



Rural School Advocates of Iowa Legislative Priorities for 2024 Session

Status of Legislative Action

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, 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 2024-25 school year and requires a consistent and sustainable commitment. A world-class education would require 10%. A 5% increase would sustain the current status. A 2.5% increase would deliver continued erosion.

Legislative Action re Adequate Resources:

HF 2612 AEs, SSA and TSS set a 2.5% SSA rate, increased teacher salary supplement sufficient to meet new teacher salary minimums, provided \$14 million statewide for hourly staff supplemental pay, and provided school districts with control of education services and media services funds that previously flowed through to AEs.

- Although significant new funds were invested, no progress was made on formula equity.
- With the higher range of TSS per pupil, from a low of \$699 to a high of \$2,852, based on the cost of districts to meet higher teacher salary minimums, additional emphasis on per pupil equity may be needed in the future. There was no money for many districts to address salary compaction, which will occur for many as a result of the two-tiered minimums. The investment of nearly \$73 million to fund teacher salary supplement for FY 2025 is appreciated.
- To sum it up, with the increase in teacher salary supplement and considering all investments in public schools, combined district cost grew by over \$192 million, which is a 3.6% increase compared to FY 2024.
- **HF 2612 AEs, TSS and SSA** included a task force to study nearly everything about special education and AEA services. As of this writing, the task force has not yet been appointed or scheduled a meeting. Many of the provisions of HF 2612 regarding AEs take effect July 1, 2025, so this task force's recommendations could prevent harm or make improvements, if legislation moves all the way through the process.

SF 2368 Charter Schools directed categorical funds to follow students, including PD and EICS, as well as current-year SCPP. This action applied to students enrolled in a charter school or in another district through open enrollment. There are competing views among school districts on whether this action promotes student equity or is a success. RSAI lobbied to exclude the TSS from the funds following students since the calculation in HF 2612 was based on funds needed to meet minimums rather than an equal per pupil calculation. The Legislature and the Governor agreed to omit the TSS as requested.

Staff Shortages: In addition to sufficient SSA, strategies to rebuild Iowa's education workforce must address these areas during an unprecedented staff shortage:

Recruitment: to rebuild the pipeline of interest into education, the Legislature, BOEE and DE must provide additional flexibility for school districts to provide hiring incentives, ongoing investment in CTE programs for high school students to study and experience work in education, provide resources for grow-your-own educators and appropriate certifications including expanded intern licenses, provide means-tested tuition assistance and minimize the economic costs of unpaid student teaching, provide more loan forgiveness, and change the culture of political speech to restore education to a respected profession.

Retention: to slow the out-migration of staff from schools to other professions or retirement, the Legislature, BOEE and DE must provide maximum flexibility to hire staff to deliver great instruction; 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, institute social studies and other content generalist credentials, define a shorter bona fide retirement period for schools to hire retirees, consider tax incentives for teachers, increase state funding for teacher salary supplement, and maintain the commitment to 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. In 2019-20, Iowa ranked 28th in the nation in average teacher pay (including TLC for teacher leaders at the high end) and starting teacher pay was ranked 38th (*source: Learning Policy Institute, Understanding Teacher Compensation State by State Analysis*).

In both the short and long term, legislation, policy, and public support provide improved compensation and benefit options for educators. They must also foster respect for the education profession, which is well deserved, to attract more Iowans into teaching and retain more teachers in Iowa. Only when we are able to do this will Iowa be able to have adequate numbers of quality individuals educating and supporting our children.

Legislative Action re Staff Shortages:

- **SF 2411 Work-based Learning** allows a student participating in a 14-week student teaching experience to be credited between 1 week and 10 weeks for prior work experience as a substitute teacher or a para-educator, including prior experience under the TPRA grant program, under specific conditions.
- **HF 2612 IPERS provisions** allow teachers whose first month of retirement benefits is July 2024 or later, but before July 1, 2027, to return to covered employment as a teacher after receiving one month of retirement benefits.
- **HF 2618 Iowa Literacy Initiative** requires new teachers to take the Foundations in Literacy exam, and requires colleges to report scores, but does not condition the teaching license on successfully passing a target score.
- **HF 255 Teacher Intern License/Program** creates a new pathway to teaching with an on-the-job completion component.

- [SF 2443](#) **Standings Appropriations Teacher Minimums**: more clearly defined 12-years of teaching experience for teacher pay minimums, effectively adding \$5 million to the TSS distribution method.
- [SF 392](#) **Teacher Retention and Recruitment** allows the use of the Management Fund for loan forgiveness and recruitment programs. This bill did not receive additional legislative action in the 2024 Session.
- [HF 2465](#) **AG Classes Offer and Teach Flexibility** provides opportunities to code courses differently to meet offer and teach requirements for math, science, and CTE courses in areas teaching Agriculture.
- [SF 2411](#) **Work-Based Learning** allows students to receive high school credit for work-based learning, even when school is not in session.

Public School Priority: as Iowa public schools will always be the first choice of most Iowa families, they must be adequately funded and supported by the State.

- 1) Education Savings Accounts, as enacted by HF 68 in 2023, require further legislation to minimize the impact on public students and schools.
 - a. Public schools should be relieved of the mandate to reimburse private school parents or provide transportation for private schools.
 - b. Private school students returning to public school after the October enrollment count date should be funded timely (included in the enrollment count and budget for the next year or added to the class action requests for SBRC modified supplemental amount similar to on-time funding spending authority).
 - c. ESA (and open enrollment) applications should be submitted and approved by an annual deadline to inform both public and private schools timely for staff and budget planning.
- 2) ESAs should not be expanded to homeschool students or a weakened accreditation process expanded to more private schools.
- 3) Equity of expectations and regulations should be applied consistently to both public and private schools under an ESA environment.
- 4) Many rural school districts do not have a private school in their community today. In the future, the expansion of private online academies, the pressure for the State to support homeschooling and the profit motive to expand private schools without the corresponding costs of oversight and compliance will create lower economies of scale, compounding the challenge for small rural schools to survive rigorous State accreditation compliance.

Legislative Action re Priority of Public Schools:

- No legislation moved forward related to ESAs specifically. Regarding school choice, the reinstatement of the Open Enrollment March 1 deadline was contained in the Education Appropriations bill, [SF 2435](#).

Opportunity Equity, Increasing Student Needs and Mental Health: resources should be based on at-risk need, in addition to enrollment. All school boards should have the opportunity 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.

Investments in programs for at-risk students prepare them for full participation in the workforce, improve school safety for all students, minimize tax increases to remediate social costs later and improve outcomes for students and families. Students in rural areas are often distanced from services. Iowa must continue to address needed access to funded community mental health services for children and the shortage of mental health professionals statewide. The State should provide resources for local districts to train school staff in mental health first aid and awareness and build community capacity to collaborate for a collective solution to the increasing mental health needs of children.

Legislative Action re Opportunity Equity and Mental Health:

- **HF 2515 Therapist, Counselor or Social Worker Authorization Reciprocity**
- **SF 2435 Education Appropriations** included several items regarding mental health:
 - Allows DE to transfer unencumbered or unobligated funds from the FY 2024 General Fund appropriation for Therapeutic Classroom Transportation Claims Reimbursement to the Therapeutic Classroom Incentive Fund established in Iowa Code section 256.25 before the close of the fiscal year.
 - Maintained \$500,000 appropriation for therapeutic classroom transportation reimbursement
 - Maintained \$2,351,382 appropriation for therapeutic classroom incentive grants.
 - Maintained \$3,383,936 appropriation for AEAs to provide for children's mental health school-based training and support to be used for mental health awareness training for educators and provide mental health services and support for students.
 - Maintained \$520,000 appropriation for deposit in the Mental Health Professional Loan Repayment Program fund. The Program provides for the repayment of qualified loans to non-prescribing mental health practitioners who practice full-time in a service commitment area or teach in Iowa. The annual loan repayment provided to a recipient cannot exceed \$40,000, which is paid in annual installments of \$8,000 towards qualifying loan balances. A recipient is eligible for loan repayment for no more than five consecutive years unless granted a waiver for part-time service.
- **SF 2443 Standing Appropriations:** the legislature continued the practice of delaying the \$10 million standing appropriation for high-needs schools first enacted in the 2014 legislative session.
- Although introduced, bills allowing all districts up to 5% of Regular Program District Cost spending authority for dropout prevention did not progress. See **HF 380**, which did not advance out of House Education, and **SF 246**, which was approved by the Senate Education Committee, but did not progress further. These two bills were introduced in the first year of the biennium.

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 like they do for K-12 (budget guarantee/on-time spending authority). 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.

Legislative Action re Preschool:

Each of these bills received a 3:0 subcommittee passage but did not move forward out of the House Education Committee.

- [HF 2357](#) **PK Instructional Hours** would have required full-day PK for a full 1.0 weighting.
- [HF 297](#) **Funding for Low-Income PK** would have provided a full 1.0 weighting for PK students in families below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Reorganization and Operational Sharing Incentives should be extended. The 21-student cap should be increased to allow access to new flexibility. Weightings should be sufficient to encourage and support sharing opportunities, with a 3-student weighting at a minimum per position. Reductions in weightings should be restored. The addition of new positions over the last few years, such as mental health counselors, work-based learning coordinators and school resource officers, demonstrates the value of continued sharing incentives for both efficiency and student opportunity. Some positions, such as those to address mental health or school safety, should be exempted from the cap.

Legislative Action re Operational Sharing:

- [HF 2615](#) **Postsecondary and Career Information:** provides that the supplementary weighting associated with a shared operational function in the area of a college and career transition counselor or coordinator shall not count toward the maximum amount of additional weighting for budget years beginning on or after July 1, 2024 (effectively exempts the college and career counselor or coordinator supplementary weighting from the 21-student cap.)

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.

Legislative Action re Local Control:

- [HF 2398](#) **Insurance for Public Officers** allows the option for an insurance policy rather than a bond.

- **HF 2586 School Security Personnel/Armed School Staff** maintained the requirement that local board policy must allow staff to carry weapons on school grounds and added to the requirement to employ or retain the services of a school resource officer or a security officer employed by a private security business, that the district could employ security officers in high schools. Also allows the school board to opt out of this requirement.
- **HF 2652 School Safety** requires the DPS, with the DE and the DHHS/DE, to establish a task force on school safety standards and requires a report by December 2024. Prohibits schools from issuing bonds for school building projects if any attendance centers are not in compliance with safety standards. Allows the use of SAVE funds for technology and safety equipment but not for staff (no difference from current law). Requires schools to maintain infrastructure and requires infrastructure be approved as anti-terrorist. This bill originally included an appropriation for school safety and technology grant program, but that was amended out of the bill before final passage. There are concerns that the standards recommended by this task force may create unfunded mandates and infringe on local control.
- There were many other bills introduced that were unfunded mandates or would have limited district authority that did not make it to the Governor's desk.

Formula Equity: continue investments in formula equity, closing the 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.

Legislative Action re Formula Equity:

No action

Bond Issue Dates: 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 cost to taxpayers. Bond issues, like other ballot initiatives, should be approved by a simple majority of voters.

Legislative Action re Bond Issue Dates

No Action

Area Education Agencies: Iowa schools are critically reliant on Iowa's Area Education Agencies (AEAs), rural schools in particular, not only for special education services to students and training and support to staff, but also for instructional and media services. In many instances, if it wasn't for the AEAs, rural schools would not be able to find or afford specialists to meet student needs or assist staff with the curriculum and materials necessary for student learning. In addition, the economies of scale of the AEAs provide savings which schools would not otherwise be able to achieve. The AEAs also provide many needed services for schools, just to name a few: emergency support when a district loses a superintendent or school business official mid-year, virtual learning content, printing of materials at affordable fees, training when districts undertake new instructional math or literacy initiatives, crisis/emergency supports and mental health services, among many others. The Legislature should work

closely with schools and AEAs in updating expectations and changing the funding or structure of AEA services, in order to fully understand the impact on students and schools before any changes are made that will negatively impact services to rural students, schools, and communities.

Legislative Action re AEAs

- **HF 2612 AEAs, TSS and SSA Educational and Media Services**: The Governor's original bill eliminated educational and media services by removing local district property taxes, which currently provided the funding via AEA flow-through. The Legislature restored the property taxes and funding, however required 40% of that funding must go to AEAs while retaining school district control over the remaining 60%. School districts are still allowed to access media and educational services from AEAs, with that remaining 60%, but some rural and smaller school districts are concerned the funding is not sufficient to allow them to purchase the services they used to receive from the AEA. The ability of the AEAs to provide educational and media services to schools, especially small rural schools, will be impacted by requiring a fee for service, market-based fee structure.
- **HF 2612 AEA Changes Timeline**: Original timelines in the Governor's bill were delayed, with changed to education and media services funding occurring over a two-year period and changes to special education funding beginning July 1, 2025 (district retains 10% of special education funding while AEAs retain 90%). Many changes in policy on enactment were also delayed until either July 1, 2024 or July 1, 2025. Although the delay was appreciated, it still did not leave AEAs and school districts time to contemplate local impacts, hire needed staff or set up service agreements before the start of the fiscal year.
- **HF 2612 AEAs, TSS and SSA** included a task force to study nearly everything about special education and AEA services. As of this writing, the task force has not yet been appointed or scheduled a meeting. Many of the provisions of HF 2612 regarding AEAs take effect July 1, 2025, so this task force's recommendations could prevent harm or make improvements, if legislation moves all the way through the process. Initial indications are that small rural schools will likely run out of funds for educational and media services perhaps as early as midyear, with additional needs unmet. There are also concerns about IEP development and other special education steps that were previously completely managed by the AEA that are now requiring local district staff time to accomplish.