



Urban Education Network Legislative Priorities for 2024 Session

As approved by Steering Committee Nov. 15, 2023

- **Invest in Iowa's Future**

Adequate funding provides program and delivery options and individual student place-based choice within a neighborhood public school. The goals of public education, in addition to teaching basic skills, are to close achievement gaps, provide career exploration and work-based learning experiences, fine arts, and extracurriculars to help students develop skills and find their passions. Quality education prepares all students for engaged citizenship, postsecondary study and/or credentialed workforce participation.

Adequate funding helps public schools respond to student needs, provide individualized attention and build better relationships via smaller classes. Schools must hire and competitively compensate staff to nurture and challenge today's students. Iowans expect top-notch public schools.

High-quality public schools provide the business community with a great recruitment and economic development tool. Funding levels should reflect Iowa citizens' recognition that education drives family decisions for where to live, work and go to school in every community. Schools are subject to market economics and must have adequate funding and more flexibility to address teacher and other staff shortages in Iowa's competitive employment environment.

Iowa's funding formula includes meaningful and significant categorical funds that support teachers, school improvement and students. UEN supports adequate and timely Supplemental State Aid (SSA), at least meeting the inflation rate. Funding should be set predictably, timely, sustainably and equitably. Continued progress on inequity within the formula is important.

- **Teacher, Administrator, Staff Shortage**

State and local leaders must generate enthusiasm for teaching by speaking about and treating educators with deserved respect to both attract new teachers to Iowa and keep great Iowa teachers in classrooms. Adequate funding is essential for public schools to compete with the private sector in hiring new and retaining experienced employees. New policies should be implemented to help schools recruit, attract and retain educators that mirror our diverse students, such as licensure flexibility, additional nontraditional intern programs with adequate pedagogy/on-the-job classroom exposure, grow-your-own, tuition support, and loan forgiveness programs. Iowa's Future Ready Workforce efforts should include an educator focus to replenish the talent pool and attract high school and college students to a career in education. UEN supports SF 392, which allows use of the Management Fund for loan forgiveness and recruitment programs. Research demonstrates that good administrators are critical for supporting teachers to thrive in classrooms. Pressures to limit administrative staff and expenses only serve to move paperwork and compliance to teachers. Investments and expectations for increasing teacher pay, included for all licensed staff in classrooms or other roles in school districts, requires additional funding above and beyond the SSA rate.

- **Quality Preschool**

Iowa's preschool program, initiated with strong support from the business community nearly a decade ago, should generate 1.0 weighting for full-day programming, including wrap-around services and childcare for low-income and non-English speaking students. Such funding delivers a proven return on investment for both student achievement and taxpayers, while also freeing up childcare slots for younger children and allowing parents to fully participate in full-time employment. Additionally, schools should be allowed to use General Fund dollars or generate spending authority to pay for preschool expansion.
- **Student Opportunity Equity**

Many Iowa students start school behind their peers, some by several grade levels. With the near doubling of free and reduced-priced lunch participation, an education marker for poverty, the needs of many of Iowa's students are intense. Iowa's funding formula should include targeted funding based on the actual costs of closing achievement gaps for at-risk students living in poverty.
- **English-Learner Programs and Services**

Increased weighting commensurate with the costs of programs and support for students is needed to provide services for Iowa's English-language learners. Such investments will support the employment of appropriately credentialed staff and effective programs, closing learning gaps for these students. Ultimately, quality English Learner services build strong communities and a strong workforce.
- **Literacy**

Literacy is the gateway skill to full participation in the 21st Century. UEN supports state investment in improved literacy instruction with a solid research base, known as the Science of Reading. Such support involves training, materials and formative assessment tools. State support must recognize and respect the local control required to implement initiatives with fidelity.
- **High School Programming**

UEN supports the expansion of funding and educational opportunities for public school students, including career and technical education (CTE) programs, apprenticeships, career pathways and college readiness experiences, including content which delivers standards relevant to their trajectory. High school content delivered through work-based learning demands that Iowa finds alternative ways to measure high school competency and completion. UEN also supports more student choice in meeting course and core graduation requirements rather than state-mandated one-size-fits-all course requirements.

- **Special Education Identification and Instruction**

Appropriate identification of students' disabilities and provision of the continuum of care associated with their needs will support academic growth and meet individual goals for students.

Iowa is the only state in the nation that identifies and assigns special education services to students with disabilities based on nonproficiency (failure to progress and performance below expectation) rather than specific disability categories for students entitled for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Since Iowa's significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and without is evident, UEN supports an evaluation of our state's plan with the federal government for compliance, including a thorough investigation by an independent evaluator to determine how such a change to child find/student identification for services related to disability used by other states and allowed under Federal law would impact student outcomes in Iowa.

The current identification process creates a barrier to identifying needed supports, accommodations and modifications, which are needed to serve students in partnership with parents and keep staff and students safe.

Additionally, Iowa does not provide for a full continuum of needed care for students, i.e., residential placements and all day wrap-around therapeutic classrooms have long waiting lists without appropriate services in the meantime. The goal to close the achievement gap for students with disabilities is further compromised by special education staff shortages in Iowa. UEN schools are committed to lowering achievement gaps for students with IEPs. Adequate SSA is required to keep pace with inflation for the cost of services required in IEPs to be funded by special education weightings in the formula. Additional state investment to build and support a full continuum of care is required. A workable system gives access to all information needed to effectively serve students entitled under IDEA. Mandates from the State of Iowa should not exceed federal requirements for special education services.

- **Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and School Choice**

The priority of public schools demands adequate funding and support by the state. UEN opposes any expansion of programs/plans that redirect or designate additional taxpayer funds for private school, homeschooling or other private services. Private school programs must include accountability for expenditures and should be subject to public oversight that accompanies tax dollars. Investments in education savings accounts or other private systems stress public school resources in several ways: 1) reducing students (Iowa's funding formula is enrollment-based), 2) concentrating minority and poverty in urban public schools (where private schools tend to be located), 3) creating pressures to expand to include homeschool and nonaccredited private school ESA eligibility, and 4) allowing private schools to choose which students to enroll. HF 68 was enacted so quickly in the 2023 Session, it did not benefit from the perfecting process of subcommittee and committee meetings, extended conversation, media and constituent attention. UEN supports the following correcting legislation to improve the program:

- If a student withdraws from the private school after the Oct. 1 enrollment count date and enrolls in the public school, the student should be counted for funding or spending

- authority in the coming fiscal year. The reallocation of funds for an ESA mitigates the impact on the state budget.
- The appropriation to public schools for parent reimbursement of transportation expenditures for nonpublic students should go directly to private schools. Parents should not be reimbursed for additional transportation if the student leaves private school.
 - Nonpublic and open enrollment to another public school impacts both funding and staffing decisions. A reasonable deadline for ESA application and for open enrollment should be in place. Exceptions should be reinstated to allow open enrollment or an ESA after the deadline for extreme cases. Such a deadline would improve the ability of all schools to budget and staff wisely, allocating resources for the students they will serve.
- **Mental Health Services**

Iowa children need an improved mental health system, including the structure and funding to eliminate mental health professional shortages, such as loan forgiveness programs. Educators are not trained providers of mental health care, nor do they have the capacity to meet the mental health needs of students. Iowa should engage in every opportunity to maximize school access to Medicaid claiming for health services for all students, not just students with disabilities. The formula should include a categorical funding stream designated for mental health professionals and programs serving students. Such funding would provide case management and service coordination, transition support and services for students returning to school after a mental health placement, ongoing training to improve understanding of child 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. The Legislature should avoid enacting legislation and education policies that increase pressure on students with mental health challenges. Legislation must value inclusion and the diverse lived experiences of all students.
 - **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.

- **Safety and Cybersecurity**

Escalated threats are increasingly present and devastating; some are obvious (flood or derecho), others are more nefarious (cybersecurity crimes). UEN supports updating funding sources to protect staff and students. Cybercriminals interrupt instructional delivery and school district operations, impacting students, families, staff and communities. UEN calls for coordinated efforts to support school districts' cybersecurity needs, to create a consortium to curate, vet and establish professional services from which school districts may choose for cybersecurity needs. The consortium should create options to preserve the local decision-making authority of school boards in choosing safety solutions for their community schools. School districts should be able to expense cybersecurity systems, services, improvements, training, costs of cybersecurity staff, as well as the costs of safe entrances, facility safety improvements and safety training to protect staff and students from the Management Fund, as well as from the state penny for school infrastructure (SAVE) fund and the physical plant and equipment levy (PPEL). Investments to protect staff and students minimize risk exposure and avoid significant litigation settlements otherwise paid by local taxpayers.