



Educating Diverse Students in Iowa's Urban Communities  
To Become Successful World Citizens  
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## Urban Education Network 2026 Priorities

(Approved Nov. 19, 2025)

### UEN's Top 2026 Legislative Priorities include:

- Property Tax Reform
- Quality Preschool (including full-day option)
- Invest in Iowa's Future: Adequate Funding for Public Schools

### Other UEN 2026 Legislative Priorities include:

- Teacher, Administrator, Staff Shortage
- Student Opportunity/Poverty
- English-Learning (EL) Programs and Services
- Literacy
- High School Programming
- Special Education Identification and Instruction
- Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and School Choice
- Mental Health Services
- District Authority
- Safety and Cybersecurity

### Property Tax Reform

UEN supports the following principles to guide property tax reform legislation:

1. preserve state general fund capacity to adequately fund Iowans' priorities, including a quality public education for all children,
2. retain local school board and voter authority to fund infrastructure, technology and school safety via PPEL, SAVE and Debt levies,
3. provide local school board authority to continue pre-reform voter-approved amounts (levies and total dollars anticipated) through transition periods, and
4. move toward a more transparent system, require clear and simple property tax statements, remove rollbacks, and provide clearly understood property valuations and TIF impacts on taxpayers.

The Tax Foundation's 2025 Study, "Securing Property Tax Relief in Iowa," supports some of Iowa's proposed legislation to limit levies rather than assessments, phase out of existing rollbacks, and suggests excluding new property in calculating levy limits and allowing voter overrides to limitations. These experts also encourage Iowa to:

1. incorporate inflation into the levy limit (not a fixed 2% growth limit, for example),
2. tie future limitations to legal taxing authority maximums and not to actual tax revenue in the prior year, "levy limits should neither force nor inhibit lower taxes by local governments", and

3. future limits should be recession-proof (tied to a baseline rather than a lower valuation if property values fall).

UEN does not support management fund limits without regard to local circumstances, which would usurp local control. Local taxpayers have the authority under Iowa Code § 24.27 to contest a school district's budget, including the management levy, through the county auditor and the State Appeal Board. Local voters can also replace school board members who exceed the community's tolerance for property taxes.

The current restriction to November bond elections spikes demand for providers, architects, bonders, and construction labor, while extending completion times, all of which increase costs to taxpayers. School boards should be given multiple options for bond election dates. Bond issues should be approved by a simple majority of voters (50% +1), rather than a super majority (60% +1), and only one vote should be required regardless of the levy amount, up to the \$4.05 maximum levy.

### 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, reflecting student and community needs 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. Full-day preschool allows parents to fully participate in the workforce. Plus, it is good for students. 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.

### 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, post-secondary study and/or credentialed workforce participation, to engage in a fulfilling, productive and prosperous life.

Adequate funding means public schools can meet student needs with robust program choices, individualized attention and better relationships via smaller classes. Inadequate funding combined with more 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, and students deserve, 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; adequate funding and more flexibility are necessary 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 \$713 to a high of \$3,360 per pupil, is a 471% deviation, one of the largest per pupil inequities impacting school district 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, specifically shortages in special education, and for some districts, in nearly every content area.

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 the use of the management fund for recruitment and retention programs.

UEN maintains a commitment to quality and support for every teacher. Quality should not be sacrificed 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 for teacher and student success. Pressures to limit administrative staff, salaries and expenses move 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 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 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, not funded once since its inception, should finally be appropriated, beginning in the 2026-27 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. EL investments support the employment of appropriately credentialed staff, who are in short supply today. 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**

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 state investment starts with the understanding of student literacy needs and engagement, upon conversation with school leaders and educators to determine what the State should provide. UEN leaders are ready to be partners with the State to improve literacy outcomes. Schools depend on good 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 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, providing college credits during high school, should be fairly funded, recognizing the costs and contributions of school districts and post-secondary partners in delivering value to Iowa families. High school content delivered through work-based learning demands that schools and the State find alternative ways to measure high school completion and competency. UEN also supports 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 decisionmakers, to effectively serve students entitled under IDEA. State mandates should not exceed federal requirements for special education services.

Adequate SSA is required to keep pace with inflation for the cost of required services. Additional state investment is required to build and support a full continuum of care.

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 services related to disability used by other states might impact service delivery and student outcomes in Iowa. The evaluation should also consider whether Iowa's system of identification of disability based on discrepancy from a student's peers should include an element of categorical identification. If the evaluation results in policy recommendations, they should be vetted by stakeholders and accepted by federal authorities as IDEA-compliant before being implemented. 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 special education teacher and staff shortage.

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 with no services in the meantime. 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, they should be included as graduates in district accountability reporting.

### **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. UEN opposes expansion of 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.

Private school programs receiving ESA for tuition should be subject to public oversight. UEN also supports the following correcting 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 this funding for any expenditure in the district to improve the quality of education and programs for students.
- If a student withdraws from the private school after the October 1 enrollment count date and enrolls in the public school, the student should be counted for funding or spending authority in the next semester and/or the coming fiscal year. The reallocation of the balance of that student's ESA would provide for the public program.
- The deadline for ESA application should be March 1, the same as open enrollment. Exceptions should be allowed for an ESA approved after the deadline for extreme circumstances, based, the same as open enrollment. 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, be added to the ESA or be offered as a tax credit for private school parents. Public schools should be relieved from the paperwork demands of this accounting function.

### **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 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.

### **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 the flexibility necessary to implement changes intelligently, without increasing bureaucracy and compliance tasks, driving increased school administrative costs. Legislation must include common-sense timelines, allowing 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.

### **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, training, staff, safe entrances, safe facilities and safety training to protect staff and students are all investments to 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 be allowed for the entire range of safety and security expenses.