

Education Trends

SD Schools Feel The Pinch Of Teacher Shortage

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A recent study conducted by the School Administrators of South Dakota (SASD) revealed most districts were able to fill their open positions by the first day of school, but lost highly qualified teachers due to low teacher salaries.

"Years ago, there used to be 30 to 40 applicants for one position. Now we are seeing applicants in the single digits," SASD Executive Director Rob Monson said in an interview with the *Press and Dakotan*.

Many area schools have been affected by the teacher shortage this school year.

Superintendent Mike Elsberry of the Marty Indian School said he had just two applicants for Marty's 5th grade position this year. One applicant backed out and the other took another position.

Fortunately, the school was able to look internally to someone who was a paraprofessional that recently finished her elementary degree.

"I don't think the pay is high enough for teachers in South Dakota," Elsberry said. "I think they are looking elsewhere. When you compare salary schedules, you can tell there's a problem."

The SASD study showed that South Dakota schools lost highly qualified teachers due to low salaries and other opportunities that pay better.

According to a press release, more than half of the 90 percent of public school districts that responded to the recent survey cited salary, relocation

or a change in professions as reasons given by teachers who left the districts. Many of those teachers who relocated went to other states.

"We're seeing the results of an issue that has been building for awhile," Monson said in a press release. "We're in a crisis and our districts are losing their quality teachers. I can't imagine parents across the great state of South Dakota settling for average, or not teachers in front of their children."

In 2013, the average teacher salary in South Dakota was the lowest in the nation at \$39,540. This was 30 percent lower than the national average.

According to research done by the South Dakota Budget and Policy Institute (SDBPI), South Dakota teachers would make more money if they chose to teach in neighboring states. This includes in actual dollars and purchasing power.

SDBPI Executive Director Joy Smolnisky said that the excuse for paying South Dakota teachers less has always been because the low cost of living. But SDBPI's study showed that that was not the case.

Smolnisky spoke at the South Dakotans Talking meeting at the Vermillion Public Library in September to discuss how the state collects and spends money for education. Community members, as well as several area Democratic candidates, gathered to discuss the facts about education funding policy, teacher salaries and the many options South Dakota might need to consider at the next legislative session.

"In other states, you not only make more, but your money goes further," said Smolnisky. "The reason for me



PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

being here today is, there is not enough teachers here in South Dakota. This is why."

University of South Dakota professor and Rep. Roy Ring (D-Vermillion), who attended the meeting, said South Dakota could be reaching the point where the state's education program is beginning to suffer.

"I came here today because I am very concerned about funding of education," Ring said. "Funding education and raising teachers salaries has to be a priority, otherwise we are going to just keep slipping further and further behind."

Elsberry said that South Dakota makes a big deal about the low cost of living, but this benefit doesn't help teachers.

"If you look at South Dakota salaries compared to other states salaries, this benefit cancels out," Elsberry said.

Tim Rhead, superintendent of Alcester-Hudson, also had a low number of applicants this year.

"There is lower numbers definitely," Rhead said. "It has been de-

clining more and more each year."

Rhead believes the low number of applicants is due not only to the low salary, but also because kids graduating out of high school are getting about the same salary for a teaching job as one that doesn't require a degree.

"It is an issue," Rhead said. Monson said that when high school students are looking into a teaching degree and they see that teachers get paid \$27,000 to \$37,000 while other professions are almost double that amount, it isn't a hard decision on what career path they should make.

Joel Jorgenson, Hamlin superintendent, expressed her concerns about the future of South Dakota schools in a press release.

"I believe we have only scratched the surface of teacher shortage which we will be facing for many years," Jorgenson said.

The School Administrators of South Dakota survey also cited multiple education disciplines that were difficult to fill, and many of the school

responding noted approaches to fixing this problem. Some included offering bonuses, moving expenses, paying off loans or paying liquidated damages along with other option just to get a teacher to look at the open position.

"Every district wants a high-quality, certified teacher in front of their children, but they're struggling to retain those individuals," Monson said. "Our teachers are being forced to make difficult decisions, not just on where to work, but also whether or not to stay in the profession."

Monson said in order to change this trend, the respectability of education in South Dakota needs to heighten.

"We need to raise the starting teacher salary to a respectable level," Monson said. "We need to make significant improvements in teacher pay or the situation is only going to be worse next year."

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Week

From Page 1B

little research into it," Knudson said. "We put it on a trial basis for two years, and during those two years, we were going to especially look at student progress to see if having a shorter length of time in school would hurt that progress."

Knudson said, if anything, the district saw improvement throughout the district.

"We found that it did not (hurt progress)," he said. "The attendance seemed to be better and the discipline issue seemed to still happen, but they seem to decrease somewhat and the students did just as well."

With these findings, the district chose to keep the plan in place permanently.

Higgins has also seen improvement at his school.

"Our ACT scores, which we monitor yearly, they've kept going up," he said.

Irene-Wakonda School District superintendent Dave Hutchison

said the move, as with many districts that adopt the four-day week, was meant to cut costs.

"The Irene-Wakonda School District chose to adopt the four-day school week so that we could combat the high fuel and utility costs that schools were facing," Hutchison said. "In a school our size, a financial savings of \$45,000 is saving a teacher and, in many instances, saving a school program."

He added test scores are still above the state average.

"Irene-Wakonda School District's state achievement scores have continued to match the consistent and elevated results we had in the past," he said. "This year's ACT composite score of 22.1 was above the state average of 21.9."

Having the extra day off doesn't mean students are locked out of the classroom, as all three districts offer students opportunities to come into school and interact with teachers for additional help.

"The Fridays — we have 14 of them per year — are called 'Tutor Fridays' which means students are encouraged to come in for extra help," Knudson said. "The teachers are all here. Some of those days we also use the afternoons for profes-

sional development."

Irene-Wakonda, which implemented a four-day week during the 2011-2012 school year, offers 20 "Eagle Fridays" where teachers are available from 8 a.m. through noon and provide students an opportunity to work on class projects, attend review sessions, work on homework and study.

Higgins said Wynot also offers similar services thanks to available technology, and it's also a benefit to the staff.

"We have a lot of technology in the building where we utilize our one-to-one concept with the high school," he said. "They take college credits in their dual-credit classes, and even on that Monday off or Friday off — whichever one it is — they still connect with their teachers and get their work done from home. It allows the school to have faculty work days where we can get some training from our local service unit. It gives you a day to regroup."

While many districts tend to target Friday as their day off, Higgins said the Wynot concentrates on giving Mondays off.

"We went back to more Mondays off because we found it works

a little bit better," he said. "What happens on Fridays off is usually we have an activity, so the kids were pretty sluggish when they came in for basketball or football. (The coaches) liked them to be here in school so they're active throughout the day and they're more focused on activities in the evening."

Knudson said so far, reception has been mainly positive for the format.

"There may be some who would still like to go back to a five-day school week, but I'm really not aware of it," he said. "The conversations I have with parents are pretty positive, so I think it's been accepted."

Higgins said the same has been true for Wynot.

"We had talked about going back to the traditional five-day week here several years ago and our kids threw a fit," he said. "They said, 'Do everything you can to keep the four-day week.' We've never looked back."

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Colony

From Page 2B

it's been very rewarding for me to watch students develop and grow during that period of time. It's one of the things about teaching here that I really value."

"Our students regularly excel in their work," Winckler adds. "They love to read. They don't have televisions or video games to distract them. They're used to working hard, it's part of their culture. They bring that same attitude toward working into the classroom. Both students and parents are very dedicated to education."

While kids will be kids, Winckler and Kotalik say disciplinary issues are usually minor and both parents and Colony members support an atmosphere of respect and courteous behavior.

"There is such a deep sense of community and family here," Kotalik says. "These kids are together all the time. They're like one big family of brothers and sisters. We greatly appreciate the kindness and generosity of Colony members. They provide us with a noon meal every day and do everything they can to help us, even changing flat tires if we have one."

Superintendent of Bon Homme School District, Dr. Bryce Knudson, says the teaching team at Bon Homme Colony Elementary is equally dedicated to their work.

"They played a significant role in the school's ability to achieve exemplary academic standards," Knudson says. "That made everyone in the school and at the Colony very happy. It made us very proud and proud of our students, too."

Kotalik believes her teaching experience at the colony has made her a more well-rounded person. Winckler agrees.

"I will retire from here," Winckler says. "I've taught in a few other settings and this is the best fit for me. I don't know of anything that could pull me away from here."

Technology

From Page 1B

handle similar information are audited, whereas school districts rely on IT supervision after the fact with monitoring.

"On the IT side, we are constantly learning every day," he said. "That is just the way technology is — for me, that is fun. You have the

challenge of having to know the new technology; at the same time, you have to make sure the old is implemented in new ways to make the old equipment work with the new technologies."

Brenner said that, eventually, the more traditional computers labs will disappear in the school district buildings with just a few remaining for very specific purposes, such as for the computer-assisted drafting classes that require specific hardware at the high school.

He also said in the future he could see personal computing devices being considered a school supply rather than provided by the school district, although not any time soon.

"The thing with digital content is, it is always available and up to date," Brenner said. "That forces us to need better switching technology, which is better and more efficient, providing better coverage for the school. As one technology improves, it forces us to improve the next."

Brenner said he never sees the traditional role of a school disappearing, no matter how much technology advances.

"Schools will be different, technology will be different," he said. "It will be a totally different learning experience, but they are not going away in my lifetime."

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