


2025-2026



iowa
safe
schools



STUDENT DAY AT THE CAPITOL

State Legislative Advocacy Workbook



Get Ready for Student Day at the Capitol!

Hello! We're so excited to have you join us for Student Day at the Capitol (SDAC). Our team loves this event because it's a great introduction to understanding the legislative process and real-world advocacy.

This packet is totally optional. You don't need any prior knowledge or experience to participate in SDAC. This is just an extra resource for anyone who wants to explore advocacy, plan activities for their GSA, or just feel more confident ahead of time!

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Quick Links:

- Contact Hannah Mitchell (Dir. of Youth Engagement): hannah@iowasafeschools.org
- Contact Damian Thompson (Dir. of External Affairs): damian@iowasafeschools.org
- Iowa Legislature's [Website](#)
- Legislative Website's [Educational Tools](#)
- Student Day at the Capitol 2026 [Registration](#)

ABOUT

Iowa Safe Schools

Iowa Safe Schools, a non-governmental non-profit, was founded in 2002 with the goal of ensuring every young person in Iowa can learn in a safe, supportive, and affirming environment. In our early years, we worked alongside students, families, and community leaders to share students' stories for change, ultimately resulting in Iowa passing a comprehensive anti-bullying law and expanding civil rights protections to LGBTQ people.

Today, we continue that work by supporting LGBTQ students, their families, and the adults who serve them.

[Our staff](#) are here to answer your questions, celebrate your wins, and support you when challenges come up. You can connect with our advocacy expert, [Damian Thompson](#) or our Director of Youth Engagement, [Hannah Mitchell](#) for all things advocacy, student organizing, or civic engagement!

The GSA Network Program & Student Events

A core part of our mission is strengthening student leadership and student-led inclusion clubs across Iowa. Through the GSA Network, we connect hundreds of LGBTQ and allied students, support advisors, and offer programming like Student Day at the Capitol that develops students' civic skills, advocacy, leadership capacity, and sense of community.

[Check out the latest on our upcoming student events](#)

2026 Student Day at the Capitol - March 3rd, 2026

Student Day at the Capitol is our annual civic engagement event where LGBTQ and allied students learn how the legislative process works, explore real-world advocacy strategies, and meet with lawmakers to share their perspectives. No prior experience is needed—just curiosity, courage, and a desire to make change.

Learn more & register now: iowasafeschools.org/student-day

Understanding How a Bill Becomes a Law (in Iowa!)

Iowa's Legislative Structure

Iowa as a state has a **bicameral legislature**, meaning it's made up of two chambers:

- **Iowa House of Representatives** – 100 members, each serving a two-year term.
- **Iowa Senate** – 50 members, each serving a four-year term.

Together, these two chambers form the **Iowa General Assembly**. Every bill must pass through **both chambers** before it can go to the Governor, who can sign it into law or veto it.

Iowa's legislative work happens over a two-year period known as a **General Assembly**, and each one is numbered in order. For example, the 90th General Assembly met in 2023-2024. Each General Assembly is made up of:

- The First Regular Session (odd-numbered years).
- The Second Regular Session (even-numbered years)

Bills that don't pass during the first session don't necessarily "die", they can be carried over to the second session for more discussion.

Step #1: Introducing a Bill

Bills are introduced by legislators, but *ideas* for bills can come from many places, including:

- **Legislators** themselves, based on issues they care about.
- **Constituents** (that's you!) who contact their lawmakers about a problem or an idea.
- **Organizations and experts** — **Advocacy groups, nonprofits, businesses, and lobbyists** may suggest changes to address problems, update regulations, or improve services.
- **Government agencies & the Governor**, who can work with legislators to introduce bills.

When a legislator wants to introduce a bill, they usually don't write the full legal text alone. They work with [a nonpartisan office](#) that helps draft bills. This office may also prepare estimations of costs or legal notes to explain the impacts of a bill.

Once an idea is developed, a legislator must **sponsor** the bill, meaning they agree to submit it to the Legislature. A bill can't be introduced without a sponsor; the sponsor often explains the bill, presents it in committee and during floor debate, and answers questions from other lawmakers. In some cases, *several* legislators **co-sponsor** a bill to show support.

A bill can start in either chamber (except for bills that raise or spend state funds, which must start in the House).

When a legislator introduces a bill:

- It's given a bill number (for example, House File 123).
- The bill's title and purpose are briefly read aloud – this is called a first reading.
- It's then assigned to a subcommittee/committee by the chamber leadership (the Speaker of the House or the Senate Majority Leader).

Step #2: Committees

Committees are where the action happens. Each chamber has several standing committees, and each one focuses on a specific topic — like education, health, or commerce.

Before a full committee votes on a bill, it often goes to a smaller group called a **subcommittee** for closer review and input. **Subcommittees** are made up of two or three legislators from that committee who take a first look at the bill, discuss it in detail, and gather public input through **public hearings**.

The subcommittee ultimately makes a recommendation to the full committee — usually to pass, amend, or reject the bill. The full committee meets to review the subcommittee's findings, make any changes, and vote on whether to move the bill forward.

Bills must move through this process before certain deadlines called **funnel dates**, which make sure bills keep moving through the process instead of stalling.

If the committee approves the bill, it moves forward to the full chamber for debate and voting — but if the committee rejects the bill or misses a funnel date, the bill usually dies for the session.

Step #3: Debate and Vote in the Chamber

Once a bill leaves committee, it goes to the floor of that chamber. Legislators then debate the bill and can propose **amendments** (changes). After debate, members vote; a bill passes through a chamber with a **majority** of votes.

Then, the bill moves to the other chamber (House or Senate) and the process repeats.

Step #4: Governor's Decision

Once both chambers agree and pass the same version, the bill goes to the Governor's desk. Generally, the Governor can either sign the bill into law or veto the bill (reject it).

How An Idea Becomes a Law

Legislative Webpage Scavenger Hunt Activity

Use the website www.legis.iowa.gov, and complete this activity individually or compete against other members of your GSA!

#1. Find the names of your Iowa House and Senate Representatives using the “Find Your Legislator” tool. List any committees they sit on.

My House Representative:

My Senate Representative:

Committees:

#2. Find a bill filed in the 91st General Assembly under the ‘Education’ category. List the bill’s number and title.

Bill Number:

Bill Title:

#3. For the bill you found in #2, read the explanation and briefly summarize it.

Summary:

#4. Find the House committee on Education. Who are the top three listed representatives?

Chair:

Vice Chair:

Ranking Member:

#5. Use the Bill Tracking Tool to find SF 418. What date was this signed into law by the Governor?

#6. Find the number of the General Assembly for the year you were born.

My birth year:

General Assembly #:

#7. What was the bill number for the first bill ever sponsored by Rep. Aime Wichtendahl?

Bill Number:

Legislative Webpage Scavenger Hunt Activity - HINTS & ANSWER KEY

Use the website www.legis.iowa.gov, and complete this activity individually or compete against other members of your GSA!

#1. Find the names of your Iowa House and Senate Representatives using the “Find Your Legislator” tool. List any committees they sit on.

Answers vary. [Direct link to “Find Your Legislator” tool](#)

#2. Find a bill filed in the 91st General Assembly under the ‘Education’ category. List the bill’s number and title.

Legislation > BillBook > Ensure 91st GA is selected on left side > Education

[Direct link to valid answers](#)

#3. For the bill you found in #2, read the explanation and briefly summarize it.

Answers vary. Each bill has an “explanation” header within the text of the bill.

#4. Find the House committee on Education. Who are the top three listed representatives?

Chair: Skyler Wheeler

Vice Chair: Samantha Fett

Ranking Member: Heather Matson

#5. Use the Bill Tracking Tool to find SF 418. What date was this signed into law by the Governor?

2/28/25

#6. Find the number of the General Assembly for the year you were born.

Answers vary. General Assembly numbers and years are listed in any dropdown menu when selecting which General Assembly you’re viewing - [Example](#).

#7. What was the bill number for the first bill ever sponsored by Rep. Aime Wichtendahl?

Legislation Tab > Find Legislation > By Sponsor or Floor Manager > Select Aime Wichtendahl under House Sponsor dropdown > HF 1

Understanding an “Issue”

When we say “**issue**” in this packet, we’re talking about a civic or policy area—something in your school, community, or state that affects you and that you’d like to improve. Most issues don’t have *one* person or agency fully in charge. Decisions and their effects happen through **layers of influence** – from individual schools and local school boards to the state legislature and even the federal level. Each layer adds a piece to the puzzle.

We’ll use examples from schools and students in Iowa, but these same ideas apply to any issue – whether it’s health care, immigrant rights, or the environment.

Layers of Influence - *Who Shapes What Happens in Schools?*

Level	Examples of Who	What They Can Do	Example
School	Principals, teachers, counselors	Apply district and state policies; make daily decisions.	A principal investigates a bullying report.
District	School board, superintendent	Create or adopt policies that guide all schools in the district.	The district’s policy defines what counts as bullying and outlines steps staff must take.
State	Iowa Legislature, Governor, Iowa Dept. of Education	Pass, remove, revise laws that set requirements for schools statewide.	Iowa Code 280.28 requires every school district to have an anti-bullying policy and report data.
Federal	U.S. Congress, U.S. Dept. of Education	Alter national protections; allocate funding and enforcement.	Passed Title IX/VI, The U.S. Dept. of Ed. investigates when bullying crosses into discrimination.
Judicial	State courts, district courts, U.S. Supreme Court	Consider the constitutionality of laws; consider how laws apply in real cases.	The Iowa Supreme Court may review a student’s claim that their rights under anti-bullying laws were violated.
Community & Advocates	Students, families, local organizations	Raise awareness, provide education, and push for policies.	Students, parents, and groups advocate for clearer policies and proper enforcement.

In real life: All these layers interact. The state defines what schools must have in their bullying policies, districts write their version, schools apply them, and community members help make sure the policies are working. You can probably think of even **more** layers (or people within these layers) who shape what happens. Elections, news, researchers & data, social media, crises, etc.

That's why the *same* law can feel very different from one school to another—the layers of influence shape what happens on the ground.

Research Guide

If you're interested in a particular issue but not sure how it connects to these layers of influence, try doing a bit of research. Here are some **guided search prompts** to get you started:

- Iowa [your issue] law
- Iowa legislature [your issue] bill
- [Your issue] model legislation
- [Your issue] policy map
- Timeline of [your issue] policy in [Iowa, the U.S., the world]
- Editorials about [your issue]
- [Your issue] coverage comparison (resources: [allsides.com](https://www.allsides.com); [ground.news](https://www.ground.news))

Reflection: After researching, jot down your takeaways:

My issue:

Who influences it (local, state, federal):

Opposing arguments:

One thing I learned about how decisions are made:

A question I still have:

Telling Your Story

Personal Reflection & Narrative Builder

Step #1: Discovering What You Care About

Goal: Identify issues that matter to you, even if you're not sure why yet.

Circle or star 2-3 issues that stand out to you. We've provided a list of ideas to get you started, but you can also add your own!

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student safety & bullying prevention • Mental health support & resources • LGBTQ+ civil rights & safety • Housing & Healthcare access • Diversity & equity • Racial equity • Immigrant rights • Gun violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library & inclusive literature access • Free speech & student expression • School funding • School policies • Bathroom & facility access • Government overreach & privacy • •
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Let's write: Now that you've picked a few issues, take a few minutes to think about **why they matter to you.**

What connects you personally to these issues? Think about moments in your life that shaped how you feel about them. *Remember*, being 'connected' to an issue doesn't always mean you've experienced something dramatic – the small moments or things you've seen happen to others also give you valuable insight.

Grab a piece of scratch paper & write in as many words as you want & however you want - we'll come back to edit it in step #3!

Step #2: Understanding the Issue

Issue at Hand	My Experience	The State Legislature's role:

Not sure how the state legislature impacts your issue? Be sure to read through the 'Understanding an Issue' section of this packet!

Step #3. Telling a Story

Understanding Strong Stories

Below are two versions of the same story. Read both, then reflect (jot down your own thoughts or discuss in a group) on the questions that follow.

Story A:

“So last year, on the second week of school—I think it was a Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday—I was walking into the cafeteria around 11:37 because that’s when my lunch period started, and I saw a group of kids at a table kind of laughing. My friend Alex was sitting nearby, and I went over to talk to him, and then I noticed he looked sort of upset. And then he told me that earlier that morning, in first period, two students had called him slurs because he uses they/them pronouns, and then he told the teacher, but the teacher kind of brushed it off and said something like “let’s just focus on the lesson,” which wasn’t helpful. And then later in the day he went to the counselor, but she said she wasn’t sure what she could do.

And then at lunch those same students walked by again and made comments, and Alex just put their head down. I didn’t really know what to do. I tried talking to a different teacher after school, but she told me to email the principal, and then when I emailed him he didn’t respond for like three days, but when he did respond, he said he couldn’t do anything about it. And then after all that nothing really changed except Alex decided to sit in the library most days instead of the cafeteria. I just feel like students deserve better.”

Story B:

“Last year, my friend Alex was repeatedly called slurs for using they/them pronouns. When they reported it, the adults they talked to said they couldn’t intervene, and the harassment continued. As a result, Alex stopped eating in the cafeteria and spent most lunches alone in the library just to feel safe.”

Questions for reflection:

1. What differences do you notice between Story A and B? (clarity, tone, impact, etc.)
2. How long would it take to tell each story?
3. Do the extra details in Story A make the message stronger?

Editing Your Story

Now, let's return to your writing from Step #1 and start shaping it into a powerful message. When you meet with a lawmaker, you often only have a few minutes—so your story needs to be focused and memorable.

#1. Underline 1 clear example that best shows the issue in action. It's tempting to list everything you've experienced, but too many examples can overwhelm your listener.

#2. Circle key words or phrases that show the impact. Think about what *feeling* you want the listener to walk away with, and connect your story to values lawmakers often name—such as safety, fairness, dignity, integrity, or freedom (even if they interpret those values much differently than you do).

#3. Cross out unnecessary details. Keep details that help the audience understand the problem or build empathy. Remove anything that distracts from the core moment.

Look for: Exact dates & times, unnecessary backstories, or repeated ideas.

#4. Rewrite your story in only 3-4 sentences. You should be able to retell this story in about 45 seconds. Try practicing with a partner, especially someone unfamiliar with the situation. After you share your story, ask a partner to repeat it back to you. Take note of the key parts they remember.

TIP: The “And Then” Rule:

If you read through your story, and you hear yourself saying “and then... and then... and then...,” it might feel like a long list of details instead of a real narrative.

Strong stories use “but” (a challenge) or “therefore” (a consequence) to show what changed and why it matters.

Check out the phrase bank at the end of this packet for more ideas!

Step #4. Build Your Message

Now, we'll put it all together!

Step #1 - Set the scene

Who are you? Where are you from? *Remember to identify yourself as being from your lawmaker's district in some way.*

"Hello, my name is _____ and I'm a student/voter from _____ School."

Step #2 - Tell your story

Insert your story from Step #3 here.

Step #3: Connect your story to what your lawmaker can influence, like a specific bill

Look back at what you wrote in Step #2 under "The State Legislature's Role".

"This is a direct result of....."

"Our state really needs....."

Step #4: Make a specific ask

Make a clear call to action - this can be asking a lawmaker to oppose a bill, support a bill, introduce a bill or even asking them to commit to learning more.

"Will you commit to repealing this harmful bill?"

Step #5: Engage

While you don't need to be a content expert, be prepared to answer some basic questions. Consider planning to follow up with your representative by emailing or calling their office.

...And that's it! You should now have a strong, compelling message you can share in just a minute or two.

Feeling stuck? Check out the **Advocacy Sentence Starters & Phrase Bank** section of this packet for extra support.

When you're ready, practice delivering your message a few times—out loud, with a friend, or even in the mirror.

Advocacy Sentence Starter & Phrase Bank:

Opening a Conversation

“Thank you for taking time to talk with me today.”

“I appreciate the chance to tell you about this issue.”

“I’m a student from ____, and I’m here because...”

“I know you’re busy, so I’ll keep this brief.”

“I wanted to share what I’m seeing in my school/community.”

Sharing Facts or Experiences

“Are you aware that...?”

“Here’s what this actually looks like in real life...”

“Something you should know is...”

“What I’ve seen among my peers is...”

“In my school, we’ve noticed...”

“Something students often deal with that adults don’t always see is...”

“From my experience as a student...”

“One thing I hope you’ll understand is...”

Explaining Why It Matters

“This matters to students because...”

“This affects our learning environment by...”

“When policies like this are passed, students experience...”

“It may seem small, but for students it means...”

“The impact on LGBTQ+ students (or another group) is...”

“When this isn’t addressed, we feel...”

“This isn’t about politics for us – it’s about whether we feel safe and supported at school.”

Asking Direct Questions

“What steps will you take to support...?”

“Will you commit to...?”

“How will you ensure that students like me are protected when...?”

“Where do you currently stand on...?”

“Would you consider supporting/opposing legislation that...?”

“Are you open to learning more about...?”

“What is your plan to address...?”

Making a Clear Ask

"I'm asking you to support..."

"Students need lawmakers to..."

"I hope you'll oppose..."

"I'm urging you to vote in favor of..."

"We would really like to see movement on..."

"Please help ensure that..."

Building Connection or Common Ground

"Something we both care about is creating safe schools."

"This is important to me because... and I think it aligns with your priorities around..."

"I know we likely share the goal of helping students succeed."

"As a student in your district, I'm hoping we can work together on..."

Navigating Hard Questions or Pushback

"From a student perspective, here's what I want to make clear..."

"I understand your concern, but I'd like to offer another viewpoint..."

"I hear that, but in our schools the reality is..."

"Even if we don't agree on everything, I hope you'll consider..."

Closing the Conversation

"Thank you for listening to my perspective."

"I hope you'll really think about what students are telling you."

"I appreciate your time and your consideration."














"Thank you for your leadership and for hearing my story today."

"Is it okay if I follow up with more information?"

Advocacy Glossary:

Legislative Services Agency Glossary

Term	Definition	Category
Act	A bill that has been passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor.	☀️ Core Terms
Amendment	A change or addition made to a bill. It can add, delete, or edit parts of the text.	☀️ Core Terms
Appropriation	Money that the Legislature sets aside for a specific purpose (like education or roads).	💰 Budget
Bill	A written proposal to create, change, or repeal a law.	☀️ Core Terms
Carryover Legislation	A bill that didn't finish during the first year of a General Assembly but can still be considered in the second year.	🏠 Legislature Structure
Caucus	A meeting of members from the same political party to plan strategy or discuss bills.	🗨️ Behind the Scenes
Caucus/Caucusing	A meeting of members from the same political party to plan strategy or discuss bills.	⚙️ Lawmaking Process
Co-Sponsor	A legislator who signs onto another legislator's bill to show support.	🧠 People and Roles
Committee	A small group of legislators who specialize in certain subjects (like education, health, or transportation) and review bills related to those areas. Committees produce reports which show their decision on a bill.	🏠 Legislature Structure
Committee Chair	The legislator in charge of a committee, responsible for guiding discussion and deciding which bills get heard.	🧠 People and Roles
Constituent	A person who lives in a legislator's district. Lawmakers represent and make decisions on behalf of their constituents.	🧠 People and Roles
Effective Date	When a law officially takes effect. The default effective date in Iowa is July 1st.	⚙️ Lawmaking Process
Floor Debate	When all members of one chamber (House or Senate) discuss and vote on a bill after it leaves committee.	⚖️ Voting & Debate
Floor Manager	The legislator who leads debate and explains a bill during session.	🧠 People and Roles
Funnel Dates	Deadlines that determine which bills move forward each session.	⚙️ Lawmaking Process
Governor	The head of Iowa's executive branch. The Governor signs or vetoes bills after they pass both chambers.	🧠 People and Roles

Introduction of a Bill	When a bill is officially presented and given a number (House File or Senate File).	 Lawmaking Process
Iowa Code	The official collection of all Iowa's permanent laws.	 Core Terms
Legislative Services Agency (LSA)	A nonpartisan office that helps legislators by writing bills, doing research, and analyzing costs.	 Behind the Scenes
Legislator	An elected member of the Iowa House or Senate. Also referred to as Representative and Senator, respectively.	 People and Roles
Lobbyist	A person who works to influence legislation on behalf of a group or cause.	 People and Roles
Majority/Minority Party	The party with the most seats (majority) and the one with fewer (minority) in each chamber.	 People and Roles
Motion	A formal request made by a legislator during debate (for example, to vote or amend).	 Voting & Debate
Omnibus Bill	A large bill that combines many topics or funding areas into one.	 Core Terms
Point of Order	A question or objection raised about following the rules during legislative debate.	 Voting & Debate
Public Hearing	A meeting where citizens can share opinions about proposed bills.	 Behind the Scenes
Quorum	The minimum number of members required to vote.	 Voting & Debate
Regular Session	The yearly timeframe in which lawmakers debate and pass bills.	 Legislature Structure
Resolution	A formal statement used to express an opinion, recognize an individual or event, or make internal rule changes. Resolutions don't create new laws.	 Core Terms
Special Session	A session called for a specific reason outside the normal schedule (usually by the Governor).	 Legislature Structure
Sponsor	The legislator who introduces a bill.	 People and Roles
Statue	Another word for a law that's been officially approved and added to the Iowa Code.	 Core Terms
Subcommittee	A smaller group of committee members who review bills in more detail before the full committee votes. The primary opportunity for the public/lobbyists to speak on a bill publicly during the lawmaking process.	 Legislature Structure
Veto	When the Governor rejects a bill passed by both chambers. The legislature can override a veto with a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber. An Item Veto is when the Governor vetoes just one part of a bill, usually in a budget.	 Lawmaking Process