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Annual report details the state of Iowa's education system



Travis K. Fischer
Mid-America
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It's not just students that have to do their homework.

On January 25, the Iowa Department of Education released their 2017 Annual Condition of Education Report. The Legislatively mandated report is used by Iowa lawmakers as a resource to inform policy decisions. Covering a wide range of topics, the State of Education report offers a comprehensive data set that not only provides information about the current state of affairs, but also historical data to determine trends and predict long-term changes.

"We provide it to the legislature every year, and they use it in any way they see fit," said Jay Pennington, Bureau of Information and Analysis Services Chief for the Department of Education.

From student enrollment and performance to teacher salaries and technology spending, the report shows what areas Iowa's education system is performing well in and what areas need more attention.

One encouraging statistic in the report is that student enrollment numbers continue to move upward. Following a 14-year decline between 1997 and 2011, public school enrollment numbers are slowly but surely on the rise, and the upward trend is projected to continue over the next six years.

The reversal of this downward trend can be largely attributed to a significant increase in the number of minority students in the public school system. The percentage of minority students in public schools has more than doubled since 2000, now making up 23.5 percent of the student body.

"When you start looking at the different groups, the largest group growing are the Hispanic and Latino students," said Pennington. "It's significantly above where it was a decade and a half before. That's an area of opportunity."

As enrollment goes up, class sizes have also been slightly on the rise. Since 2001, average class sizes have increased from about 19 students per class to about 20. Additional funding has been allocated into the education system with the goal of bringing class sizes down to 17 students, but so far those funds seem to merely be keeping class sizes stable.

"The funding for this program has remained about the same across time," said Pennington. "It's not like there's a huge infusion of money to impact those class sizes."

Iowa employs 36,279 full-time teachers with an average salary of \$55,703, placing Iowa at 22nd in the national rankings of teacher compensation and fifth when compared to other Midwest states.

One of the bigger challenges of Iowa's education landscape is the divide between rural and urban districts. Roughly half of Iowa's public school students are educated in 33 of the state's highest populated districts, with the other half spread out across the remaining 300 districts. A school district that has 300 students will have different needs and resources than one that has 3,000, making it difficult to implement statewide programs that work in both environments.

"From a policy perspective, districts in those different size categories, we need to think about how policies impact those school districts differently," said Pennington.

For example, a recent legislative priority has been the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System, which encourages experienced teachers to take a mentoring role for other teachers. However, finding teachers to take on that role will naturally be more difficult in districts with smaller pools of candidates.

"When we think about rolling that out and ensuring that 25 percent of teachers in any given district are in those leadership roles, it may be the case in the smaller districts that they may need to work together to provide a mentor teacher role," said Pennington. "We need to think about our AEA partners in how they can assist that participation."

Internet access is also an issue, particularly as paper tests are being phased out in favor of online tests. Out of the state's 1,303 school buildings, 237 of them have internet speeds of less than 100 Mbps. Ten of those buildings have no internet access at all.

At the same time, Iowa has made significant increases in technology spending since 2008. For the 2015-16 school year, the state spent \$179.06 per student on computer hardware and software. The student-to-computer ratio in Iowa is now one-to-one across the state, a dramatic change in the learning environment since 2000 when the ratio was four-to-one. Academically, the annual report

features a mix of good news and bad news.

Generally speaking, between 75 and 83 percent of Iowa students are shown to be proficient in reading, mathematics, and science, depending and the grade and subject. While these numbers may see a dip or rise, there has been little change in them in recent years.

"Test results have largely flatlined across time," said Pennington. "There's more work that can be done."

On the other hand, Iowa rates highly in ACT scores and can be proud of their exemplarily high graduation rate. At 90.8 percent, Iowa's Class of 2015 boasted the highest graduation rate in the nation for that year. The class of 2016 improved on even that high standard with a 91.3 percent graduation rate.

"Iowa has always been either one or two in terms of graduation rates nationally," said Pennington. "I think folks can really be proud of getting as many students as possible completing high school within four years."

The complete State of Education report is available on the Department of Education's website. In addition, for the first time this year, the department is introducing an online companion that features interactive charts for easy data comparison.

With the 2017 report done, Pennington says the Department of Education is already well underway in preparing another report for next year. Enrollment data for the 2017-18 year is already being gathered, and the Department of Education will spend the next several months collecting data to keep the state up to date.

"We take it by chunks," said Pennington. "It takes a whole year to get all the different parts together."

Education Facts

- In 2016-17, Iowa public schools educated 485,147 students.
- 32,622 additional students attend non-public schools.
- Half of Iowa's students are educated in just 10 percent of Iowa's school districts.
- 6.5 percent of public school students open enroll out of their district.
- 41.3% of students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program.
- 11.6 percent of students are enrolled in special education.
- 98.5 percent of Iowa public schools offer a preschool program.

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