

## Urban Education Network Legislative Priorities for 2023 Session

*Approved by the Steering Committee Nov. 16, 2022*

- **Invest in Iowa's Future**

Fund Iowa's public schools at a level sufficient to deliver the quality education all Iowa students deserve and need to be successful. Adequate funding provides program options, delivery options and individual student place-based choice within their neighborhood public school. The goals of public education are to close achievement gaps, provide career exploration and work-based learning experiences, fine arts, and extra-curriculars to help students uncover their skills and passions. This quality education prepares all students for engaged citizenship, further postsecondary study and/or credentialed workforce participation.

Adequate funding positions public schools to respond to needs deepened by the pandemic, do better for our most at-risk students, provide supports and enhancements for special needs and gifted students, provide more individualized attention and build better relationships via smaller class sizes, provide a more diverse, multi-lingual workforce, and hire and competitively compensate the dedicated teaching and support staff who nurture and challenge today's students, tomorrow's leaders. Iowans expect top-notch public schools with many programming choices for students.

The funding level should demonstrate Iowa citizens' recognition that PK-12 Education drives family decisions for where to live, where to work and where to go to school in every community. Our high-quality public schools in Iowa provide our business community with a great recruitment and economic development tool.

Iowa's funding formula includes meaningful and significant categorical funds which support teachers, school improvement and students. Adequate and timely SSA, at least meeting the inflation rate, is needed to deliver and sustain world-class educational opportunities for students. Funding should be set predictably, timely, sustainably and equitably. Continued progress on inequity within the formula is important. Districts must have adequate funding to address growing inflation and teacher and other staff shortages in Iowa's competitive employment economy.

- **Student Opportunity Equity**

Many Iowa students start school behind their peers, some by several grade levels. Iowa's funding formula should include targeted funding based on the actual costs of closing achievement gaps for at-risk students living in poverty. 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 child care for low-income or non-English speaking four-year-old 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. Increased weighting to provide services for Iowa's English-language learners, low-income and at-risk students will close learning gaps while building a strong workforce.

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

Iowa already has significant school choice. UEN opposes the creation or expansion of programs/plans that redirect or designate additional taxpayer funds for private school, homeschooling or other private services, regardless of whether those funds are provided indirectly through education savings accounts or directly through appropriations or tax credits. The priority of public schools demands adequate funding and support by the state. Investments in education savings accounts, voucher programs, school tuition organizations or homeschool remove resources from public schools in four ways:

1. Iowa's funding formula is enrollment based. Fewer students mean fewer resources for staff, programs and courses for the vast majority of students remaining in the public school. For urban schools, students remaining in the school after some exercise a private option tend to be in neighborhoods with greater needs, such as higher poverty, more non-English speakers and higher minority concentration. Providing incentives for private schools has the effect of re-segregating our urban centers. The students who attend a private school with the ESA take with them not just the state funding estimated at \$79 million by legislative staff, but also lower the public district's resources by other significant sources of enrollment-based funding.
2. Carving Iowa's education funding pie into more pieces necessarily means a smaller piece of pie for Iowa's public school students. Urban school leaders, looking ahead to the implementation of the 2022 historic tax cuts, anticipate the inability of the state to adequately fund public schools, let alone, take on the commitment to fund a second educational delivery system.
3. School choice programs typically start small, but quickly expand eligibility criteria (increased income eligibility, support for home school, or even eventual public support of private tuition for any student at any private school that will take them). Although most of Iowa's nonpublic schools today are religious, in the future, private online academies, the pressure for the state to support homeschooling and the profit motive to expand private schools without the corresponding costs of oversight and compliance will create additional budget pressures for our public schools and compete for teachers and other staff already in short supply.
4. Private for-profit schools may selectively enroll high-performing and low-cost students and are allowed to operate on an uneven playing field without fiduciary oversight or publicly elected representation.

UEN opposes all forms of education savings accounts/voucher programs/additional public funds appropriated for private or home school. Public funds should be used for public schools. Private funds should be used for private schools. Private school programs do not include accountability for expenditures, are not required to educate all children or provide special education services, and are hidden from the public oversight that should come with tax dollars. With unlimited open enrollment to any public school in Iowa, students and parents already have choices for which taxpayers have transparent access and accountability. Since private and home schools in Iowa already cost the state over \$80 million annually, even small demonstration programs or pilot projects should be resisted.

- **Teacher, Administrator, Staff Shortage**

Adequate funding is essential for public schools to compete with the private sector in hiring new and retaining experienced employees. Recent steps to simplify licensure reciprocity with other states and eliminate IPERS barriers to rehiring retirees are welcome relief, but insufficient to eliminate staff shortages urban schools experience today. New policies should be implemented to help schools meet the challenge of attracting and retaining tomorrow's educators and recruiting teachers that mirror our diverse students. UEN supports flexibility in certification requirements such as a K-12 special education credential, minimizing barriers for educators with international experience to teach in our schools, additional teacher intern programs that include adequate pedagogy/on-the-job classroom exposure, and continued support for grow-your-own programs, para and teacher apprenticeships, 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 supported last year's discussion in the Iowa Senate to use the Management Fund for loan forgiveness and recruitment programs. Of critical importance is the dedication of state and local leaders to generate enthusiasm for teaching by speaking about and treating educators with the respect the profession deserves and keeping great Iowa teachers in classrooms in Iowa.

- **Mental Health Services**

UEN leaders understand that mental health challenges must be addressed through a system that recognizes students and families with mental health needs are experiencing symptoms not only in school, but during the 17 hours a day and full days when they are not in school. Iowa needs an improved mental health system for children, including the structure and funding to eliminate the shortage of professionals. Schools should be partners to serve students and families, but educators are not trained providers of mental health care, nor do they have the capacity to meet the mental health needs of students. Students who have no outward indicators of mental illness suffer quietly, even leading to suicide. Well known risk factors many Iowans already recognize include but aren't limited to: students adjudicated or in residential placements, students with refugee trauma, and students experiencing adverse childhood experiences. Providing appropriate mental health services would position these students and their families for better academic, social and economic success. Iowa should engage in every opportunity to maximize school access to Medicaid claiming for health services for all students, not just students with individual education plans. Funds to provide case management and service coordination are required when Medicaid, special education or other categorical funds do not cover it. School districts require capacity and/or funding to provide:

- 1) transition support and services for students returning to school after a mental health placement,
- 2) ongoing teacher, administrator, and support staff training to improve awareness and understanding of child social-emotional, behavioral and mental health needs,
- 3) actionable classroom strategies to address student needs, and
- 4) integration of mental health promotion into instruction when appropriate.

- **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. UEN supports two specific areas of expanded flexibility: 1) flexibility to use school general fund to pay for expanded preschool slots, and 2) management fund flexibility to cover safety and security costs, including security personnel and cyber security measures (both of these most certainly qualify as risk management and litigation cost avoidance, which are current goals of the management fund).

- **Cyber Security**

Cyber criminals pose a malicious threat to the instructional delivery and operation of school districts. When school districts are the target of nefarious attacks, students, families and communities are most impacted. The Iowa Legislature and executive branch should coordinate efforts to support school districts' cyber security needs, to create a consortium that curates, vets and establishes professional services and supports from which school districts may elect to use or purchase for cybersecurity needs. To the maximum extent possible, the consortium should create options and preserve the local decision-making authority of school boards and districts in choosing services and supports needed for their community school. School districts should be able to expense cybersecurity systems, services, improvements, and training from the management fund, the state penny for school infrastructure (SAVE) fund and the physical plant and equipment levy, including the costs of cybersecurity staff.