

Iowa School Needs Survey Report Summary December 2005

The national average for per pupil spending is \$1,058 more than Iowa spends. Iowa PTA conducted a survey of public school superintendents to find out what they could do for students if they had an additional \$1,058 per pupil. Questionnaires were e-mailed to every public school superintendent in Iowa. Superintendents were asked to forward the questionnaire to principals in their district. Respondents were asked to identify their position in the school district and their school district's enrollment. All respondents were asked what they could do for students if they had an additional \$1,058 per pupil. They were also asked to list other major concerns this year. Results are reported by region and by district size.

Summary of Responses From Superintendents (67 superintendents responded)

Iowa superintendents identified many ways that additional resources could be used to enhance the education of Iowa students. The following six areas were mentioned most often:

1. Add and Update Technology (Listed by 52% of superintendents)

Computers support and enhance instruction and provide opportunities for students to use technology in ways that will prepare them for postsecondary education and the workforce.

2. Update Curricula, Textbooks, Materials and Resources (Listed by 48% of superintendents)

A quality educational program requires curricula and instructional materials that are current, relevant, and regularly reviewed and updated.

3. Reduce Class Sizes (Listed by 45% of superintendents)

Small class sizes enable teachers to provide students with individual attention, establish individualized goals and benchmarks, and prepare lesson plans that are rich in "hands-on" activities and exploration.

4. Provide More Professional Development Opportunities (Listed by 43% of superintendents)

Research indicates that the most important factor in student learning is the teacher and his or her ability to motivate and communicate. Teachers need assistance in implementing new research-based instructional practices that will increase student achievement. They must be provided with opportunities to update content (especially in science and technology), improve their skills, collaborate with colleagues, and renew their commitment to teaching.

The following two areas were each listed by 33% of the superintendents:

5. Support for Early Intervention Programs, "At-Risk" Students, and English Language Learners

An increasing number of students are living in poverty, homeless, unable to speak English, have behavioral problems, or lack support at home. Meeting the needs of these students requires additional teachers and staff, specific courses, instructional strategies, before- and after-school programs, and enrichment opportunities.

6. Increase Teacher Pay

Forty-one other states offer teachers more money than Iowa does, and many other professions are available to teachers at a higher salary. It is essential that Iowa schools be able to hire and retain highly qualified teachers for every grade and subject.

Many other needs were mentioned by superintendents, but not as often as the six listed above. Some of the other needs that could be met with additional funding included:

Reading specialists

Guidance Counselors

Media specialists

Added course offerings

Field trips and exploratory experiences

Restored funding for foreign languages, music, art, drama and physical education

Before- and After-School Programs and Preschool Programs

A major concern for superintendents this year is the expected increase in costs for fuel and utilities. Declining enrollment continues to be a major concern, along with aging or inadequate facilities, increasing cost of health insurance and staff benefits, and the ability to retain/replace quality teachers. Superintendents also listed government mandates, student learning, student behavior, and parental support as concerns.

This is the fourth consecutive year that Iowa PTA has surveyed administrators to determine needs and concerns. The tone of the responses has gotten progressively more depressed, discouraged, and disheartened. In the words of one superintendent:

We are tired. We have too few people trying to do too many different jobs. We waste oodles of time on reports and mandates that do not enhance our learning environment. We could be doing so much better if we only had the resources to do it!! Iowa is losing its best economic development tool – its top-notch schools. I have never seen such a bleak period in Iowa education in all my 33-year career!

Administrators provided many facts and comments to support concerns for education:

- *Teacher salaries are not keeping pace; funding is not adequate to meet the growing needs of our students. We have more English Language Learners, more students in poverty, and more students coming to school with serious learning disabilities. Yet, Iowa continues to lose ground in per pupil spending at a time when Iowa students have greater needs than ever before.*
- *The percentage of students coming into the system unprepared for kindergarten has increased from 8% to 23% in the last 5 years.*
- *4.7% of our student population is currently homeless. Funding is needed to support the needs of homeless children.*
- *With over 300 students unable to speak, read, or write English, we need more instructors who are highly trained in delivering English to non-English-speaking students.*
- *Students are entering school unprepared to sit and listen, to take turns participating, and to show good manners... Children don't know nursery rhymes or childhood songs. They don't understand the food that is served – they haven't ever seen or tasted vegetables, some fruit, mashed potatoes and gravy. If it's not packaged food or fast food, they don't know what it is.*
- *Each instructor is scheduled so tightly, there is no room in their schedule for individual attention.*
- *It is time we did away with the unfunded mandates enacted following the issuance of the Nation at Risk Report (1983), and focus on what is needed in the 21st century to meet the needs of students and improve student achievement. If we wait much longer, we will be so far behind other countries that we may never catch up.*
- *When I started in education 30 years ago in Iowa, moving from out of state, I did so because Iowa was a leader and something to be proud about. We are no longer a leader in education, and this saddens me.*
- *We are having more and more “at-risk” students and less and less money to serve these students. I see more and more parents both working at low paying jobs and not being able to afford quality child care. Students are not coming to schools as prepared as in the past. More and more demands are being placed on schools yet, at the same time, funding decreases. We are fortunate, for it is only through the heroic efforts of parents raising money for the schools that the teachers feel anyone cares about what they are doing. I think schools that do not have this support would have a very difficult time keeping up their morale, for it is apparent our government leaders at both the state and federal level don't truly want to support public schools.*

Iowa PTA supports fully funding public schools and an equitable school finance formula that will provide funding for public education commensurate with rising costs and the challenges facing public education in providing quality instructional programs for all its students. For the complete report on this year's School Needs Survey or to learn more about Iowa PTA legislative activities, contact Iowa PTA or visit: www.iowapta.org

Iowa PTA
5619 N.W. 86th St., Suite 600
Johnston, IA 50131-2955
(800) 475-4782
(515) 225-4197
ia_office@pta.org
www.iowapta.org