

# Building Pathways to Teaching through Apprenticeship

## Case Study: Educators Rising South Dakota

### *Workforce Pathways for Youth Grant Informational Resource*

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# Case Study: Educators Rising in South Dakota

## *Addressing Gaps in the Teacher Pipeline by Engaging Students and Their Natural Interest in Teaching*

### Executive Summary

South Dakota began addressing a shortfall in new teachers entering the field with the *2016 Blue Ribbon Act*. At that time, the state initiated a strategy beginning with a review of teacher salaries. The conversation grew to include a range of potential solutions to increase the number of students entering the education field. The work resulted in a recommendation for higher teacher salaries. A second result was the start of a grassroots effort to recruit more teachers. Specifically, the members of the Blue Ribbon Panel wanted to create systems to support secondary students who expressed interest in teaching as a career. They focused the initiative on leveraging the existing Educators Rising impact in South Dakota by expanding it to additional schools, developing partnerships with in-state colleges and universities, as well as increasing recruitment of students. Educators Rising provides students with advanced training in teaching and learning for K-12 schools before they pursue a teaching degree, helping school districts address the shared critical need of securing future educators for their schools.

The collaborative South Dakota group also focused on thinking creatively. Since then, they have launched impactful interventions, including paid teaching apprenticeships and a Teacher Signing Day, an initiative introduced by the national office that South Dakota adopted as an extension of the broader Educators Rising program to celebrate student teachers who sign contracts to remain in their internship schools. Other innovative practices include providing college credit and certificates to high school students and providing a pathway for paraeducators to become teachers. The innovations have also led to the creation of pathways for high school students to become paraprofessionals and get paid as they complete their bachelor's degree and teaching credentials. This work created awareness among students of the teaching profession, as well as advancement opportunities for paraprofessionals and teacher candidates.



## The Beginning of Educators Rising SD

The thriving ecosystem dedicated to helping South Dakota communities to ‘Grow Your Own’ (GYO) teachers began through collaborative foundation building a decade ago. In 2015-16, a Blue-Ribbon Task Force was created to make recommendations on changing teacher salaries. The group's efforts resulted in the 2016 Blue Ribbon Act, which revamped the state's school funding formula and increased teacher pay. Task force members discussed other topics that they believed were relevant in South Dakota. After the conclusion of their initial task, some members continued their discussions and expanded their work to the next major task, creating a more robust teacher pipeline to meet the state’s needs. The group developed a strong interest in establishing more opportunities for secondary students to explore teaching as a profession. They worked to do so through the South Dakota Educators Rising (EdRising) program, which was established in August 2015.

The goal of the organization is to ensure that all South Dakota students have access to education preparatory programs, regardless of their zip code. To accomplish this, the organization created structures and activities to help adults support high school students considering teaching as their career and ensure a pipeline of future teachers existed.

### Introduction

School districts have experienced staffing challenges for decades, but persistent work force trends have made the situation more dire. Since the pandemic, fewer youth express an interest in the teaching profession, and rural communities are often highly impacted by teacher vacancies. While challenges are seen nationwide, they are also locally contextualized. Vacancy rates by content or specialty will vary as both school needs and teacher preparation programs rarely match perfectly.

To address this need and help policymakers, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and school systems reconceptualize teacher supply, it’s important to recognize that many organizations are eager to collaborate on how to address the shortage issue. By working together, they can not only solve their individual challenges but also build stronger statewide candidate pools.

This more nuanced framing for conceptualizing the process to expand the pool of potential teachers can be described through four stages for a more



sustainable educator workforce: the 4 A's of the sustainable Community of Support framework described by Edifying Teachers (2023).

- **Awareness:** Encouraging more K-12 students to consider teaching and education as a possible career field,
- **Apprenticeship:** Ensuring candidates have the support (including compensation) to maintain interest as they build skills and explore various pathways into the profession,
- **Adequate support:** Providing effective induction and mentorship for new (and experienced) teachers to improve their craft and develop leadership opportunities,
- **Advancement:** Elevating the profession by offering career ladder structures such as National Board Certification for Teachers and corresponding leadership and compensation growth opportunities.

To increase awareness, many districts, states, and institutions of higher education (IHE) are developing Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, which recruit students in middle and high school who express interest in teaching as a career. The longest running GYO initiative in education is Educators Rising, a career and technical student organization (CTSO) operated by PDK International (PDK), which is redefining teacher preparation pathways. It supports students through opportunities to explore and practice teaching alongside learning about public education as part of a career and technical education program focused on education and training. Educators Rising includes both state and national conferences that allow students to compete in multiple events. Educators Rising also provides schools with the curriculum, resources, and teacher professional development to implement the program, paying attention to local context. Offering a consistent throughline for the 4 A's framework is the fact that the EdRising standards are backward mapped from the National Board Certification standards.

New efforts to leverage interest and resources for workforce pathways through apprenticeship include implementation of a Department of Labor grant, *Workforce Pathways for Youth*. The grant was submitted through the leadership of Educators Rising in partnership with South Dakota and



Maryland state Educators Rising programs. The grant will support increasing the number of schools and students participating in the program, expanding internship/apprenticeship opportunities and supporting connections to local teacher preparation programs.

Those who successfully complete the program will need adequate support. This support for new education professionals will address pedagogy and other instructional needs as well as personal support on issues like time management and peer relations. Helping young professionals in their early career years improves retention and success in the classroom, for both the new teachers and their students.

For schools, efforts were made to support or create district organizations such as career and technical student organizations (CTSO).

### **CTE and CTSO Development**

While the state did not adopt any specific programming, they allowed the creation of a career and technical student organizations (CTSO) director position. The position is financially supported by a stipend from the CTSO center grant. CTSOs are student-led organizations that address leadership, community service, competitions, and professional development. Studies have found that there is a positive correlation between the amount of CTSO participation with academic motivation and engagement, grades, career self-efficacy, college aspirations, and employability skills. Competitions have been found to have the most positive effects.<sup>1</sup> With the creation of the CTSO position and recommendations from the task force, Educators Rising State Director Travis Lape developed a strategy to expand Educators Rising throughout the state.

As a starting place, members of the original task force who were interested in continuing the work created a sounding board to advise and support the work. The board consisted of six members who represented teachers, principals, superintendents, and college deans. Over time, as the programming has expanded, the board has also expanded to include 13 members representing a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. The

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<sup>1</sup> Alfeld, C., Stone, J. R., III, Aragon, S. R., Hansen, D. M., Zirkle, C., Connors, J., Spindler, M., Romine, R. S., Woo, H. (2007). Looking inside the Black Box: The Value Added by Career and Technical Student Organizations to Students' High School Experience. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497343>

group provides strategic advice, supports activities, and raises some financial support. Primary financial support has come from universities and professional associations, the immediate beneficiaries of the work's success. They support student meetings, conferences, and competitions, often holding these events on campuses of local colleges and universities to expose students to higher ed connections.

## **Higher Education Partnerships**

Recognizing the importance of teacher preparation programs to student advancement, Educators Rising created partnerships with local universities. These partnerships were developed as a mutually beneficial relationship. As part of college recruitment efforts, universities could host high school upper classmen on their campuses, coordinate learning expos to see the value of enrolling in their college, and provide tours to interested students. IHEs realized that this potential pipeline of future students could support their recruitment efforts. In addition, Educators Rising was able to host student conferences across the state. For students, the partnerships offered opportunities to visit multiple campuses across the state, increasing their college knowledge by seeing campuses, facilities, and other campus amenities. For Educators Rising, these partnerships led to opportunities to increase participation in more high schools and impact more students. One area that has seen growth over time were state conferences for students.

## **Conferences Over Time**

The number of state conferences at a variety of institutions of higher education (IHEs) grew over time, impacting the number of students being provided opportunities to visit college campuses. Below is a snapshot of the campuses supporting annual state conferences and the number of participating students. The opportunity to host a student event was used as a recruiting opportunity for Educators Rising SD.

## Annual EdRising SD Conferences, with Student Participation & IHE Hosts

(Annual conferences are held each February. *Note: for perspective, South Dakota graduated 8,189 students in spring 2019.*<sup>2</sup>)

- **2018:** Organization created
- **2019:** First conference held at Southeast Technical College (Sioux Falls)
- **2020:** 20 students participated in first competition at Dakota State University (Madison, SD)
- **2021:** Pandemic conference held online
- **2022:** 50 students competed at South Dakota State University (Brookings, SD)
- **2023:** 50 students competed at Black Hills State University (Spearfish, SD).
- **2024:** 100+ students competed; EdRising SD introduced a new chapter award to acknowledge the achievements of individual chapters at Northern State University (Aberdeen, SD)
- **2025:** 160+ students competed at Dakota State University

As the number of students increased, so did the number of competitions where students displayed their growing skills. Currently, there are 45 state competition categories open to students in middle and high school, as well as 31 additional categories at the national conference. Exposure to other students and different teacher preparation opportunities allowed students to determine their interest in K-12 and in early education.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23\\_219.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.20.asp)

## Early Childhood Education (ECE) Pathway

One pathway available to students is the Early Childhood Education (ECE) pathway, illustrated in Figure 1 (below). From a hiring perspective, early childhood positions are hard to fill. These positions often fail to attract enough qualified candidates to fill all vacancies. To address this need, Educators Rising has worked to recruit and support additional high school students through two new pathways offered by Educators Rising SD.

- The first is through traditional CTE courses where students complete Human Development 1 and 2. In addition to earning credits, successful completion fulfills the 120 academic hours needed for professional certification. To further support student transition to employment, Educators Rising SD has partnerships with local Head Start and licensed childcare facilities that provide opportunities for students to earn the 480 hours of the required on-the-job training.
- The second pathway was developed with the National Head Start partnership and allows students to earn Child Development Associate (CDA) credits at no cost.

Completion of the program meets the 120 academic hours requirement. To earn the remaining 480 hours of on-the-job training, schools coordinate with the local Head Start program or a licensed childcare facility. A unique aspect of this option is that training can be scheduled during the three days a week when students are not in the 90-minute class sessions.

Students who complete either program create their CDA Portfolio to begin the application process for the exam and hopefully earn the **Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential**, a nationally recognized certificate.



Figure 1. [ECE Child Development](#) Credential

## Paraprofessional and Teacher Pathways

To attract secondary students, schools can engage with Educators Rising to offer multiple pathways for their students, illustrated in Figure 2 (below). One straightforward way is to have schools or districts become an Educators Rising Chapter. This commitment provides teachers with a curriculum, orientation to the program’s resources, and a variety of programming for middle and high school students. This includes career exploration, conferences and competitive events, leadership opportunities, and inclusion in a statewide supportive community. Schools can use Perkins Funding or raise their own funds to offer these opportunities to their students.

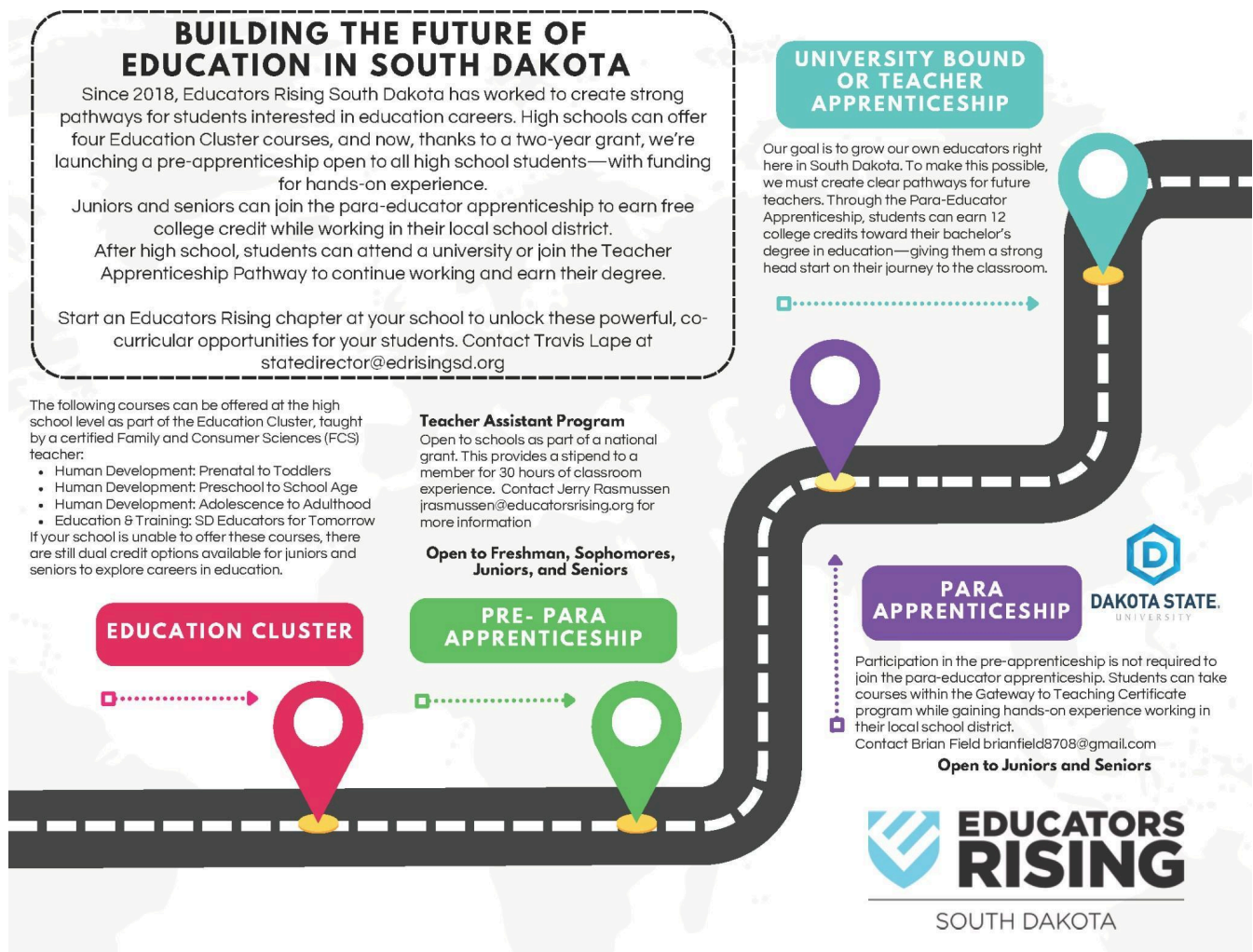


Figure 2. Student Pathways through Educators Rising South Dakota

Educators Rising SD has worked with local colleges to create a statewide community that provides students with additional opportunities for exploring the path to becoming a professional educator. Participating colleges offer on-campus events free of charge to Educators Rising students and schools. These include opportunities for students to attend learning events at post-secondary institutions. Unfortunately, due to rising costs, 2024-25 state dues were implemented at \$10 per student to support the program. Schools cannot use Perkins Funding to pay these dues, but often coordinate fundraising to cover them.

Another way to engage with Educators Rising SD is to establish a chapter and participate in competitions. Competitions allow students to showcase their talents and gain valuable hands-on experience in education. These occur at the state level, and top performers qualify for the national competitions. CTSO research has found these student competition opportunities to be impactful. Participation in the state conference may include transportation paid for by the schools. The national event brings together chapters from across the country to celebrate education, learn from leading educators, network with other current and future educators, and highlight the participants' skills, but participants may incur costs for transportation and registration. These occasions are also opportunities to inform students of pathways through college to achieve their goals. These include a *Gateway to Teaching Certificate*, *4 Plus One* innovative programming, *Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway*, as well as *High School Paraprofessional Apprenticeship Pathway*.

### **Gateway to Teaching Certificate**

A highly structured option that supports students who are on the road to obtaining a teaching certificate is an education pathway that allows them to earn college credit while in high school. Here students take dual enrollment classes and have the option to earn college credits toward their teaching degree. This pathway creates a seamless transition of students interested in becoming teachers from high school to postsecondary education.

Earning the Gateway to Teaching Certificate allows them to arrive at several colleges (Dakota State, South Dakota State, Black Hills State, University of South Dakota, and Northern) with earned credits for the following courses:

- EDFN 102: Intro to Education;



- SPED 100: Intro to Persons with Exceptionalities;
- Choice of HIST 151: American History, HIST 152: US History II or INED 211: South Dakota American Indian Culture and Education; and
- Either CMST 101: Fundamentals of Speech Communication or ENGL 101: Composition I.

## **New Educational Pathways and Certificates**

In addition to the Gateway to Teaching Certificate, Educators Rising SD has developed other innovative programming to nurture teacher candidates and encourage them to remain in South Dakota schools. One example is *4 Plus One*. Through this program, student teachers are paid by the hosting district. Not surprisingly, it has led to an increase in student teachers remaining in the district, often in the same school. As an additional incentive, Educators Rising SD created Teacher Signing Day, which has further increased the likelihood that student teachers remain in their school. This builds on a state initiative from 2023-24 that allows districts to hire students during their student teaching experience. This has been important to retain high-need content teachers such as math teachers. The student teacher can be paid a salary after agreeing to a commitment to the district.

## **Paraprofessionals**

The South Dakota Department of Education has created ***The Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway***, a program that supports the further development of successful South Dakota paraprofessionals into certified teachers. Paraprofessional apprentices can complete online courses at Dakota State University (DSU) in an asynchronous format.

Paraprofessionals are expected to enroll in a minimum of four credits per academic year (can be spread out over fall, spring, and summer semesters) to be considered an apprentice.

Another innovative option for students is the ***High School Paraprofessional Apprenticeship Pathway*** (H-PAP), which supports high school students in earning college credits while learning and working part-time as a paraprofessional in their school district. For districts, it creates a growing of your own paraprofessional staff, and through additional support, it helps



students become certified teachers. To start, high school students become paraprofessional apprentices while completing college education coursework. The goals are to strengthen their capacity as paraprofessionals and to create another on-ramp into the education profession. The financial support provides students who otherwise may not be able to afford college to fund it through multiple methods. In addition, the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulations can annually reimburse paraprofessional apprentices for tuition expenses at Dakota State University. These DSU college credits can often be transferred to another institution.

The H-PAP creates a new source of paraprofessionals as well as potential teachers. It is a unique on-ramp for interested high school students who might struggle to fund college tuition. In addition, The South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulations reimburses the district for a portion of a paraprofessional apprentice wage, up to 480 hours per year depending on availability of funds.

## Key Findings

Educators Rising South Dakota grew organically from local needs. As the work expanded, partnering with Educators Rising (national) on a federal Department of Labor grant created an opportunity to review the work systematically and expand strategically. This case study documents the starting point of the grant work, showing where Educators Rising SD had already achieved success before the award and capturing the early progress that followed. A second case study will be completed at the conclusion of the work to highlight the impact of partnership and funding in South Dakota.

In the first year of implementation of the Department of Labor grant, the SD Team has 35 sites receiving Educators Rising programming with an anticipated 300 students at the annual state conference. In addition, an internship program was developed with 27 students now registered.

On review and reflection, it became clear that the work had a distinct local context<sup>3</sup> that had to be captured and leveraged.

- Create local definitions of teacher development and recruitment that include assets that already exist.
  - Develop a strategy that identifies and addresses those specific challenges that may be unique to your region.
  - Develop and create opportunities for individuals who face barriers to becoming teachers (e.g., paraprofessionals unable to complete/afford a college degree).
- Identify specific areas of need.
  - Secondary math and science may be amplified by guiding career scientists to alternative certification programs available through the state department of education.
  - Special education positions can be supported through new positions, such as a learning teacher (uncertified staff supported by a certified teacher who completes required paperwork).
- Include overlooked or marginalized populations.

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<sup>3</sup> Educators Rising currently has 39 state affiliates, including SD, which can benefit from addressing local contexts associated with teacher shortages.

- In South Dakota, this includes the beginning of outreach to Indigenous communities. Schools in Bureau of Indian Education districts, as well as private schools that were formerly boarding schools, may have students interested in becoming teachers who otherwise have no access to explore that path. This effort also extends to universities on reservations, where tailored pathways and supports can be developed to help those students pursue the profession. Find virtual and/or real-world possibilities to create a community.
- Partner with like-minded individuals and influential organizations who can help increase awareness of teaching as a profession, as well as support the advancement to certification, the exploration of degrees and careers in education, and apprenticeships/fellowships to expand student exposure to teaching.
- Celebrate new teachers through innovative activities like Teacher Signing Day when student teachers sign contracts to return to their schools after they graduate from college.

## Next Steps

Through these continuing efforts, leaders of Educators Rising South Dakota have identified areas for future work, including the following priorities:

- Creating a comprehensive communication plan that includes the development of an app that allows the support network to follow students through high school, college, and beyond. In addition to providing a means to stay connected with students, an app can also create community cohorts of students or regional groups. It would also:
  - allow students and/or cohorts to develop community across the state;
  - connect peers in ECE, new teachers, STEM, and other subspecialties;
  - raise awareness of programs and supports for future funding; and
  - establish low barrier communication for the Board of Directors.
- Creating a database to monitor, understand, and evaluate the work. For example, now that so many colleges offer dual enrollment opportunities, it would be important to know how many students are registering and successfully completing these courses. Additionally, systematically collecting information from the colleges and high school transcripts would support understanding how well the program expansion is going and the impact of student teachers, as well as students and schools.
- Creating a long-term funding strategy that will support recruiting and developing opportunities for teachers across the state, guaranteeing excellent staffing for schools into the future.
- Publishing a second case study—inclusive of Maryland, the other region participating in the WPY grant project—to document strategies, success, and challenges from the first year of implementation.