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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - Rural School Advocates Set 2026 Legislative Agenda

Solution Tree Training Center, 611 5th Avenue, Des Moines, IA, 50309

Member school districts of the Rural School Advocates of Iowa (RSAI) met on Thursday, October 9, in Des Moines. RSAI advocates on behalf of the students, parents and communities in rural Iowa to ensure all students have access to a great Iowa education, regardless of where they live. RSAI members include nearly 200 Iowa school districts, of all sizes. Six Area Education Agencies (AEAs), Iowa's Regents' Universities, Iowa Valley Community College and DMACC are affiliate members of RSAI.

RSAI members heard a presentation from Dr. Melissa Sadorf, Executive Director of the National Rural Education Association. She shared the core values and . A new "Why Rural Matters" annual report will be posted on the NREA website after their annual research symposium and conference, after Oct. 15, to be posted here: <https://nrea.net/research/why-rural-matters/>. There will be a specific state level ranking page for Iowa. Dr. Sadorf congratulated Iowa rural districts on being leaders for students, with high graduation rates and commitment to early childhood education, making sure that so many 4-year-olds have a quality preschool program to give them a good start for success. She also discussed Iowa's challenges, similar to the rest of the nation, facing critical staffing shortages and workforce, transportation and student well-being. She acknowledged the innovative energy and collaboration required for student opportunity and success. Dr. Sadorf also shared that, based on US Census codes, over half of Iowa's schools and about a third of students are in rural settings. She promised that the "Why Rural Matters 2025" will spotlight Iowa's balance of stability and innovation. Dr. Sadorf summed it up, the "Rural student success is Iowa student success."

Attendees discussed, debated and determined the list of RSAI priorities for the 2026 Legislative Session. Those listed below are at the top of the list, having the greatest impact on Iowa's rural students:

Adequate School Resources: State Supplemental Assistance, or SSA, remains a top priority for RSAI members. Despite the state's fiscal strength, the 2025 Iowa Legislature set a modest increase of 2.0% per student last year. Rural schools are grateful for State's investment in teacher salary increases, but members expressed concern about funding equity and sustainability. Improvements in teacher pay will be short lived if the SSA rate does not grow in the future. The combined increases in all funds for the 2025-26 school year will not close Iowa's gap of \$2,374 education spending per pupil below the national average. The state's per pupil increases have lagged rural school costs of educating students in 14 of the last 15 years. The SSA rate also funds AEAs and special education services for Iowa's neediest students.

Ron Lorenz, Superintendent, Red Oak Community School District, stressed the importance of state law which requires the Legislature to set the SSA rate within 30 days of the release of the Governor's budget. "They expect schools to follow the law. It's important for Legislature to follow the law, too." Schools need to know that number on time, so they determine programs and staffing for students, publishing their budget by April 30. RSAI members agreed, and voted unanimously to stress that need.

Staff Shortages: Rural schools continue to struggle to recruit and retain great teachers, paraeducators, bus drivers and staff. Although adequate would help make school employees' pay competitive with other jobs, it alone is not enough. Attendees discussed the need for Iowans to change the culture of political speech, to restore education to a respected profession, to continue licensure and staff flexibility, and to provide state funds for grow-your-own teacher and para-professional licensure programs. Erik Smith, Superintendent, New Hampton Community School District, stated, "We are all facing challenges in finding and keeping qualified people in most areas of work, but particularly in special education and CTE positions in rural schools."

"Like many rural Iowa districts, we are struggling to find and keep qualified teachers and support staff. Fewer students are entering education programs at our colleges and universities, and low wages combined with the

growing demands of the profession have made recruiting more difficult.

Education remains an honorable and essential calling, but the image and support of the profession have suffered. To attract and retain the people who shape our students' futures, we must invest in competitive pay, professional respect, and policies that show Iowa truly values its educators," stated Rob Busch, Starmont & West Central Shared Superintendent.

RSAI members also affirmed the following issues as priorities for the 2025 Legislative Session:

- Quality Preschool including 1.0 weighting for full-day programs. Scott Williamson, Superintendent, Eddyville-Blakesburg-Fremont Community School District, stressed the economic sense of quality preschool, "There are few policy investments that can deliver both improved outcomes for students and savings for taxpayers. Quality preschool does both."
- Key principles for policy makers to consider while reforming property taxes, that promote transparency, predictability, and voter participation in determining local levies that provide quality education services for students.
- Update public school roles now that Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are law, eliminating the responsibility for public schools to reimburse private school parents for transportation, include a meaningful deadline for ESA applications, and provide flexibility for funding retained by public school districts.
- Increased Student Needs, Poverty and Mental Health resources.
- Extension of Whole Grade Sharing and Reorganization Incentives and expansion of Operational Sharing for needed positions.
- Local School Board Authority rather than state-directed mandates. Stan DeZeeuw from Sibley-Ocheyedan Community School District, explained that Iowa used to be known as the local control state. "In recent years", he said, "state policy has inflicted many mandates and one-size-fits all directives damaging to local control. Rushed implementation timelines on many state mandates have made it even worse."
- School Foundation Formula Equity to close the \$130 per pupil funding gap within 10 years.
- AEA services are critical to rural schools who do not have the economy of scale to provide curriculum, school improvement, mental health, media and special education services to staff and students.

Resources:

See the RSAI legislative website at: <http://www.rsaia.org/legislative.html> or contact Margaret Buckton, Professional Advocate, RSAI Margaret.buckton@rsaia.org or 515.201.3755, or Dave Daughton, RSAI Grassroots Advocate, dave.daughton@rsaia.org.

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