

Iowa State
Education Association

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An affiliate of the
National Education
Association

December 6, 2004

The Honorable Nancy Boettger
Iowa Senate
Iowa State Capitol
Des Moines, IA 50319

The Honorable Jodi Tymeson
Iowa State Capitol
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Senator Boettger and Representative Tymeson:

I'd like to thank you for your efforts as the chairs of the Legislative Interim Committee reviewing the Iowa School Finance Formula and for the opportunity to share with you and your committee members the views of the Iowa State Education Association.

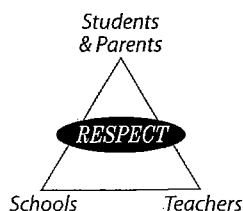
First and foremost, the ISEA believes that in general, the current school finance system has served the state well. As with all complex systems, however -- especially one that allocates over \$3.0 billion to provide educational programs to Iowa's more than 480,000 students in 367 public school districts -- some refinements are needed.

The ISEA believes it will take more than minor "tinkering" of the school funding formula to maintain Iowa's public education system as our state's strongest asset and major marketing tool for job retention and creation. Your committee has a unique opportunity to make bold changes in the way the state invests in its schools -- changes which will guarantee Iowa's future vitality and economic strength.

One bold change would be to eliminate the practice of providing property tax relief through the school finance formula. This revenue-shifting practice does nothing to improve learning opportunities for students, and lawmakers should simply stop trying to claim that it does!

Our state's investment in education should address quality of educational opportunities, not just educational equity. The ISEA offers the following suggestions to ensure that all Iowa students continue to receive a quality public education:

- **Eliminate categorical funding.** Experience has shown that categorical funding has had only a limited short-term benefit and a negative long-term impact on education. It is glaringly apparent to us that "categoricals" -- like excellence in education, class size, technology, and teacher quality -- lose buying power and effectiveness over time because the funds are not allowed to grow. In many instances, categorical funds have



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been cut and even eliminated. Funding for new initiatives must be adequate, sustainable, and be allowed to grow in order to keep pace with inflationary factors.

- Analyze existing programs. Before we look to the future, we need to determine whether current program commitments are still viable. In particular need of study are programs such as teacher quality/compensation, class size initiative, technology, National Board Certification, instructional support, and special education. And if these programs are deemed worthy of continuation, then we must find a way to adequately fund them. Here's a case in point: The original legislative commitment to teacher quality was to have been \$250 - \$300 million over seven years. Although this program is now in its fourth year, funding has remained stagnant. Similarly, the class size initiative for grades K-3 was a wonderful first step toward addressing the learning needs of students. But instead of being allowed to expand, this valuable program has been cut by \$750,000.

- Look to the future. It is clear that the world is changing and Iowa's schools will have to change to meet changing needs. Our students will be competing in a world economy so we will have to make sure that a world quality education is available to all kids whether they live in Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Lineville or Diagonal. We need to look to the future and weigh our success -- not on how much we spend but on the return we receive on our investments. What may appear costly today could reap untold rewards in the future. We need to seriously consider providing for regional learning opportunities and expanding early childhood programs and before- and after-school programs. We must also explore developing new programs in the areas of science, educational research, and innovation. The future will require risk taking but that is the beauty of America and Iowa. We have been risk takers in the past and we need to return to our great heritage so that we can compete in the future.

In closing, we appreciate the opportunity to share with you our view on your work. It is a daunting task we recognize, but a task that is essential to the future of our great state. If we do not take bold actions on behalf of our children, then who will? An extremely well-educated work force has always been this state's greatest resource. Now is the time to take action to ensure that our future workers stay here and that we can also attract the best workers from around the world to Iowa. Our children are our future and it's time to fight for them. The members and staff of the ISEA stand patiently waiting to assist you in your great efforts.

Sincerely,

Bradley D. Hudson
Administrative Lobbyist