FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***Rural School Advocates Set 2021 Legislative Agenda***

FFA Enrichment Center, DMACC Campus, Ankeny, Iowa (and attendees virtually via ZOOM)

October 21, 2020

Representatives from member school districts of the Rural School Advocates of Iowa (RSAI) convened their Annual Meeting on Wed., Oct 21, at 4:30 PM at the FFA Enrichment Center in Ankeny. RSAI advocates on behalf of the students, parents and communities in rural Iowa, to ensure that all students have access to a great Iowa education, regardless of where they live. RSAI members include over 100 Iowa school districts but several are among the largest geographic school districts in the state. As Dennis McClain, Chair of RSAI and superintendent of the Adair-Casey and Guthrie-Center school districts reminded the members, “*this is an organization of rural schools with a common mission of equality, not an organization of small schools*.”

Bill Menner, Executive Director, Iowa Rural Development Council, explained to the attendees the importance of education leaders to rural economic development.

School Funding, known as State Supplemental Assistance, or SSA, was a clear priority for RSAI members. Superintendent Dan Peterson, Central DeWitt Community School Districts, said this funding is not just a priority, but supports the very survival of rural schools. “*We have 47 fewer school districts than we did just 20 years ago*,” he stated. School funding primarily pays for people. The teachers, counselors, librarians, administrators, nurses, secretaries, coaches and custodians in RSAI schools. According to Peterson, “*Low funding inhibits our ability to attract and retain staff and to remain competitive with the private sector in Iowa’s growing economy*.”

If we’ve learned anything from COVID-19 this last year, closing the technology divide is a clear priority for RSAI members. Superintendent Barb Schwamman, shared between the Osage and Riceville Community School Districts, said this issue is critical for rural schools and rural communities. “*Iowa’s rural students and staff need reliable and affordable broadband Internet connections to continue our progress in STEM and computer science classes, as well as connecting us to resources throughout the world. This is no longer just a homework gap for our students*.”

Tim Mitchell, Superintendent from Riverside Community School District, SW Representative on the Legislative Group, weighed in on two equity issues important to rural schools; transportation per pupil funding in Iowa’s formula. “*For us, those route miles we run to get students to school take away from the instruction we could provide. This is an equity issue. The legislature has, for three years now, made a good faith effort to close this gap. We are urging them to keep up the good work*.” Mitchell also talked about formula equity, which again received some progress in the last three legislative sessions. “*The legislature doubled their effort in 2020 by closing the gap by $10 per student. At this pace, it will take another 16 years before student equity is achieved. We respectfully ask them to continue their work and phase out the $155 per pupil gap within the next 10 years.*”

RSAI members also included the following issues as additional priorities for the 2021 Legislative Session:

* Opportunity equity for students from low-income families, with formula funding to help cover mandated fee waivers and to provide services that these students need for success.
* Quality Preschool, including funding for 3- and 4-year old preschool at a 1.0 weighting, to help provide full day service and cover transportation costs in rural schools.
* Staff and educator shortage, including additional staffing flexibilities, to ensure students in rural Iowa have access to great teachers, bus drivers and all of the supports to meet their needs.
* Assessing and Addressing Staff/Student Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health, including resources to fund the recent changes made at the statehouse, including virtual mental health services and therapeutic classrooms, especially for Iowa’s rural students living in communities without mental health providers.
* Allowing snow days or other school days missed due to weather, construction or public health emergency to count toward instructional days as long as continuous remote learning is utilized.
* School safety resources including funds for development of school safety plans, staff and training costs.
* Simple majority vote for school bond elections and application of the 5% debt limitation to apply only to property tax debt.
* Local School Board flexibility and authority, including a commitment to implementing home rule and interpreting Iowa’s laws (liberally construe the statute and court rulings) to effectuate the purposes of local control.

Resources:

Position Papers on key issues and a Digest of the 2020 Legislative Session are available on the RSAI legislative web page at [www.rsaia.org/legislative](http://www.rsaia.org/legislative.html) or by contacting Margaret Buckton, RSAI Professional Advocate, [margaret.buckton@rsaia.org](mailto:margaret.buckton@rsaia.org), 515.201.3755.

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Quotes/Notes:

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