

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 list of Legislative Successes from the 2024 Session posted at: [2024 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.

The following questions are suggestions to both provide information and engage with candidates on where they stand. Feel free to change the questions and/or add some local information based on your school district's experiences and student needs.

1. As the Iowa economy and competitive hiring market continue to be strong, schools are struggling to fill positions (teachers and noninstructional staff). As the legislature has continued to mandate local district actions that cost money, our schools have had to sacrifice programs that parents and employers would prefer, because there is less discretionary revenue to support those programs. **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, exceeding the inflation rate?** (You can share the adequate funding position paper which shows Iowa's lagging investment in public schools, the history of per pupil increases, and RSAI's explanation of what per pupil increases of 10%, 5% and 2.5% could do to support or erode programs for students.)
2. Reorganization and whole grade incentives expire at the end of this school year. These incentives have helped many rural schools share resources, so students have more opportunities. When reorganization is the best answer as determined by local school boards and voters, these incentives also provide a short-term property tax break while implementing a newly reorganized school district. **Will you support either repeal of the deadline or at least a 10-year extension of whole grade sharing and reorganization incentives?**
3. 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 the philosophy of local control, and will you work to consider the importance of local control in your decisions at the statehouse?**
4. **Iowa has a worker shortage.** It's been evident in the education field for years, although the pandemic created additional stress. Iowa DE compiles a list of [shortage area positions](#), which for 2024-25 includes nearly every teaching position (elementary classroom teachers, science, math, English-language arts, social studies, family consumer science, agriculture, industrial technology, business, world languages, English-as-a-second language, special education, school counselors, talented and gifted, teacher librarians, music, early childhood, art and career and technical education teachers, and others.) Almost all districts in Iowa, large and small, are struggling to find bus drivers, paraprofessionals, office staff, and food service workers. Nearly all districts face a shortage of substitutes.

What do you think are the causes of the education workforce shortage?

The Governor used federal pandemic funds to create the teacher and paraeducator registered apprenticeship grant program known as TPRA. RSAI convened a consortium of smaller districts since the application required at least 10 paraeducators from each grant applicant to participate. Iowa has seen some great results, including in our rural areas, but the federal funds will all be gone by 2025.

Will you work to help find state or other sources of funding to continue similar grow-your-own teacher recruitment programs?

There has been a slight improvement in vacancies to start the 2024-25 school year, but schools still struggle to pay a competitive wage with the private sector. Recent investments in teacher minimum pay will help, but districts still need additional resources to address salary compaction. The range of increases in Teacher Salary Supplement for this school year provided in some cases, just enough funding to meet the two minimums and in some case, not quite enough. There was no funding to prevent salary compaction, a term which explains how employees will stay at one salary for a long time, before gaining enough experience to move to the next minimum.

Will you work to provide resources to help districts address and avoid salary compaction while implementing new teacher pay minimums and promise to grow the TSS funds in the future so Iowa school districts can compete with private employers and other states?

We can all do better to reduce the negative rhetoric about teachers and public schools that discourages young people from going into teaching and encourages experienced teachers to leave the field.

What will you do to turn the tide, so we can recruit more people into education and restore the respect that the profession deserves?

5. In the 2024 Session, the legislature and governor made significant changes to how AEAs are funded and how they provide services for schools and students. For many smaller or rural schools, these changes have impacted our ability to afford and access support for school improvement, media services, and significant special education supports in developing IEPs for students and accessing needed services such as speech and language pathologists and mental health providers.

Will you commit to work with educators and school leaders, who are the boots on the ground, in assessing and managing changes to the AEA system, to determine the impact on students?

Will you assure sufficient resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities and all students, through adequately staffing and funding AEAs in the future?

6. Solid research demonstrates the positive impact of a quality preschool experience for students. (See the RSAI Position Paper on PK for examples). For many of our 4-year-olds, however, their parents cannot get them to half day programs or childcare is not available for the other half of the day. There have been recent proposals to provide a 1.0 weighting for all day preschool or for preschool with wrap around services for the full day, so parents can engage in the workforce and students most in need of closing the achievement gap (such as low income and non-English speaking students) can get the great start they need in school.

Do you support investment in quality preschool for needy students, including the 1.0 weighting, so schools can overcome barriers to access by providing the continuum of quality preschool including wrap-around services?

7. 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, but all districts should have access to the 5%.

Do you support all districts being able to access the 5% cap for dropout prevention programs, if their local school boards determine there is a need for this local funding?

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 41%, which means almost 200,000 students in the 2023-24 school year were living and learning in low-income environments. For many students in low-income families, schools must provide the additional resources and supports they need. Iowa does not have a poverty factor in our funding formula. Districts with concentrated poverty need more to close achievement gaps and support students to success.

Will you work with us to update Iowa's formula more in alignment with what other states do to provide resources for their neediest students?

Would you support a poverty factor and English-learner weighting for preschool students, to get these students off to the right start?

8. The Legislature and Governor worked for a period of five years to make progress on the inequity in the district cost per pupil and state cost per pupil. We appreciate the commitment to close that gap by \$5 last done in the 2022 Session. There is still a gap of \$140 per student remaining in the formula.

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 8-10 years?

9. 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, created licensure reciprocity with other states, and the 2024 Session allowed retiring teachers to return to the classroom after just one month of bona fide retirement for a few years. All of these are helpful. Proposals to use Management Fund for teacher recruitment and retention costs have moved forward but have not made it across the finish line.

What solutions have you been discussing to address the staff and educator shortage for Iowa schools, and can you commit to supporting additional resources and flexibility in the management fund for teacher recruitment and retention?

10. 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 and then expedited in the 2024 Session are estimated to reduce state General Fund revenue by over \$1.8 billion annually when phased in (likely impacting budgets when the surplus and taxpayer relief funds are spent down).

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?

11. Now that Iowa is in the final year of implementing education savings accounts to pay for private school tuition, there are some technical corrections to existing law and possible realignment of resources that could support public and private students.

Would you support eliminating the public-school role of reimbursing private school parents for transportation and instead, appropriate the \$8.2 million to private schools for transportation?

Shouldn't funding for students who leave the private school system come back to public schools when those students return, rather than waiting for 18+ months for the formula to catch up with the students?

In the 2024 Session, the legislature and governor restored the March 1 open enrollment deadline. It would be simple and make sense to have the same deadline for parents to apply for an education savings account. That would give both public and private schools the ability to plan and staff the students they will be educating in the Fall.

Would you support a March 1 ESA application deadline?

Now that Iowa has ESAs, would you support redirecting some of the School Tuition Organization Tax Credits and Tuition and Textbook Tax Credits to public school needs, such as poverty, English-learner supports or teacher recruitment and retention programs?