



## Urban Education Network 2025 Legislative Priorities

*(As approved by UEN Steering Committee November 2024)*

### **Invest in Iowa's Future: Adequate Funding for Public Schools**

The goals of public education, in addition to teaching basic skills, are to close achievement gaps, provide career exploration and work-based learning, fine arts, and extracurricular experiences to help students develop skills and find their passions. Quality education prepares all students for engaged citizenship, postsecondary study and/or credentialed workforce participation, to engage in a fulfilling, productive and prosperous life.

Adequate funding helps public schools respond to student needs with robust program choices, provide individualized attention and build better relationships via smaller classes. Inadequate funding combined with many mandates and categorical fund inflexibility reduces high-cost career and technical programs, fine arts, and optional programs that parents, students and stakeholders seek. 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 minimizing inequity within the formula is important. The expanded range of Teacher Salary Supplement (TSS), from a low of \$699 to a high of \$2,852 per pupil, is a 308% deviation, one of the largest inequities impacting school districts general funds.

### **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 and retaining experienced employees. All schools are facing a reduced pool of applicants, shortages in special education and nearly every content area, even elementary classroom teachers.

New policies are needed to recruit, attract and retain educators that mirror our diverse students and communities, including; licensure flexibility, grow-your-own programs, internships and on-the-job programs, tuition support, and loan forgiveness programs. School districts should have flexibility and

opportunity to provide training and CEU's toward needed licensure. Internship and apprenticeship programs should be simplified to allow school staff to easily implement and support participants. UEN supports use of the Management Fund for recruitment and retention programs.

UEN maintains a commitment to quality and support for every teacher in the classroom. Quality should not be sacrificed for interns, apprentices or any fast-track credentialing program. Content knowledge is critical, but so is pedagogy and instructional skill. Schools need adequate resources to provide clinical experiences during the credentialing process, plus mentoring, modeling, instructional coaching, classroom management support and ongoing skill development after program completion.

Research demonstrates that good administrators are critical for supporting teachers to thrive in classrooms. Pressures to limit administrative staff, salaries and expenses only serve to move paperwork and compliance burdens to teachers. Investments and expectations for increasing teacher pay, for all licensed staff in classrooms plus other staff in school districts, requires additional funding above and beyond the SSA rate. Compensation funding should be delivered in equitable ways to all school districts to reward all teachers and educational support employees and to support all students.

## 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 early childhood instruction combined with wrap-around services and childcare for low-income and non-English speaking students. Districts must retain flexibility to offer a variety of program options, as determined by student and community need and staffing capacity, including half-day and full-day preschool, or a combination of early childhood education and child care when necessary to provide a full-day environment to minimize transportation and workforce barriers.

Quality preschool programs deliver 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 the workforce: Six rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were 25% less likely to drop out of school, 40% less likely to become a teen parent, 50% less likely to be placed in special education, 60% less likely to never attend college and 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime (*Source: Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014.*) Quality Preschool is one of the best prevention investments a state can make in supporting a quality workforce and saving taxpayers the expense of poor educational outcomes.

Additionally, schools should be allowed to use General Fund dollars or generate spending authority to pay for preschool expansion.

## Student Opportunity/Poverty

Many 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 socio-economic status is often a factor in achievement gaps for non-English speaking families, young families, and families with special needs living in poverty. It is challenging for many of

these families to get their students 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 include targeted funding based on the actual costs of closing achievement gaps as indicated by the Iowa Schools Performance Profile for at-risk students living in poverty. The High-Needs Schools appropriation of \$10 million annually, created as part of Gov. Branstad's Education Reform Act in 2013, not funded once since its inception, should be appropriated, beginning in the 2025-26 school year.

## **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 Learners. Such investments support the employment of appropriately credentialed staff, hard to find with today's teacher shortage. Many students begin their educational journey with EL services and become proficient by testing standards, which is to be celebrated. They still need more support, however, as content of textbooks becomes more difficult and assignments become more complicated. Ultimately, English-Learner services build successful engaged citizens, strong communities and a strong workforce.

## **Literacy**

Literacy is the gateway skill to a successful life in the 21st Century. UEN supports state investment in improved literacy instruction with a solid research base. Such investment starts with the understanding of student literacy needs and engagement, built by the Department of Education's connection and conversation with school leaders and educators to determine what the State should provide. UEN leaders are ready to be partners with State leaders to improve literacy outcomes. Schools depend on good training, materials and formative assessment tools, but the State should not provide a one-size-fits-all solution to school districts with very different communities, student needs and capacities. State support must recognize and respect the local control required to identify and implement initiatives with fidelity.

## **High School Programming**

UEN supports the expansion of 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, which provide college credits during high school, should be fairly funded, recognizing the costs and contributions of school districts, community colleges and other post-secondary partners in delivering this value to Iowa families. 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 parent and student choice in meeting course and core graduation requirements.

## **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 access to all information needed by decision makers, to effectively serve students entitled under IDEA. Mandates from the State of Iowa should not exceed federal requirements for special education services.

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 is required to build and support a full continuum of care.

Iowa, unlike the rest of the nation, 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 a thorough investigation by an independent evaluator to determine the effects of our system. The evaluation should consider how child find/student identification for services related to disability used by other states and allowed under Federal law might impact service delivery and student outcomes in Iowa.

Iowa's teacher shortage is profound in the area of special education instruction. 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 and inflexible special education licensure is challenging, and 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 differentiation of instruction compromised. School districts must be able to provide special education administrative support paid by special education weighting in order to train, deliver, evaluate and deliver special education instructional initiatives and practices without burdening teachers with too much bureaucratic interpretation, paperwork and documentation.

Iowa does not provide for a full continuum of needed care for students. Residential placements and all-day wrap-around therapeutic classrooms have long waiting lists without appropriate services in the meantime. School districts with residential placement facilities generate special education funding for students in these facilities with IEPs. Other placed students without IEPs have significant behavioral and instructional needs, but no formula funding to provide them.

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

The priority of public schools, chosen by well over 90% of families in Iowa, 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, homeschool or other private services. Iowa should resist loosening accreditation or providing incentives for lower quality private schools to expand in Iowa.

Private school programs are not held accountable for ESA expenditures, but should be subject to public oversight that accompanies tax dollars. UEN also supports the following correcting legislation:

- 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 next semester or the coming fiscal year. The reallocation of the balance of that student's ESA would provide for the public program.

- A reasonable deadline for ESA application should be in place and should mirror the Open Enrollment deadline of March 1. 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.
- The appropriation to public schools for private school parent reimbursement of transportation should go directly to private schools. Public schools should be relieved from the paperwork demands of this accounting function. Private schools are also in a better position to ensure parents are not reimbursed for transportation after the student has left the private school.
- Removal of the teacher salary supplement (TSS) assigned to school districts based on their count of resident students eligible for an ESA from the calculation to meet minimum teacher pay. The retention of this categorical funding as part of HF 68 legislation creating ESAs was discussed as a necessary piece of the puzzle to improve public schools where these students reside. This funding was effectively repurposed by the state to fund new teacher pay minimums imposed in HF 2614 during the 2024 Session. School Districts should be able to apply the categorical funding generated for public schools by ESA recipient resident students to any expenditure in the district to improve the quality of education and programs for students in that school district.

## Mental Health Services

Iowa should continue to work to improve our child mental health system, including the structure and funding to eliminate 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.

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 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. State leaders are encouraged to work with local school leaders and educators on crafting public policy solutions that provide flexibility necessary to implement changes intelligently, without increasing bureaucracy and compliance tasks driving increased school administrative costs. The Legislature and Governor should include common sense timelines for deadlines, allowing administrative rules to be developed, accreditation processes to be defined, and local school policies to be approved, before compliance is mandated.

## **Safety and Cybersecurity**

Escalated threats are increasingly present and devastating, including cybersecurity crimes. 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, to create a consortium to curate, vet and establish professional services from which school districts may choose for cybersecurity solutions. The consortium should identify options to preserve the local decision-making authority of school districts in choosing safety solutions for their community schools.

Cybersecurity systems, services, improvements, and training expenses, costs of cybersecurity staff, as well as the costs of safe entrances, facility safety improvements and safety training to protect staff and students are a risk-management investment. The Management Fund is already established to avoid risk and as such, is an ideal funding stream to use since these investments protect the district and taxpayers from the cost of cybersecurity corrections and litigation otherwise paid by property taxes. The state penny for school infrastructure (SAVE) and the physical plant and equipment levy (PPEL) should also be allowed for the entire range of safety and security expenses. Investments to protect staff and students minimize risk exposure and avoid significant litigation settlements otherwise paid by local taxpayers.