## **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 experiences from your own education, and those of your family’s involvement in school, frame your educational priorities today?
2. 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?
3. What is your vision for education?
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?

## **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. **As we turn the corner on the pandemic, 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 is asking for 3.75% in FY 2022 based on the significant budget surplus ending FY 2020.)*
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on many parts of our economy and our society. We are hearing that statewide enrollment may be down by 6,000 or more students compared to the fall of 2019, most likely as parents have 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 next year, 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?**
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 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. **Will you support budget protections for PK so our districts have enough staff for a larger class next year and local flexibility to serve and count some 5-year-olds in PK next year 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 42.2%, which means 205,947 students in the 2019-20 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 doesn’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. Last year’s HF 2490 Poverty Weighting Study was approved with strong bi-partisan support in the House Education Committee in the 2020 Session and would serve as a good starting point for continued conversation. **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 three 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 $155 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 9 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 the goal of diversity in teaching staff that more closely matches student populations. Almost all districts in Iowa are struggling to find bus drivers, paraprofessionals, office staff, and food service workers. 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. 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 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 end of this first semester 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 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.) 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. Schools continue to learn from our experiences in the last 10 months how to provide instruction through different models. We are finding ways to connect students and staff to content virtually, whether that’s through virtual meeting, a phone, videos or materials downloaded onto their computer, or small group connections to each other. As we master this ability, our local school boards are in the best position to determine if virtual days can be held to avoid having to make up days cancelled due to bad weather, school facility emergencies like a broken pipe, or school closings for health safety. **Do you support allowing school boards the authority to determine if virtual days are a tool in their instructional schedule, as long as all students’ needs are met, and that those virtual days are counted toward the instructional time required by the state (1,080 hours or 180 days)?**
9. There is much thanks to go around regarding learning about and creating a structure for student mental health services. Last year’s 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 last session which addresses classroom behavior and sets up a structure for therapeutic classrooms in a pilot program. 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 and ensure all students get the services they need to be successful?**
10. 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 have lack of coverage in rural areas and affordability challenges for low-income Iowans. 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 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?**
11. 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?**
12. 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 seeing anemic revenue growth for the state. **What tax policy decisions will be considered this year to ensure stable and adequate state funding for education over the long haul?**