



# State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council Annual Report

January 2026



## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
SIYAC Structure.....	2
Committee Priorities and Goals .....	3
Mental Health Committee .....	3
Education Committee.....	4
Community Engagement Committee .....	4
SIYAC Legacy Garden- Council Project.....	4
Guest Speakers and Collaborations .....	4
SIYAC Biannual Youth Survey Results .....	5
Youth Engagement .....	5
Areas of Impact .....	5
Youth Concerns.....	6
Youth Report and Recommendations.....	6

# Introduction

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC) is an advisory council with the purpose of fostering communication among a group of engaged youth across the state and to inform the Governor, general assembly and state and local policy makers regarding programs, policies and practices affecting youth and families; and to advocate for youth on important issues affecting youth.

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council has had recent changes with its relocation to the External Relations Division under the Department of Health and Human Services as well as changes to Iowa Code 216A.140(2)(b) that has provided increased responsibility. In line with this, SIYAC is focusing on collaboration with Executive Branch agencies to help integrate youth voices and perspectives within state government.

## SIYAC Structure

SIYAC has monthly meetings and quarterly in-person meetings where SIYAC members share and advance the work they have been undertaken. During the 2025 SIYAC Fall Meeting, the Council met for the first time and planned what SIYAC would look like for the upcoming term. During this meeting, members discussed their concerns regarding youth. By doing this, SIYAC was able to form four different committees:

- Education Committee
- Mental Health Committee
- Community Engagement Committee
- Policy Review Board

## Roles and Responsibilities of SIYAC

Code changes made during the 2024 Legislative Session broadened SIYAC's responsibilities. According to Iowa Code 216A.140(2)(b), SIYAC's new responsibilities include:

- ▶ Adopt and apply positive youth development principles and practices at the state and local levels.
- ▶ Increase the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of opportunities and services and other supports for youth.
- ▶ Improve, coordinate and prioritize state youth policy and programs across state agencies.
- ▶ Align all policies around the vision that all Iowa youth will be safe, healthy, successful and prepared for adulthood.

- ▶ Review indicator data, identify barriers to youth success and develop strategies to address the barriers.
- ▶ Strengthen partnerships with the nonprofit and private sectors to gather input, build consensus, and maximize the use of existing resources and leverage new resources to improve the lives of youth and their families.
- ▶ Report annually by February 1 to the Governor and general assembly.

SIYAC's work in 2025 centered on:

- Building a strong council by organizing committees and improving how the group works together
- Developing policy advocacy skills among youth members
- Advancing youth-centered policy positions to Iowa state legislators
- Planning tools (surveys, position statements) to guide future action

Through SIYAC's work, SIYAC members will:

- Gain leadership skills and opportunities through executive positions and committee chair leadership.
- Offer networking opportunities with different youth, agencies and partnerships across the state.
- Gain valuable educational opportunities on the legislative process and issues involving youth across the state.
- Improve professional communication skills through collaboration amongst members and partnerships.

## Committee Priorities and Goals

SIYAC has various committees that work to advocate for the issues affecting Iowa youth. Each committee selects legislative and project-based priorities that work to address the needs of youth, which includes public awareness strategies, partnerships, legislative position statements, and individual and group service projects.

### **Mental Health Committee**

- Mental Health Resources Accessibility Position Statement (legislative advocacy): advocating for a new law requiring all school-affiliated websites have information and a link to Your Life Iowa to increase access to mental health resources and crisis services for youth and families.
- Your Life Iowa Collaboration (partnership): collaborating with Your Life Iowa staff to provide youth-based feedback for their current website design and youth targeted information.

## **Education Committee**

- Student Representatives on School Boards Position Statement (legislative advocacy): require that schools in Iowa have a student representative on school boards. By doing this, the Education Committee feels that youth will have a voice in what happens in their respective school districts and communities.
- Iowa State Board of Education Youth Representative (partnership): The Education Committee has been working to connect with different organizations that make a positive impact for youth, including the student representative on the Iowa State Board of Education. Through this, the committee can work with others on different priorities that come up throughout the term.
- Post Secondary Readiness (public awareness): Creating educational channels that inform impacted youth who are preparing for a post-secondary education.

## **Community Engagement Committee**

- Permitted Civic Engagement Absences Position Statement (legislative advocacy): advocating for a new law to allow students one day of excuse absence to participate in a civic engagement activity. These activities are decided by the school but can include registering to vote, attending town halls, and more. This helps remove barriers to youth civic engagement.
- Educational Brochures (public awareness): in an effort to provide youth information in a youth-friendly way, this committee has developed 3 external educational brochures: SNAP 101, Voting 101, and Financial Resources 101.

## **SIYAC Legacy Garden- Council Project**

During the 2025 Spring Meeting, SIYAC participated in a group service project where members planted a pollinator garden in Cedar Falls in partnership with the City of Cedar Falls and the Monarch Club. After this success, SIYAC created a goal to bring this project to the Capitol and plant our own “SIYAC Legacy Garden” on the Iowa Capitol Grounds. SIYAC believes that by doing this, we can show the importance of service as well as highlighting Iowa’s natural beauty.

# **Guest Speakers and Collaborations**

SIYAC is having increased collaboration with Executive Branch Agencies to integrate youth expertise and offer a perspective from youth in the operations of state government. Throughout 2025, SIYAC collaborated with many different individuals, programs and organizations:

- City of Cedar Falls and Monarch Club: planted a pollinator garden at a Cedar Falls public park and learned why milkweed gardens are important.

- Iowa Hunger Summit: created and distributed a Food Waste Guide at the 2025 Iowa Hunger Summit. The Guide was also mailed to dozens of school districts statewide.
- Iowa Family Planning Program (Title X): during our winter meeting, Iowa Family Planning program staff presented their current outreach documents in order to receive youth feedback. SIYAC provided comments on how to make language more accessible and how to make the documents more engaging for youth.
- Iowa State Board of Education Youth Representative (Grace Bechtel): at the November monthly meeting, the State Board of Education youth representative presented to SIYAC. Since then, the SIYAC Education Committee has continued to collaborate with Grace on their current priorities and use her feedback as guidance for their work surrounding education for youth.
- Children, Family and Youth Learning Collaborative: multiple SIYAC members collaborated with a team of HHS staff, Youth Justice Council members and ISTEP members to participate in a nationwide crisis services planning team and to develop an Iowa-specific action plan to improve the current crisis services Iowa has. Members of SIYAC also presented the completed action plan to the nationwide planning team.

## SIYAC Biannual Youth Survey Results

SIYAC recently completed their biannual survey and garnered over 200 responses from youth ages 13-21 from over 35 Iowa cities. The goal of the survey was to gauge the needs of Iowa youth and what challenges they face to help inform SIYAC's priorities. There was a specific focus on youth engagement within the government and local communities. After completing the survey collection, SIYAC identified key data:

### Youth Engagement

- 36% of youth reported feeling not aware or little awareness of legislative changes at the state level
- 3 in 4 youth reported not feeling connected or feeling little connection to state government with 39% reported feeling not connected at all
- 3 in 4 youth have not participated in a civic engagement activity (voting, town hall, petition, etc.)
- More than 2 in 3 youth do not know who their Iowa legislators are
- 67% of youth don't feel connected to their elected officials

### Areas of Impact

- Youth reported education (68%) and mental health (63%) as being the areas that impacted them the most
- 81% of youth reported that they receive the news from social media

## Youth Concerns

There were a few short answer questions in the survey that focused on changes youth would like to see and challenges youth are encountering. Common themes emerged:

- **Youth Representation:** a consistent sentiment among youth is that they do not feel represented in government decision-making processes. Respondents noted that they felt youth opinions were not taken into account and their voices ignored.
- **Lack of Knowledge:** youth expressed concerns on lack of education on how to be civically engaged. Respondents noted that they didn't feel confident in advocating for issues that are impacting their communities through legislative decision making.
- **Insufficient Resources:** many youth responded that they felt there was insufficient support regarding mental health challenges and related resources.
- **Assumptions:** respondents noted common assumptions made about youth such as their age, background and culture. Youth reported feeling misunderstood and anxious about being civically engaged due to these assumptions.

# Youth Report and Recommendations

Based on SIYAC's work and statewide youth outreach, SIYAC has identified three priority areas for policymakers, including the legislature, Governor's office, and local and state decision-makers, to consider when taking action that impacts young people:

## 1. Mental Health

Survey data and the SIYAC Mental Health Committee's work show that youth consistently identify mental health as a major challenge. Iowa should continue to address this growing issue by expanding accessible mental health resources for youth.

## 2. Education

Youth have reported education as the top issue effecting their lives. SIYAC emphasizes the importance of including youth in education-related planning and decision-making to better understand their needs and improve educational outcomes.

## 3. Access to Youth Civic Engagement

Many youth want to be civically engaged but face barriers. Iowa should work to remove these barriers by expanding opportunities for youth participation and providing clear, accessible resources on how to engage in civic and legislative processes