation expenditure reimbursement in the formula and for making progress on the inequity in the district cost per pupil and state cost per pupil. There is a gap of $145 per student remaining in the formula. We appreciate your commitment to close that gap by $10 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. Iowa has a worker shortage. It’s been evident in the education field for years. COVID-19 has made it worse. In our district \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Iowa DE compiles a list, which for 2020-21 included physics, family consumer science, agriculture, industrial technology, business, all world languages, all science, English-as-a-second language, special education, school counselors and teacher librarians. Rural school leaders would add math, music, and even elementary teacher applicants in short supply. 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 2021-22 school year is starting 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 early retirements or concerns about the pandemic for some staff. In addition to adequate funding, schools need some flexibility in staffing and some creative solutions, such as a workaround for IPERS to bring retirees back into shortage area positions. **What solutions have you been discussing to address the staff and educator shortage for Iowa schools?**
7. The Iowa State Board of Education had a work session in November 2020 to consider the FAST testing data, which measures reading and math skills of our youngest students, K-3rd grade. There was an 11% drop statewide in reading and math this fall compared to the prior year. They talked about “COVID learning loss”. The largest drop by demographic group was 12% for students from low-income families. Our educators and entire staff have made heroic efforts to connect with students both academically and in support of their social-emotional learning this year through whatever instructional model we could use to preserve safety and social distancing. Yet, we are facing the beginning of the 2021-22 school year knowing that COVID learning loss is significant for students across the spectrum. We have more freshman with F’s in their coursework than ever before and are concerned about our middle-schoolers being on track for high school level coursework. (In our district \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.) Although significant federal funds have been allocated to address this issue, the distribution formula did not help all school districts and students equitably. I have two questions for you; **First, will you support investments to build the capacity for our schools to help remediate the impact of the pandemic on student learning? Secondly, will you commit to the authority of local school boards to determine which programs will work best for their students and communities and not be too prescriptive in the solution, since one size does not fit all in Iowa schools?**
8. There is much thanks to go around regarding learning about and creating a structure for student mental health services. The 2020 Legislative session passed legislation to allow virtual telehealth counseling for students at school. This will be welcome relief for many students and families who used to struggle to get children to needed appointments during the day, which also took lots of time away from school. We also appreciate the work on SF 2360 enacted in 2020 which addresses classroom behavior and sets up a structure for therapeutic classrooms in a pilot program. Thank you for appropriating funds in 2021 to get those pilot projects rolling. We expect that the stress of the pandemic, the economy and social isolation will continue to have ripple effects for students, families and even our school staff over the next year or two. **How important is mental health funding on your list of priorities and what ideas have you discussed with other legislators about how Iowa can address the shortage of mental health providers to ensure all students get the services they need to be successful?**
9. We’ve learned during this last many months that high-speed Internet can be the key to successful collaboration between staff and students or a barrier to even getting on the computer in the first place. Iowa ranks 45th in the country in access to affordable high-speed connections. We appreciate the Governor’s leadership and legislative support to connect the Iowans to quality internet. Our district took steps to connect students and staff virtually, during the times when we are in hybrid or 100% virtual learning, by providing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. These models have actually been very successful for some students and may continue in the future to create educational options that best meet the needs of individual students. But all of that is dependent on a broadband connection, that will also be an economic driver of entrepreneurs, main street businesses, entertainment, and even the way many citizens access government and healthcare services in the future. **Do you support investments to expand Iowans’ access to affordable Internet services?**
10. 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?**
11. The State of Iowa has taken on more of the education funding burden over time. Recent examples include making up for commercial industrial property tax credits or absorbing the cost of SSA that would have otherwise been paid by taxpayers. The extension in the state penny for school infrastructure in 2019 carved out 1/3 of the sales tax revenue for property tax relief over the next three decades. More distant examples include taking over TAG funding, paying for ELL education, or even using the PTER fund to buy-down high property taxes in low valuation districts (like ours.) Meanwhile, despite a relatively strong economy, we are hearing continued discussions about additional tax reform. When those final bills are ready for consideration, they have historically required the state to take on a greater role in funding schools, which has stretched the state’s budget to keep up with school costs. **What tax policy decisions will be considered this year to ensure stable and adequate state funding for education over the long haul?**