

Relighting the Fires for Standards Implementation in South Dakota

Have you ever wanted to accomplish a task but couldn't find much guidance on how to successfully achieve it? This was the problem many schools and educators were experiencing in South Dakota. Five years ago, the [Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards \(OSEUS\)](#) were approved by the State Board of Education based on legislation passed in 2007. Despite efforts, such as the [WoLakota Project](#), that have helped individual teachers, many were left on their own to figure out how to incorporate these important lessons across their curriculum, lacking a clear understanding of how to enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms with the OSEUS.

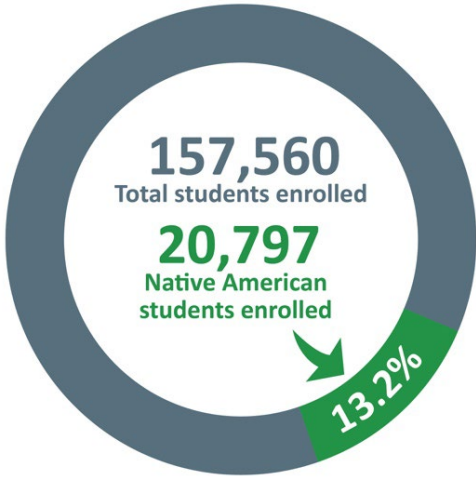
Figure 1. Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings & Standards



Beginning in 2020, the [Region 11 Comprehensive Center \(R11CC\)](#) partnered with the South Dakota Department of Education (SDDOE) and the South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations, Office of Indian Education (SD DTR-OIE) to help address this challenge.

Oceti Sakowin (oh-CHEH-tee shaw-KOH-we) means “Seven Council Fires” and refers collectively to the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people. Seven standards, shown in Figure 1, make up the OSEUS, developed to convey the rich history of the Oceti Sakowin in South Dakota, crucial ideas of culture and traditions, and descriptions of contemporary ways of life.

Figure 2. 2022 K–12 student enrollment



The OSEUS were developed for statewide use for all students. Student population is shown in Figure 2. Oceti Sakowin students, most of whom attend district schools, are likely to view schools that teach the OSEUS as welcoming—they will see their culture, heritage, and links to history reflected and being valued. Non-Native American students and educators will be given the opportunity to develop a richer understanding of the history and contemporary context of their state, in addition to gaining knowledge of the wide variety of historical sources that can be used to interpret the state’s past. When all students can understand and appreciate the history of the Oceti Sakowin, school culture can improve, said Fred Osborn, a project partner and director of the SD DTR-OIE.

While teachers are always looking for ways to improve their curriculum and make their classrooms more inclusive, simply inviting teachers to use the standards without sufficient resources and integration supports was not leading to widespread implementation, explained Michelle Nelin-Maruani, a South Dakota teacher and R11CC partner.



“It’s not because teachers don’t want to do what they know is right. It’s because they haven’t been provided the tools,” she said. “Once we understand why we’re doing something, and we know how to do it, I mean, there’s no stopping us.”

Essentially, the creation of the OSEUS is a necessary first step, but the road to successful statewide use is long. Even within a classroom, getting from standards to instruction to student learning takes effort, especially when the standards lack implementation supports across the K–12 curriculum. For example, in a [2021 SDDOE survey](#), 70 percent of South Dakota educators said teaching the OSEUS is important, but only 27 percent agreed that the resources in their content area were of high quality. That same SDDOE survey found only 31 percent of educators said they were confident teaching OSEUS lesson plans in their classroom.

The OSEUS are designed to be integrated into any content area, which is what’s unique and sometimes challenging about them, said Osborn. Without support, some teachers may hesitate to teach the standards because they feel they need additional expertise in Native American history and culture. Osborn noted, “There has to be a level of confidence before a teacher can be successful.”

Nelin-Maruani added, “We are all trained as content area or grade-level teachers. But our preparation for teaching in Native history and culture is not always adequate, and so teachers have very serious misgivings about doing it wrong.”

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Creating an Innovation Configuration Map

To address this issue, in 2021 the R11CC-led team developed an [Integration Guide](#) to help teachers implement the OSEUS. The Integration Guide is an innovation configuration map that uses evidence-based practices to support the implementation of the standards.

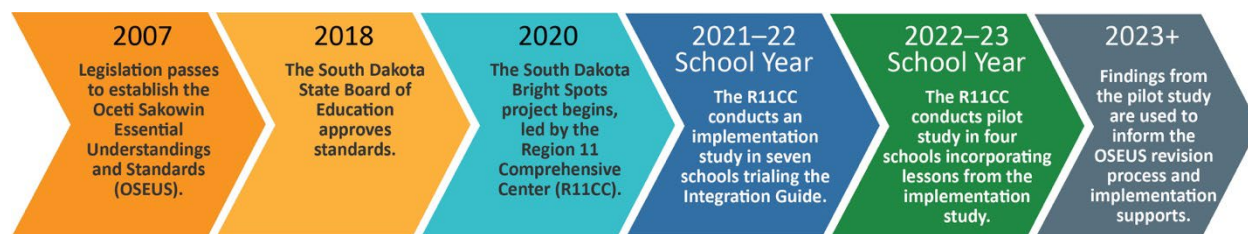
The Integration Guide is organized into four components identified by a working group made up of 25 K–12 educators and administrators from across the state who teach various content areas and come from public, private, and Bureau of Indian Education schools. The components are:

1. Use culturally appropriate resources.
2. Engage with the community to make connections with the students and families.
3. Focus on instruction that is Oceti Sakowin-sustaining.
4. Collaborate with colleagues.

Within each component are more specific subcomponents with detailed descriptions of what implementation could look like, helping teachers intentionally weave the standards into their instruction. The guide also describes implementation stages from “beginner” to “ideal” for each subcomponent, so teachers can find their starting points and work toward ideal implementation. “If you’re just starting, you know what your next steps are, and you know, “This is what it could look like in my classroom; this is what I could be doing,” said Nelin-Maruani about how the Integration Guide supports teachers.



Figure 3: South Dakota Bright Spots Project Timeline



Continuously Improving in Real Time

During the 2021–22 school year, teachers in seven schools trialed the Integration Guide, noted in Figure 3. They found that professional support and resources were essential to incorporating the OSEUS into their content standards—and recommended supporting implementation by creating structures that allow dedicated time for teachers to collaborate and learn from one another.

Based on the trial feedback, a pilot study with four schools began in the 2022–23 school year. The study uses a team coordinator approach to incorporate the Integration Guide. In this model, the R11CC works directly with the team coordinators, bringing them together for dedicated collaboration time and supporting them when they identify resource needs. The coordinators then work with teams of teachers in their schools to share the information. Teachers seeing other teachers, like them, integrate the standards can give them the support and confidence to do it themselves. “To see the pilot teachers collaborating and the team coordinators collaborating as they are, they’re unstoppable,” stated Nelin-Maruani.

Resources by Teachers for Teachers

In addition to the R11CC’s work convening team coordinator virtual meetings and in-person work sessions held at team members’ schools, the R11CC is working on a shared knowledge management site. This SharePoint site’s purpose is to build a bank of high-quality resources and to support collaboration by making lesson plans and materials easy to find. Teachers create the lesson plans and upload them directly to the site, which is only open to participating teachers for now, but there is hope for long-term, statewide scalability in the future.

The R11CC project has provided opportunities for the standards to be incorporated effectively, and “allows teachers to connect with the standards in a meaningful way by creating a rubric with criteria to move back and forth within the document, giving educators a chance to recognize where their own personal understanding is and detect any possible biases they may have,” explained Jonni R. Hertel, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, a South Dakota teacher, and a project partner.

The long-term goal is to build sustainable supports to help South Dakota educators implement the OSEUS. This could include centralized resources and a formal structure for teachers to share lesson plans and experiences and advocate for the collaboration time that is essential to successful integration. While the R11CC project is helping to develop these structures, the longevity of the project will depend upon educators across South Dakota. “You’re really kind of planting the seed, and then it spreads,” said Osborn.

Contact

For more information about implementing the OSEUS in South Dakota, please contact the R11CC co-directors, [Joe Simpson](#) and [Susan Shebby](#).