Members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee regarding Iowa’s funding for public schools, HF 136.

I’m Bob Olson, and my comments are from the perspective of a school superintendent in Clarion-Goldfield-Dows and Chair of Rural School Advocates of Iowa.

An increase of 1.11% in State Supplemental Assistance, also known as the increase in the state cost per pupil, is not sufficient to fund demands on school districts without further cutting staff and programs for students. If this percentage is enacted, the continued cost of doing business in schools will have exceeded the percentage increase set by this body in 7 of the last 8 school years. In rural schools, the effects are dramatic.

The list of expectations passed on to schools from both the state and federal level often do not include adequate funding to comply. We are living in a world in which student success depends on delivering the promise of public education for all Iowa students. That promise means all Iowa students need great teachers and 21st century technology and experiences. Students are coming to our schools today with more challenges than ever before in our history. Iowa’s future workforce, economy and standard of living depend on your investment in students.

In rural Iowa, school transportation costs are an increasingly larger portion of this state cost per pupil. We share a transportation director with Eagle Grove.  Together, his responsibility includes a geographic area second to only Western Dubuque.

Districts like mine all over the state are challenged to find teachers, with shortage areas defined by the department of education growing. Recent changes to Career and Technical Education and increased demand for teachers for TLC (teacher leadership and compensation) are together intensifying teacher shortages. When I was a shared superintendent in 1989 for Clarion and Goldfield (before reorganization in 1993), we would receive 400 applications for a single elementary teaching position.  Today, we may receive 15, with many not quite meeting our standards.

Thank you for sparing K-12 education in your budget cuts to the current fiscal year. Thank you for working hard to make this funding decision as early in the legislative session as possible. I encourage you to keep working on investing in schools and students by addressing inequities and figuring out how to reverse this recent trend.

We look forward to working with you to make sure all of Iowa’s children are educated. I end by sharing the wisdom of Lester Thurow, Economics and Management Professor, at MIT, in his book Zero-sum Solution, 1985:

“Social welfare programs may be a matter of ethics and generosity, but education and training are not. I am willing to pay for, indeed insist upon, the education of my neighbor’s children, not because I am generous, but because I cannot afford to live with them uneducated.”