

The Loop

QUALITY CARE SOUTH DAKOTA NEWSLETTER



January 2026 | Issue 29

• In This Month's Newsletter •

News to Support Your Program

- Congratulations - December Level Designations
- Staff Meeting vs. Staff Training: What's the Difference?
- Pathways Pathfinders

SD ECE Resources

- New Year, New Families: Make Your Program Shine!

Books of the Month

- Chicka Chicka I Love You
- Valentines Are the Worst!
- A Sea Monster Conundrum (The Misfits)

Mark Your Calendar

- Upcoming Statewide Conference Dates



Quality Care South Dakota is designed to support child care and school-age programs in meeting benchmarks of quality and identifying their strengths as well as areas for growth. The Quality Care Team is housed at the Child & Family Resource Network at South Dakota State University and works in collaboration with the South Dakota Early Childhood Enrichment System with support and direction from the South Dakota Department of Social Services.

Interested In Learning More?

Registered family day care homes and licensed child care centers and school-age programs can voluntarily participate in this opportunity. Please check out www.sdece.org/quality-care-south-dakota.

News to Support Your Program

Congratulations - December Level Designations

🎉 Shout-out to Our Quality Champions! 🎉

We are proud to recognize and celebrate the following outstanding programs that have recently achieved a new milestone in Quality Care South Dakota (QCSD). These teams exemplify dedication to continuous quality improvement for children and families.



Level 1 - Registered Family Child Care

- Lily Andera

Level 1 - Licensed Child Care Center

- Wolf Creek Daycare

Level 1 - Licensed School-Age Program

- Black Hawk Kidstop
- Corral Drive Kidstop
- EmBe Harrisburg Freedom OST
- EmBe Harrisburg Endeavor OST
- EmBe Harrisburg Liberty OST
- Grandview Kidstop
- Wilson Kidstop

Level 2 - Licensed Child Care Center

- Children's Care Corner
- Wagner Early Childhood

👏 Congratulations on achieving your new QCSD level! Your hard work, commitment, and passion for early childhood and school-age care are making a lasting difference. We're honored to support you on your quality journey and proud to have you as part of the QCSD community.

💙💛 Learn more QCSD at <https://sdece.org/quality-care-south-dakota/>

Staff Meetings vs. Staff Training: What's the Difference?

Strong leaders are intentional about how they use their team's time. In early childhood and school-age care programs, every meeting sends a message about priorities, expectations, and growth. Some gatherings help keep teams focused on today's work, while others build the skills they will need for tomorrow. When staff meetings and staff training are treated as the same thing, opportunities for leadership, professional development, and long-term growth can be missed. Understanding the difference allows leaders to use time more effectively, better support staff success, and build programs that are strong both now and in the future.

Staff Meeting = Direction

- Focuses on what to do and how to do it in your daily job
- Covers updates, task assignments, process reminders, and quick problem-solving
- Goal: Alignment and clarity for the work happening now

Staff Training = Skill-building

- Focuses on developing new competencies and improving performance
- Includes learning new tools, expanding knowledge, and building behavioral skills
- Goal: Growth and capability, not just task direction

Staff meetings help keep everyone aligned on today's priorities, while staff training builds skills for the future. While meetings may occasionally include brief training, such as a quick overview of a new tool or process, the focus is usually on immediate implementation rather than long-term skill development.

As you plan ahead, partner with your local [SD Early Childhood Enrichment office](#) to support your program's training needs in 2026.





Pathways Pathfinders

We're so excited to launch a brand-new monthly feature, "Pathways Pathfinders," where we celebrate the incredible educators who have chosen to be Pathways members and who make early care and education so meaningful. Each month, we'll spotlight a Pathways member, share their story, and highlight the passion, leadership, and heart they bring to their work.

We're absolutely thrilled to introduce our very first Pathways Pathfinder, Brandi McCuen, director at HopeCare in Sioux Falls. Brandi truly leads by example as a Pathways member herself and has built a culture of learning and growth, with every educator at HopeCare proudly choosing to be a Pathways member.

Brandi has been the director at HopeCare for five years and is deeply committed to supporting staff growth. She shares, "I have been the director for 5 years. Teachers need full cups to pour from in their classrooms. Assisting them with multiple ways of training and education fills their toolbelts and allows them to pour from their cups without depleting them." She describes her team as dedicated and eager to grow, noting, "They are dedicated to our mission, vision, and values. Our teachers want to learn and grow in their profession and the career field as a whole." This culture is built on strong leadership and continuous quality improvement.

Brandi was inspired to involve all staff in Pathways because **"Recognition is valuable in our field. Pathways allows teachers to be recognized for their hard work at any level."** She introduced the program to the HopeCare educators by explaining "the importance of teacher education and development" and how "it gives them recognition for their efforts." She also ensures families are informed, sharing that "We share it on BrightWheel, our parent board, and in our orientation training." Having her entire team recognized matters to her because "It means that my team of teachers sees the importance of their roles in our program and the field of ECE," and she encourages others by reminding them that "It takes a team approach for the entire field of ECE. We are all valuable in different ways for different needs. This helps create a united front for our field."

We are grateful for the meaningful work Brandi and her team do every day to support children and families, as well as her strong leadership example for the early childhood workforce. Her commitment to professional growth and recognition reflects the heart of the Pathways program. Brandi has her entire team on Pathway as an intentional leadership goal. Connect with [Nichole Lanning](#) if your program is interested in setting this goal in 2026. You can find more information at <https://sdece.org/pathways/>

Stay tuned as we continue to spotlight more Pathways Pathfinders and celebrate the educators who make a difference across South Dakota.



Congratulations to the 550+ professionals participating on the Pathways to Professional Development Career Ladder. If you're an educator in a registered or licensed early childhood or school-age care program, we'd love to welcome you and get a welcome kit to you soon!

[Apply to be a member of Pathways](#)

Visit our Pathways Facebook page and join us in celebrating the early childhood and school-age care educators who make up our Pathways community!



SD ECE Resources

New Year, New Families: Make Your Program Shine!

A new year means new opportunities to reach more families and [SD ECE Resources](#) is here to help you do just that! Our [full suite of professional marketing tools](#) makes it easy to promote your program quickly, affordably, and professionally.

With SD ECE Resources, you have access to:

- Customizable templates you can brand with your logo and messaging
- Step-by-step “How-To” guides to make marketing simple
- Tools to grow your online presence with Facebook Marketing
- And much more!

Start the year strong and give your program the visibility it deserves. Visit [SD ECE Resources](#) today and make marketing your program easier than ever!

If you are an educator working in a registered or licensed program, please [register here](#) for a South Dakota ECE Resources membership at no cost to you.



Books of the Month

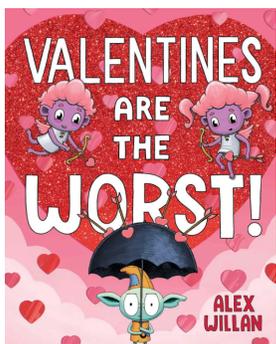
Each month, this section spotlights children’s books that align with seasonal themes or offer meaningful value for child care providers. This curated selection is designed to introduce new and noteworthy titles that caregivers may not have come across before—providing fresh inspiration for story time.

As January welcomes a fresh start and quieter winter days, it’s a wonderful time to cozy up with books and share stories with the children in your care. Reading together supports language development, builds focus, and nurtures imagination, making story time a comforting and enriching part of your daily routine as you begin the new year.



In this joyful companion to the beloved and bestselling classic *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, rollicking rhymes and bold artwork celebrate love—from A to Z! that celebrates love through alphabet rhymes. It uses the familiar alphabet theme to express affection, making it a popular gift for occasions like Valentine’s Day or baby showers, and is available in various formats, including a mini board book with holographic foil.

Reading age: 1- 3 years



An unsuspecting Gilbert the Goblin finds himself in the crosshairs of cupids and their heart-tipped arrows in the hilarious latest installment in The Worst! picture book series, where even the strangest of creatures can become the best of friends.

Who needs valentines? Not Gilbert the goblin! There’s no time for cards and hugs and all that mushy malarky with far more important matters at hand—like, uh...eating tacos. When Gilbert bumps into a squad of cupids bent on showering him with love arrows, he runs for his life!

This is clearly proof that *valentines are the worst!* Can Gilbert avoid the trappings of the holiday or will love find a way?

Reading age: 4-8 years

Oof! When reports of ghosts arise around an abandoned lighthouse, Olive and her elite team of underdogs are immediately thrust into a brand new case. After all, ghosts don’t exist . . . right?



Real or not, the ghosts draw kids at Olive's beloved Reforming Arts School, or RASCH (*not* "rash"). Turns out *everyone* wants a glimpse of the ghosts, including . . . the nearby marine life?!

Between RASCH's ghosts and newfound tourism, rumors soon spiral out of control about a sea monster in the bay—snagging unwanted attention from a corrupt mogul. What *is* going on at RASCH? Does the mythical creature really exist, and can the Misfits save it from being captured? The team will have to dive deep to get to the bottom of San Francisco's most legendary mystery. . . .

Reading age: 8-12 years

**Please note, all book descriptions and suggested reading ages are provided by Amazon. While suggested reading levels can provide guidance, they should be seen as flexible recommendations rather than strict rules. By using suggested reading levels as guidelines, you can choose books that not only match children's developmental stages but also ignite their curiosity and enthusiasm for reading. This personalized approach fosters a more meaningful and enjoyable learning experience.

↻ Mark Your Calendar ↻

Upcoming Statewide Conference Dates

[South Dakota Early Childhood Education Conference](#)

Rapid City, SD; April 9-10, 2026

[SD School-Age Care Alliance Out of School Time Leadership Retreat](#)

Keystone, SD; April 9-11, 2026

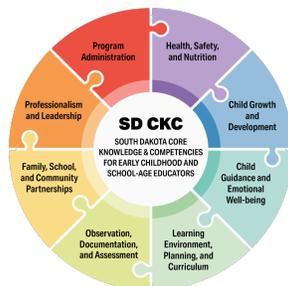
[SD School-Age Care Alliance \(SoDakSACA\) Conference](#)

Sioux Falls, SD; October 8-10, 2026



Stay in the loop with the latest news from Quality Care South Dakota!
Subscribe to our newsletter and never miss a beat.

[Subscribe to The Loop](#)



The South Dakota Core Knowledge and Competencies (CKCs) guide self-reflection and professional growth by describing what early childhood and school-age care educators need to **know**, **understand**, and **be able to do** at all levels of professional practice in eight areas of knowledge.

Directors are using the SD CKCs to support important conversations about professional development and growing leaders in your child care and school-age program. Click the button below to learn more, to view the document, and to order free copies of the SD CKCs for yourself or your team.

View SD Core Knowledge & Competencies

Quality Care South Dakota Team

- Rachel Busmann, Outreach Coordinator and QCSD Lead
- Amelia Gullickson, Early Childhood Quality Assistant
- Nichole Lanning, Early Childhood Quality Assistant
- Maria Picek, Lead Coach and Observer
- Cheyanne Kamps, Early Childhood and School Age Program Observer
- Deb Owens, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Cassie Stoltenburg, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Clover Herdman, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Tessa Stoltenberg, Education Program Support Assistant

[South Dakota State University](#)
[Quality Care South Dakota](#)
[South Dakota Quality Recognition and Information System | Website](#)

Child and Family Resource Network, SDSU | Pugsley Center 201 Box 2218, SDSU | Brookings, SD 57007 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!