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Teacher apprenticeship pilot to launch next fall

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Education has made available an application for its new Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway. The department, and its partners, will pilot the program beginning in the 2023-24 school year.

The program’s intent is to take successful para-educators, or teacher aides, and help them pursue certification to become fully accredited teachers. Northern State University and Dakota State University will offer the necessary coursework over a two-year period, culminating in a student-teacher experience in the para-educator’s home district and resulting in the completion of a bachelor’s degree in education. All coursework is offered virtually in the evenings or at other convenient times, so the participant can continue to work as a para-educator while enrolled.

During the 2022-23 school year, about 175 teacher vacancies went unfilled in the state, and the apprenticeship program is one attempt to address the shortage. The program has room for 60 participants.

“This won’t entirely solve the shortages school districts are experiencing now,” said Joseph Graves, Secretary of Education, “but if we can knock that number down by a third, that is definitely significant. It will also be life-changing for some of our para-educators. These are people who have already proven themselves to be fine educators. This program will give them the extra knowledge and expertise they need to be successful in a classroom of their own.”

The program has been made possible by a unique partnership of schools and agencies. Northern State University and Dakota State University, through the support of the Board of Regents, will be offering the coursework. The Department of Education is providing oversight and funding, and the Department of Labor and Regulation is contributing funding to keep any costs to the apprentice teachers low.

“Dakota State is excited about developing this pipeline for prospective teachers. These are hard-working South Dakotans who have already demonstrated skills in working with students but might otherwise never find their way to becoming classroom teachers. There is no better place to recruit our future teachers than our current classrooms in South Dakota,” said Dr. David De Jong, Dean of the College of Education.

“It’s time to start considering solutions to the teacher shortage in a unique way, and Northern State University is thrilled to be in partnership with the DOE and the DLR in developing the Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway. This program has the power to be truly impactful for schools, paraprofessionals, and most importantly, our students. We are all in this together, and this important work aimed at ‘growing our own’ teachers in South Dakota represents true collaboration, innovation, and thought; we are part of the solution, and that’s an inspiring feeling,” said Dr. Anna Schwan, Interim Dean of the Millicent Atkins School of Education.

Offering the program at a very low cost to the participants is an essential aspect of the program because tuition and related expenses can be an obstacle for some potential students.

“Our Start Today SD apprenticeship program offers financial services to help offset costs to support registered apprentices,” said Department of Labor and Regulation Secretary Marcia Hultman. “This is a great opportunity for South Dakotans to gain valuable on-the-job training and advance in their careers while continuing to earn an income and provide for their families.”

Information about the program can be found on [the Our Dakota Dreams website](#). Applicants must have a letter of recommendation from their school district administrator.