

Despite Sales Tax Hike, Average Teacher Pay in South Dakota Returns to Near Bottom in Nation

By Megan Raposa

In 2016, South Dakota set a goal to put more money into the K-12 public school system after years of ranking last in the nation for teacher pay.

The plan included a sales tax hike with new revenues directed to school districts to raise teacher salaries and be competitive with other states, and initially it was successful.

But five years later, progress has slowed and the state has not kept up with other states, putting South Dakota once again near the bottom nationwide in teacher pay, according to the National Education Association. Average teacher pay in South Dakota rose by 17% over five years, from \$42,025 in 2016 to about \$49,000 in 2020. Only Mississippi has a lower average annual teacher salary than South Dakota.

More importantly, education officials say, the state has the lowest-paid teachers in the Great Plains region, which can lead some teachers to begin or extend their careers in neighboring states to make more money. School districts in the state already face difficulty in hiring new teachers, a situation that has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the 2019-20 school year, Wyoming, the top-paying Great Plains state, paid an average teacher salary of \$59,786, almost \$11,000 a year more than the South Dakota average of \$48,984. Minnesota averages about \$10,000 a year higher than South Dakota.

Now, some education officials and experts are seeking a revisit to the education funding conversation and are calling on lawmakers to re-address the funding formula or find ways to close the teacher pay gap with other states.

Those who have been part of the process say the initial salary bump created by the sales tax hike and the subsequent increases were not big enough to keep South Dakota competitive with other states that have also continued to increase teacher pay since then.

"Five years is a long time," said Melody Schopp, who served as secretary of education under Dugaard and now works in education consulting. "We couldn't have anticipated what things were going to be like today. Had we not done what we had done, we'd be even further behind."

In the 2013-14 school year, average pay for a teacher in South Dakota was \$40,023 and ranked 51st among all states and the District of Columbia. After the funding infusion from the sales tax increase, the state rose to 47th in average pay in 2017-18, but has since fallen behind other states again, with an average salary of \$48,894 that is ranked 50th. Mississippi is the lowest in average teacher pay with an annual salary of \$46,843; New York is the top-paying state in the nation with an average of \$87,069.

On Sept. 27, the Teacher Compensation Review Board that produced an annual report on teacher pay, submitted its final 2021 report to Gov. Kristi Noem and the state Legislature, and the conclusion, largely, is that there's no one way to solve teacher pay challenges.

"Continued progress on teacher salaries requires action on multiple fronts," the report reads. "No single policy or effort will result in an all-inclusive solution to maintain a great educator workforce in South Dakota."

The report goes on to detail the need to continue to make teacher salaries competitive, the likelihood that the teacher shortage



Photo Courtesy of NewsWatch

Some education experts worry that if South Dakota does not keep up with neighboring states on teacher pay, that more qualified teachers will leave the state for better pay elsewhere at a time teachers are already in high demand.

will continue to increase, and that the state may face uncertain future impacts of inflation resulting from the pandemic.

The report points out that despite falling in national rankings, teacher pay in South Dakota has risen and the pay gap between the Rushmore State and other states has been reduced. In 2015, the gap between South Dakota and the 32nd state in terms of average teacher pay was \$9,516 per year; in 2020, that gap had fallen to about \$5,300.

Also, the report notes, South Dakota raised average teacher pay by 22.4% from 2014-2020 while the national average increase was only 13.3%, though other states clearly raised salaries from a higher rate to begin with.

The report shows that strong progress has been made in what South Dakota pays new teachers. According to NEA data, the average starting pay for new teachers in South Dakota rose by almost 22% from \$32,546 in 2016 to \$39,594 in 2020; the state now ranks 26th in the nation for starting teacher pay. Still, Wyoming has the 11th highest average salary for new teachers at \$46,558 a year.

Ultimately, officials said it will come down to the Legislature to decide if and how to modify the way and level at which it funds public schools.

"My future look would be to (ask) current leaders to say, 'Do we have the courage to continue to fight this good fight for teacher salaries and for schools,'" said Wade Pogany, director of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota. "Is this still a priority for South Dakota?"

In July 2015, about two dozen people gathered in the Capitol in Pierre to work out an answer to one big question: "What possibilities are there to meaningful fund education for our kids and our communities?"

Four months later, they had a plan on then-Gov. Dennis Dugaard's desk to increase the state's sales tax by half a percent as a way to funnel money into schools and raise the state's long-standing position as last-in-the-nation on teacher pay.

Another four months after that, the initial plan — morphed into three separate bills, altered in a tense legislative session and narrowly passed — were signed into law.

The average teacher salary in South Dakota went from about \$42,000 before the Blue Ribbon Task Force bills passed to nearly \$50,000 today.

Meanwhile, the Department of Education altered its funding for-

mula to prioritize teachers, and more people have opted to enter the profession. The state also rewarded districts who tried innovative ways to share services.

Within a couple years, the state went from 51st in the nation in teacher pay to 48th, as other states took steps to remain competitive and South Dakota increases ebbed, it only took a couple more years to drop back to 50th.

Conversations about the need to address school funding started a full year before the Blue Ribbon Task Force convened, according to co-chair and former legislator Deb Soholt.

"That was part of building the political policy and the political relationships to start even getting the task force together," Soholt said.

When the statewide task force convened, it had a foundation of research, buy-in from lawmakers and a commitment to keeping community feedback at the core, she added.

All told, the task force held two dozen meetings between stakeholder groups and the public.

In its final report, the Blue Ribbon Task Force recommended an increase in state sales tax to raise the average teacher salary to a target of \$48,000.

Ultimately, what passed the legislature was a half-cent sales tax increase that funneled nearly \$70 million into schools.

Dugaard signed three separate bills — one establishing the sales tax, one determining how the money generated would be divided and one creating incentives for districts that share services.

Teacher salaries went up about 11 percent in the first year after the sales tax was implemented, bumping the state up to 48th out of 51 in the annual rankings from the National Education Association.

Even with that increase, the average salary still fell short of the \$48,500 goal set by the state.

The goal both from the task force and the resulting legislation was to keep salaries increasing at a steady rate of either 3 percent or inflation annually, whichever was lower. That means by the 2020-21 school year, the state's target average teacher salary was more than \$51,300, according to data from the state's teacher compensation review board.

The actual average salary, though, fell short of that target.

Between the 2016-17 school year — the year with the initial boost from the half-cent sales tax — and the 2020-21 school year,

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The Kougars Column

Kadoka Area Students



The month of September was a very active place for the students of the Kadoka Area High School.

Hitting the heart of activities season, the students have been participating in every volleyball and football game with everything they've got, and continuing their runs at their post-season tournaments. The Lady Kougars have a busy week ahead of them as usual, competing against both White River and Philip in volleyball this week, as well as the Douglas tournament on Saturday.

Among athletics, other school activities have been in full swing as well. FFA, continuing its success in the regional competitions, recently earned themselves a trip to nationals. Band and chorus participants are busy as well, after attending the All-State rehearsal on Monday the 11th, they are practicing up, preparing to take part in the All-State

Band and Chorus Competition that will be taking place the 30th of this month. We are very fortunate to have such passionate staff, ever interested in pushing our students to reach their full potential.

The entire month of October has been dedicated to raising money for KPAC, run by volunteering parents of Kadoka School students, through General Mills products and their Box Tops for Education program. Parents and families are encouraged to simply scan their receipts via the BOX TOP app that is offered for download in the App Store, and up to 40 cents of a select item's purchase price will be transferred to the KPAC group. This money, earmarked for local teachers and staff, will be put to use into buying various things to enrich the school experience of our students.

The students, upon reaching a

certain fundraising goal, are rewarded by getting to "Pie the Principal"! Every student 6-12th grade, once funding goals are met, will get a chance to "Pie the Principal," smacking a pie in my face! Mr. Nemecek in the elementary is doing a similar incentive for the students, our hope being that this type of teamwork will help open more opportunities for our KPAC group to better serve our students in their mission.

In closing, I am so fortunate to be a principal here in Jackson County and in the town of Kadoka. I can confidently say that each member of our community makes the community what it is for our kids. Our students are so fortunate to have you and those reading to enrich their lives daily.

Thank you for your support of the Kougars.
Mr. Robert Lukens
MS/HS Principal

Prairie Doc Perspective

Kelly Evans-Hullinger

The Scientist Who Swallowed the Bacteria

In the last couple years, I have developed a renewed awe and appreciation of our scientists around the world who work for entire careers to advance science and medicine in their laboratories and beyond. One such scientist is Dr. Barry Marshall.

Marshall is an Australian physician scientist, who in the early 1980's along with his cohort Dr. Robin Warren, initiated a paradigm shift in the world's understanding of gastrointestinal disease when they discovered the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*. Prior to that, peptic ulcer disease was thought to be due entirely to lifestyle factors and stress. Marshall and Warren were ultimately able to show that *H. pylori* played a major role in maybe 80 percent of ulcers worldwide at that time.

H. pylori is an unusual bacterium in that it can grow and thrive in a highly acidic environment like the stomach, and for that reason it was difficult to grow in culture. It was found to be widespread around the world, partly due to poor water sanitation systems. The bacteria can invade the surface of the stomach and duodenum, causing inflammation of the stomach or gastri-

tis, ulcers, and rarely, stomach cancer. We now know that if *H. pylori* is a causative factor in a patient's stomach ulcers, eradication of the bacteria is an essential part of curing the patient's disease.

Now here is the greatest piece of this science story. At the time Marshall and Warren made their discovery, the worldwide scientific community was skeptical that *H. pylori* was an important factor in peptic ulcer disease. *H. pylori* did not grow in mouse or rat stomachs, so there was not a good way to study it in a traditional lab. Famously, in 1984 Marshall underwent biopsy of his own stomach, proving he did not carry the bacteria nor have any stomach disease. Then, he drank a beaker of *H. pylori* culture broth. What followed was an acute gastric illness, and after 2 weeks he had another biopsy showing proven *H. pylori* infection and gastritis. He then cured himself with an antibiotic and bismuth.

After Marshall's case study was published, much further research ensued. Today, we can detect *H. pylori* in our patients with several noninvasive testing strategies, and if detected treat them with a combination of antibiotics and acid reducing med-

ication. Surgery to remove a portion of ulcerated stomach, commonplace prior to this discovery, is now incredibly rare in the developed world. In 2005 Marshall and Warren were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology for their detective work.

I wonder, had Dr. Marshall not risked his own health for his experiment, would our understanding have shifted so quickly? Maybe, maybe not, but the story sure wouldn't be as captivating.

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