Urban Education Network of Iowa

Educating Diverse Students in Iowa's Urban Communities
To Become Successful World Citizens
www.uen-ia.org

Urban Education Network 2027 Priorities

Approved by Steering Committee - November 18 2026

Top 2027 UEN Legislative Priorities Draft

(Staff Recommendations based on Legislative Committee conversation and feedback. Steering Committee will decide which items will be the Top Priorities)

- **Invest in Iowa's Future**: UEN supports average funding to deliver above-average student achievement results. In 2013, Iowa's per pupil expenditures were within $212 of the national average (1.8% spending gap). Iowa's per pupil expenditures dropped to 22% below the national average in 2026 (over $4,100 spending gap per student). Iowa did not get into this resource deficit in one year, and urban school leaders do not expect to grow out of it in one year. UEN supports an adequate SSA rate that exceeds inflation and labor costs, plus additional growth to gradually return to average funding, no lower than 5% for the 2027-28 school year. During this transition, the school foundation formula must be evaluated and corrected for inequities that disadvantage Iowa's neediest students and families, including taxpayer and teacher pay inequities. The Legislature and Governor are encouraged to create state revenue growth to adequately fund public schools and other essential state services.

- **Quality Preschool:** Quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds delivers a great return on investment. Students are more successful, less likely to require special education services (saving property taxes for special education deficit), more likely to attend college, own a home, and become contributing adults. Quality preschool must include full-day options funded at full per pupil cost for students for whom half-day preschool is not accessible, not rigorous enough, or preferred by parents and local districts. Federal law requires our youngest students with IEPs be included in classrooms with students without disabilities. Funded full-day programs assist school districts with federal compliance. To be on par with private preschools, public preschool expansion must be funded, either through additional spending authority or access to state or other funding to add new sections. Full-day PK also benefits the workforce by providing employers better access to parents of young children participating in the labor market, especially when child care options are unaffordable or scarce. PK also helps students get off to a strong start and be prepared to fully engage in the labor market after graduating from high school or postsecondary programs.

- **District Authority:** Home Rule in Iowa Code 274.3 requires the executive branch and the courts to interpret Iowa Code impacting schools and school boards and develop administrative rules with deference to local control. UEN members strongly believe the Legislature and Governor should focus efforts on flexibility rather than state-mandated one-size-fits-all action. State leaders are encouraged to work with local school leaders and educators to craft policy solutions that provide the flexibility needed to implement changes intelligently, without increasing bureaucracy and compliance tasks that drive up school administrative costs.

Legislation must include common-sense timelines that allow administrative rules to be developed, accreditation processes to be defined, and local school policies to be approved before compliance is mandated. Too many state mandates have been effective on enactment, requiring school leaders to rewrite policy and implement changes before DE guidance is written and administrative rules are developed. This hurry-up-and-implement practice detracts from school improvement initiatives that require focus and energy, including key improvements in literacy and math. The explosion of unfunded mandates in recent years has required district staff time to implement, provide oversight and document compliance.

Additionally, district leaders should receive sufficient notice before accreditation and the start of the annual desk audit about questions on the audit and what documentation must be in place to prove compliance. The DE must clearly communicate well in advance, at least 6 months prior, for local staff to research, find documentation, and correct local policies and practices if necessary, in order to confirm compliance, ideally for all questions on the desk audit, but specifically for new questions and new content areas.

- **Property Tax Reform:** Impacts of the Property Tax Reform Act of 2026 are still unknown. UEN leaders encourage legislators and the Governor to carefully monitor impacts on taxpayers, local government (including school) services and the state budget. UEN supports the following specific policy suggestions for implementing property tax reform in the context of balancing the state budget and delivering a good education for Iowa students:
    - **Slow down or freeze the SAVE diversion to property tax relief.** UEN leaders support eliminating any further SAVE diversion to property tax reform. The state penny for school infrastructure, known as SAVE, was created to fund school construction, technology, and equipment as an alternative to property taxes. Voters will be asked to approve higher PPEL rates and larger bond issues if SAVE is not maintained. Voters already determine the SAVE uses locally, which include local property tax relief if that is a priority for constituents.
    - **Diversion Triggers:** The State must, by March 1, enact sufficient SSA above inflation plus an amount to restore average funding as described in the UEN adequate school resources priority, before diverting additional SAVE based on the phase-in schedule in SF 2472 or increasing the state share of the formula as a result of lower additional levy rates or phasing down the uniform levy.
    - **Restructure Diversion to Protect Schools and the State Budget:** If the legislature does not reach consensus to restore SAVE for school infrastructure or institute a diversion trigger, diverted dollars should fund property tax relief that avoids a state budget impact. For example, the uniform levy reduction requires a dollar-for-dollar increase in state share to offset the property tax savings. If SAVE dollars were instead used for non-formula property tax relief or contributed a match for levies that provide additional services for students, such as special education deficits for students with the highest level of disability or matching the first 2.5% of Dropout Prevention authority, school districts would be able to continue investing in programs for students rather than reducing budgets due to inadequate state funding.

- **Essential Local Investment in Schools:** Voter-approved levies, such as bond issues for construction projects, should include options for multiple special election dates. To further reform property taxes, the legislature should allow local school districts to diversify revenue options to replace lost property tax dollars for future construction and repair projects, technology and transportation equipment, and investments that prevent or protect school districts and taxpayers from cybersecurity damages, litigation, and other risks.

UEN's 2027 Priority Language

(Approved by UEN Steering Committee))

Teacher, Administrator, Staff Shortage

Adequate funding is essential for public schools to compete with the private sector to hire and retain experienced employees. All schools struggle to fill Special Education, English-Learner, high school Science, and other specific content area positions.

New policies are needed to attract, recruit, and retain educators who mirror our diverse students and communities, including licensure flexibility, funded grow-your-own programs, internships and on-the-job programs, tuition support, and loan forgiveness programs. Iowa should continue to define the teacher bona fide retirement as 30 days for purposes of rehiring IPERs eligible retirees to fill vacancies. School districts should have flexibility and opportunity to provide training and CEU's toward needed licensure. Internship and apprenticeship programs should be simplified so school staff can easily implement and support participants. UEN supports using the management fund for recruitment and retention programs.

UEN remains committed to quality and support for every teacher. Schools should not sacrifice quality for fast-track credentialing programs. Content knowledge is critical, but so is pedagogy and instructional skill. Schools need adequate resources to provide clinical experiences, mentoring, modeling, instructional coaching, classroom management support and ongoing skill development after program completion and continuously on the job.

Good administrators are critical instructional leaders for teacher and student success. Pressure to limit administrative staff, salaries, and expenses shifts paperwork and compliance burdens to teachers. Investments and mandates for increasing teacher and staff compensation require funding above and beyond the SSA rate. Compensation funding should be delivered in equitable ways to all school districts.

Student Opportunity/Poverty

Some students start school behind their peers, some by several grade levels. With the near doubling of poverty for young Iowa families over the last twenty years, the needs of many Iowa students are intense. Low socioeconomic status is often a factor in achievement gaps for non-English-speaking families, young families, and families facing special needs living in poverty. It is challenging for many of these families to get their children to preschool or provide materials and experiences at home that promote literacy and learning.

Poverty is a predictor, but not a barrier to high student achievement, if schools have the staff and resources to work with students and their parents to support success. Iowa's funding formula should target funding based on the actual costs of closing achievement gaps evidenced in the Iowa Schools Performance Profile. The High-Needs Schools appropriation of $10 million annually, created as part of Gov. Branstad's Education Reform Act in 2013 and not funded since its inception, should finally be appropriated beginning in the 2027-28 school year.

English-Learner (EL) Programs and Services

Increased weighting commensurate with the costs of programs and support for students is needed to provide services for Iowa's English Learners. SBRC reimbursement for mandated EL services should be a class action automatic reimbursement regardless of UAB carry forward amounts. EL investments support the employment of appropriately credentialed staff, who are in short supply today. EL services should be available to districts and families for preschool access; however, a year of EL service in the statewide voluntary preschool program should be in addition to the 5-year state funding limitation. Many students begin their educational journey with EL services and eventually test as proficient, which is to be celebrated. They may still need support, however, as the content of textbooks becomes more difficult and assignments become more complicated. Ultimately, EL services build successful, engaged citizens, strong communities, and a strong workforce.

Literacy & Mathematics

Literacy and mathematics are the gateway skills to a successful life in the 21st Century. UEN supports state investment in improved core instruction with a solid research base. Such state investment starts with understanding student literacy and math needs, through conversations with school leaders and educators to determine what the State should provide. UEN leaders are ready to partner with the State to improve student achievement outcomes. Schools depend on strong training, materials, and formative assessment tools, but a one-size-fits-all solution will not address all student needs, capacities, and communities. State support must recognize and respect the local control required to identify and implement initiatives with fidelity.

High School Programming

UEN supports expanding funding and educational opportunities for public school students, such as career and technical education (CTE) programs, apprenticeships, career pathways, and college readiness experiences, including content standards relevant to their trajectory. Concurrent enrollment opportunities, providing college credits during high school, should be fairly funded, recognizing the costs and contributions of school districts and postsecondary partners in delivering value to Iowa families. Public schools should be fairly compensated for providing concurrent enrollment courses for homeschool, charter school, and private school students. High school content delivered through work-based learning requires schools and the State to find alternative ways to measure high school completion and competency. UEN also supports parent and student choice in meeting course and core graduation requirements. The graduation requirement for students to complete the INS Civics test, per SF 369 in the 2025 Session, is difficult and costly for

school districts to manage and has been overregulated by the state DE. School districts should retain local control over how and when to offer the test, decide whether test sections align more closely with certain courses, and control accommodations for students with disabilities and English-language learners. SF 369 required the DE to study the test's impact on graduation rates. When available, consider that report through the lens of local flexibility as the state and school districts work together toward a very high graduation rate for Iowa students.

Special Education Identification and Instruction

UEN schools are committed to lowering achievement gaps for students with disabilities. Appropriate identification of students' disabilities and a full continuum of care associated with their needs will support academic growth and help students meet individual goals. A workable system gives decision-makers access to all information needed to effectively serve students entitled under IDEA. State mandates should not exceed federal requirements for special education services. Two recent state mandates enacted in 2026 via SF 2428 should be repealed, including 1) the requirement that paraprofessionals must attend IEP meetings, which is costly to schools and taxpayers and being interpreted by the State Department of Education more broadly than originally intended, and 2) the requirement that IEP meetings be held during the school day, which actually conflicts with federal direction to schedule IEP meetings for the convenience of parents. Pulling all school staff out of classroom during the school day also interferes with instruction for all students.

Adequate SSA is required to keep pace with inflation for the cost of required services. SSA below inflation over the last decade has had a direct impact on increasing special education deficits. The UEN plan to restore Iowa per pupil spending to the national average will gradually reduce the impact of special education deficits on taxpayers. A risk pool or a change to property tax reform to provide relief for the special education deficit, rather than the uniform levy, would help taxpayers and reduce the costs of the school foundation formula to the state.

Iowa, unlike most other states in the nation, identifies and assigns special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to students with disabilities based on nonproficiency (failure to progress, performance below expectation, and discrepancy from peers) rather than diagnosed disability categories. Since Iowa's achievement gap for students with disabilities is significant, UEN supports a thorough, independent evaluative study to determine the effectiveness of our system. The evaluation should consider how child find/student identification for disability-related services used by other states might affect service delivery and student outcomes in Iowa. The evaluation should also consider whether Iowa's disability identification system, based on discrepancy from a student's peers, should include an element of categorical identification. If the evaluation results in policy recommendations, stakeholders should vet them and federal authorities should accept them as IDEA-compliant before implementation. Most importantly, such recommendations should be grounded in improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Iowa's special education teacher shortage is profound. All students, including students with disabilities, are regular education students first, so all teachers need the skills to teach them. Recruiting existing teachers to meet complicated special education licensure is challenging. The job

of special education instruction has never been harder. It is no surprise that special education teachers and experts are in short supply. This shortage leaves classrooms too crowded and compromises instruction. UEN supports recruitment strategies, incentives, and commensurate pay structures to address the shortage of special education teachers and staff.

Iowa does not provide for a full continuum of needed care for students, which will require additional state investment to build and support. Residential placements and all-day wrap-around therapeutic classrooms have long waiting lists. School districts with residential facilities generate special education funding for students in these facilities with IEPs. Other students without IEPs have significant behavioral and instructional needs, but no funding to provide them. Students with disabilities who have met graduation requirements continue to be served in schools as they develop life skills until age 21. These students count against a district's graduation rate, as they are not technically considered graduated with their 4- or 5-year cohort. Once students with IEPs meet their graduation requirements, districts should include them as graduates in accountability reporting.

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and School Choice

The priority of public schools, chosen by 90% of families in Iowa, demands adequate funding and support. UEN opposes expanding programs that redirect or designate additional taxpayer funds for private school, homeschool, or other private services. Iowa law should set and maintain a rigorous accreditation process to provide and fund only high-quality private schools for Iowa students. To help balance the state budget while achieving a goal of access to private schools, UEN would support means testing for eligibility, so ESAs would only be available to students from lower-income families.

Private school programs receiving ESA for tuition should be subject to public oversight. UEN also supports the following corrective legislation:

- Categorical restrictions on funds generated for public schools by a district's count of resident students eligible for an ESA should be lifted. School Districts should be able to use these funds for any expenditure to improve the quality of education and programs for students.
- The deadline for ESA application and open enrollment into an online school should be March 1, the same as regular open enrollment. Exceptions should be allowed for an ESA or online enrollment approved after the deadline for the same reasons that apply to regular open enrollment. This deadline would improve all schools' ability to budget and staff wisely, allocating resources for the students they will serve. If students receiving an ESA return to public schools, funding should also come back to the public school.
- The appropriation to public schools for private school parent reimbursement of transportation should go directly to parents, by adding an amount to the ESA and/or be offered as a tax credit for private school parents. Public schools should be relieved from the paperwork demands of this accounting function.
- The State Board of Education should restrict the number of independent accrediting bodies and limit them to accrediting processes with public standards and public accreditation reports for private schools. Taxpayer dollars spent on ESAs that parents use to pay tuition and other private school costs should be audited and reported to the public.

- Public School District staff should not be required to oversee private school programs and expenditures funded by federal or state funds or provide public school programs to private or homeschool students without adequate funding.

Mental Health Services

Iowa should continue to work to improve our child mental health system, including addressing pediatric mental health professional shortages. Mental illness among students and families impacts attendance, hampers a student's ability to complete work and contributes to achievement gaps. Educators are not and should not be trained providers of mental health care, nor do public schools have the capacity to meet the mental health needs of students under the existing school funding formula.

Iowa should engage in every opportunity to maximize school access to Medicaid claiming for health services for all students, not just students with disabilities. Iowa's school funding formula should include a categorical funding stream designated for mental health professionals and programs serving students, if schools and communities choose to provide those services at school. Needed services include case management and service coordination, transition support for students returning to school after a mental health placement, virtual mental health counseling, ongoing training to improve understanding of children's social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs, actionable classroom strategies to address student needs, and integration of mental health promotion, suicide prevention, and coping skills into existing curriculum.

Safety and Cybersecurity

Escalated cybersecurity criminal threats are increasingly present and devastating. It is time to update funding sources to protect staff and students. Cybercriminals interrupt instructional delivery and school district operations, impacting students, families, staff and communities. Efforts should be coordinated to support school districts' cybersecurity needs by creating a consortium to curate, vet, and establish professional services from which school districts may choose cybersecurity solutions. The consortium should identify options to preserve school districts' local decision-making authority in choosing safety solutions for their community schools.

Cybersecurity systems, services, improvements, training, staff, safe entrances, safe facilities and safety training to protect staff and students are all investments that minimize risk. The school district management fund was established to avoid risk and, as such, is an ideal funding stream to protect the district and taxpayers from the cost of cybersecurity litigation otherwise paid by property taxes. The state penny for school infrastructure (SAVE) and the physical plant and equipment levy (PPEL) should also cover the full range of safety and security expenses, in addition to any software or technological equipment.