

State Representative Cindy Golding
Sound Bites vs Facts

It's campaign season again and that means plenty of misinformation from a variety of sources. As your State Representative, I think it is important that I provide some facts to balance some of the misunderstandings.

Myth

Iowa government is running a budget deficit.

Fact

Current revenues show a better-than-expected financial picture for this year. When the last budget year ended on June 30, the state had \$5.5 billion in the bank. The last time the budget was not balanced, and draconian expense cuts had to be made, was during the administration of Chet Culver.

It is also important to remember that state income taxes have been reduced and taxes on retirement income eliminated, allowing you to keep more of your money.

Myth

Iowa does not prioritize education.

Fact

56% of Iowa's state budget is spent on Iowa's education system. Most citizens realize that a financial "priority" means you spend most of your money in that area. 56% is a significant majority of all expenses. This number does not include the additional funding public schools also receive from property taxes and from Federal contributions.

Myth

Iowa government is "defunding" public schools.

Fact

First, I believe that local public schools must be the backbone of our responsibility for educating our children. The legislature is not "defunding" public schools.

Since 2020, taxpayer funding for K-12 public schools has increased by 33.9%.

Public school financing is extremely complicated, but here is the overview:

Prior to 1973, local public schools were funded almost entirely by local property taxes. Then, as now, legislators recognized that quality education was a state priority. To lessen inequities among school districts across the state, the legislature voted to "supplement" property tax income with State money. This became known as State Supplemental Aid (SSA). SSA is a state payment to the local public school based on student count. For 2026-2027 the SSA is \$8,148 per student. Naturally, the student must attend the school for the school to receive the payment.

In 2008, the legislature added a state-wide 1% sales tax to increase public school funding. These SAVE dollars (Secure an Advanced Vision for Education) are paid to the local public school based on the number of resident students in the district, whether or not the student attends the local school.

Simplifying a very complicated topic, Iowa public schools have four basic sources of taxpayer money:

- Federal funds
- Property taxes
- SAVE
- SSA

Myth

Public money should not be sent to private schools.

Fact

Iowa taxpayer money has been used for private education for decades.

For example, since 1969 state tax dollars have funded the Iowa Tuition Grant program (ITG), which enables students from all socioeconomic groups the opportunity to attend private colleges in Iowa; colleges such as Cornell, Coe, and Mt. Mercy right here in Linn County. Cornell College, for example, received almost \$1.3 Million of taxpayer money from the ITG program in FY2024. It is safe to say that these taxpayer contributions have made a significant difference in private college finances, and that difference has appreciably benefited the citizens of the Mt. Vernon/Lisbon area.

Myth

When a K-12 local public-school student enrolls in a private school, the private school gets the taxpayer money.

Fact

The public school still receives the following taxpayer money:

- Property tax
- SAVE tax
- SSA of \$8,148 for the first year plus a variable up to \$1,600
- A variable amount up to \$1,600 per year for subsequent years

In other words, the public school doesn't have the responsibility or expenses for educating the student, yet the public school still receives the bulk of the taxpayer money.

The ACCREDITED private school, on the other hand, receives \$8,148 dollars.

Myth

The concept of "School Choice" damages the quality of education. Education Savings Accounts (ESA) are "shoveling" money to private schools.

Fact

Parental choice became a legislative priority in 1989 when the Open Enrollment law allowed K-12 students to enroll in a different public school. The homeschooling option was expanded in 1991, recognizing that some students may do better in a non-standard setting. School Choice options expanded in 2023 to include ESA accounts for ACCREDITED private schools and public charter schools.

Outstanding schools attract students from other areas. For example, last school year Mt. Vernon had 398 students who were “open-enrolled” from other school districts, and 51 ESA students. Lisbon drew 195 students enrolled from other school districts and only 2 ESA students. Springville attracted 117 open-enrolled students and had 12 ESA students. Some school districts, by comparison, must evaluate their own performance because they are losing students to other school districts. Competition creates the opportunity for greater overall success.

Few citizens today would question the concept of “open enrollment”; however, when it was introduced, many naysayers believed that open enrollment would ruin public education. Today, some also question the ESA program (mistakenly called “vouchers”).

Open Enrollment Compared to ESA

An interesting fact is that if a student open-enrolls today from School A to School B, School A gets most of the Federal funds, all the property tax, and all the SAVE money. However, the Supplemental State Aid amount (\$8,148) goes to School B.

On the other hand, if that same student uses an ESA to go to an accredited private school, School A still gets some of the Federal funds, all of the property tax, all of the SAVE money, and \$8,148 SSA plus up to \$1,600 the first year, then up to \$1,600 in subsequent years.

In other words, local public schools receive more tax revenue if a student uses ESA to attend a private school than if the student open enrolls into another public school.

The last year we have complete school spending data is the 2024-2025 school year. In that year, the average total expense across all Iowa public schools was \$24,285/student. The taxpayer expense for a student using an ESA to attend a private school was \$7,826 (the SSA for 2024-2025 school year).

Summary

Of the entire “school choice” discussion, local public schools receive most of the tax revenue even when families choose other options for their children. I’ve heard it said that we are shortchanging public schools to finance the wealthiest Iowans sending their kids to private schools. In reality, the ESA program is designed to erase the education inequities based on family income. Utilizing an ESA, even a poor family can send their children to a private school if they believe that is in the best interest of their children.

For specific details for your school district go to
www.legis.iowa.gov/publications/schoolAid

This site has exact enrollment and other funding details.

It is an honor to serve the citizens in small town and rural Linn County as your State Representative. I appreciate your prayers and words of encouragement. I seek your input, will tell you how I see things, and I will not be bought.
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