



Higher pay for teachers coming as part of legislative actions in 2016

Laws also aim to improve school efficiency, teacher retention

by South Dakota Rep. Jacqueline Sly

The statements have been loud and clear: South Dakota does not have enough teachers to fill open positions.

“Districts once had many applicants for openings, but now there are only a few or even none ...”

“Our state’s teacher pay is the lowest in the nation ...”

“Teachers are leaving the state to teach elsewhere ...”

Our governor created a task force to address these and other concerns of South Dakotans about teacher pay and school funding, but he wanted data to guide our decision-making and policy recommendations. He charged the task force (of which I served as the co-chair, along with Sen. Deb Soholt) with re-evaluating our current school funding formula, collecting and analyzing data, engaging with stakeholders and seeking public input.

During the course of almost a year, through listening sessions and meetings with educators, business leaders and community members, some very clear themes emerged:

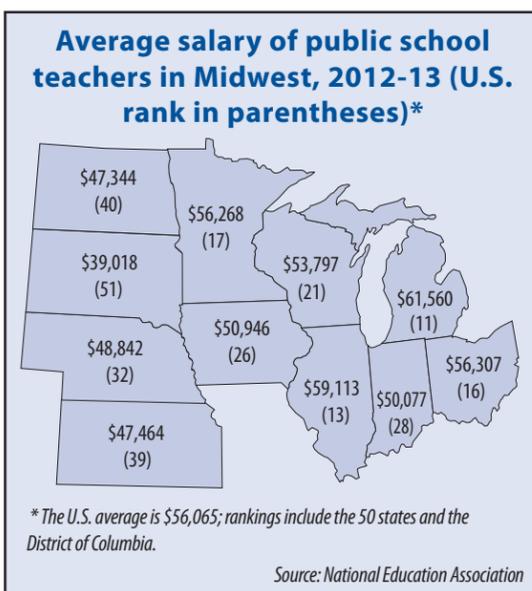
- Schools matter to a community.
- The most important factor in student success is the presence of a highly qualified teacher.
- All students should have equal access to learning opportunities.
- South Dakota faces a teacher shortage.
- No one plan will fit the needs of all districts, and funding equity is essential.
- Citizens expect that tax dollars are to be used cost-effectively.

Furthermore, any sustainable solution for the issues we faced would require significant ongoing revenue. In addition, quantitative data were presented to the task force. Some major findings were:

- South Dakota’s average teacher salaries rank last in the nation.
- Even adjusted by a comparable-wage index, salaries in South Dakota are behind our next-lowest neighbor by more than \$8,500 per year.
- Teacher turnover is large, with salaries being a significant factor.
- The incoming pipeline of teachers will not meet our state’s projected needs.
- The current funding formula, based on a per-student allocation, is derived from a set amount of money available, not the specific needs of a district.
- Capital outlay tax collections have risen significantly and exceed the national average.
- Reserve fund balances, on average, tend to be larger than is typical nationally.
- Other revenues create funding inequities.

From skepticism to legislative action

There was much skepticism among education stakeholders, some legislators and the public as the task force began its work, and the distrust



continued throughout the process. The reason: The state has had multiple interim studies, work groups and task forces in the past. None has resulted in any major changes in funding education.

For years, the state has not systematically looked at all the different ways we fund education. (The current funding formula had been in place for 20 years.) The actual formula was equitable, but revenues outside the formula created great inequities among our school districts.

Each step of the process began to prove — with data — what had been said for years. Once this was done, there was no denying the challenges of funding, shortages of teachers, and the lack of competitive salaries. Based on the task force’s recommendations, the governor introduced a package of bills this year. By the end of our legislative session, they all had been signed into law.

For starters, we needed to find a stable, sustainable source of revenue. With HB 1182, the Legislature increased the state’s sales tax rate by 0.5 percent — a major change in policy, considering the rate had not been changed since 1969.

The second bill, SB 131, addressed our state’s funding formula and the different sources of revenue that school districts use. The foundation for this new formula is a targeted average teacher salary and a student-teacher ratio based on the size of the district. (Percentages for benefits and overhead are also added into the formula.)

Accountability was also important to many legislators; as a result, new reporting provisions and sanctions will ensure that these new state dollars go to teacher salaries and benefits. In addition, every three years, a review board will compare salaries in the region and recommend action to keep South Dakota competitive.

Focus on efficiency and retention

The third part of this legislative package, SB 133, addressed efficiencies in schools, student learning opportunities and teacher-

pipeline challenges. South Dakota has many small school districts, so consolidation was part of this discussion.

But rather than forcing schools to close, legislators decided to work with districts to find new efficiencies and support. For example, voluntary shared services at the state level and incentives for shared staff among districts will help utilize services and staff more efficiently. Small schools in South Dakota already come together in order to field sports teams, and the same thing can happen in sharing staff — whether that means teachers or school administrators.

SB 133 will also expand the state’s capacity to offer online learning. A state university already has been offering this help for rural and small schools that could not hire teachers for higher-level classes, and demand has risen because schools cannot fill positions. Additional state dollars will provide access to these online learning opportunities. We also have created an innovation grant to incentivize teacher training and classroom access to virtual education.

This legislative package should improve teacher recruitment and retention as well. We lose beginning teachers faster than at any other time of their career, so we will support mentoring programs and summer camps for people new to the profession — investments that we believe will pay off in the long run.

With these three bills now signed into law, the framework is in place. Implementation is the next step.

Given time, adjustments can be made to strengthen the plan. Is the plan perfect? Of course not. Is there a perfect plan? No. Is it a positive step to address the needs of South Dakota? Yes. It is a beginning, not an end.

As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” The Legislature and citizens of South Dakota proved her words to be true. ★

Rep. Jacqueline Sly, a Republican from Rapid City, was first elected to the South Dakota House of Representatives in 2008. A former teacher, she also co-chairs the Midwestern Legislative Conference Education Committee.

Submissions welcome

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