

# Electric Education

“Teaching people of all ages how to use electricity safely has been a focus of cooperatives for decades.”

by Brenda Kleinjan

FOR DECADES, SOUTH DAKOTA’S ELECTRIC cooperatives have been investing in the state’s youth and the state’s schools, providing numerous educational opportunities. These opportunities follow students from the earliest grades through their summers and on to their post-high school educations.

## Teaching Safety

Teaching people of all ages how to use electricity safely has been a focus of cooperatives for decades. Arguably, school children are one of the primary audiences cooperatives attempt to reach. During the school year, many cooperatives will conduct safety demonstrations at school assemblies across the state. In summer months, the cooperatives partner with the “Save Our Farm Youth” program to continue their outreach on electrical safety.

## Power Behind the Switch

Many cooperatives work to bring Basin Electric Power Cooperative’s “The Story Behind the Switch” educational program to area schools. The program allows students to learn about electricity – how to use it safely, use it efficiently and how it is made – using a hands-on approach. The 45-minute program about electricity presented by a Basin Electric demonstrator explains what electricity is, how it is made, how it gets to where it’s going and how it has become part of our lives.

About 20 minutes of the program is dedicated to questions from students and hands-on demonstrations. Supplementing the program are actual samples of high-voltage transmission line conductors and other hardware. Students can examine pulverized coal that is burned in power plants to generate electricity.

The program teaches children about conductors, current, insulators, voltage and other related topics, including electrical safety near water, kite flying and tree climbing safety precautions near power lines and operating farm equipment near power lines.

The program has reached more than 300,000 students throughout Basin Electric’s nine service territory states.

## Building Character

Recognizing the importance of investing in the character development of the state’s youth, South Dakota’s Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives are a Character Champion for the responsibility character trait through the South Dakota CHARACTER COUNTS! Program.

South Dakota’s CHARACTER COUNTS! program is a statewide effort to support and partner with communities to teach youth and adults the six character building traits of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

CHARACTER COUNTS! began in South Dakota in 1996 under the direction of the SDSU Cooperative Extension Service through Youth Development/4-H. In partnership with the South Dakota State 4-H Foundation, the project offers resources and training to communities and schools across the state. Local coalitions design and carry out programs to fit their needs.

## Discovery “Get Charged” Partnership

Touchstone Energy Cooperatives and Discovery Channel School have teamed up to offer a unique educational tool that provides a real-world understanding of the power and purpose of electricity, as well as the importance of electric cooperatives in bringing power to rural America.

Combining Discovery Channel School’s Get Charged! curriculum kits with Touchstone Energy co-ops’ branding efforts, local electric co-ops have provided the tools educators need to teach middle/junior high school (grades 5-9) students about electricity. This initiative provides a vehicle for Touchstone Energy cooperatives to highlight their commitment to the communities they serve while providing an effective educational program about electricity and rural electrification.

The comprehensive Discovery Channel School Get Charged! curriculum kits are for educators teaching about electricity to middle/junior high school (grades 5-9) students. These kits provide teachers with a complete curriculum package focusing on a topic required by the National Education Standards.

## Co-ops and Voting

As democratically controlled organizations, electric cooperatives understand the value of

having involved and informed members voting. This belief has led the cooperatives to be a prime financial sponsor of the Kids Voting South Dakota curriculum.

Recently, South Dakota's Touchstone Energy Cooperatives have partnered with Kids Voting South Dakota to develop a curriculum component to teach students about the cooperative business model and how the democratic process is used within that model.

"This project uniquely combines three of the co-op principles – education, the democratic process and concern for community – to build strong, informed leadership for both our government and our cooperatives," NRECA CEO Glenn English noted when presenting a National Community Service Award to the state's cooperatives for their role in the program.

### Youth Excursion

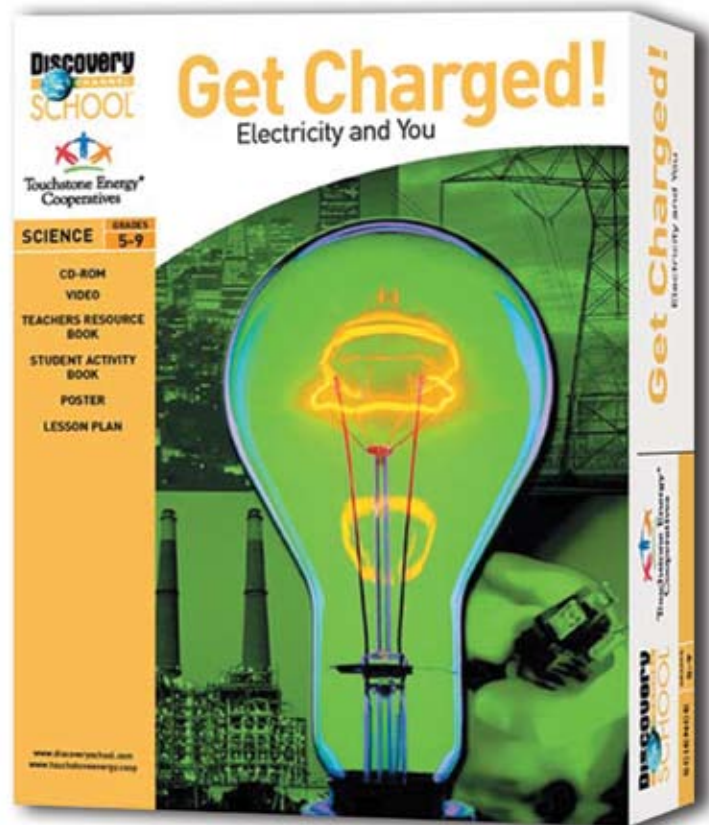
For more than a decade, South Dakota's electric cooperatives have sent teenagers on a three-day excursion to North Dakota to explore the cooperative's electricity supply system. Each summer, 50 to 60 teens make the trek to Basin Electric's facilities at Beulah, N.D., where they tour a coal-fired electric generation plant, a coal mine and a unique gasification plant that turns coal into natural gas. During the tour, students learn about the science of the process, environmental endeavors undertaken by the cooperatives, cooperative principles and career opportunities at the state's electric cooperatives.

### Youth Tour

For more than 40 years, cooperatives have been involved in making sure cooperative youth understand and experience democracy in action through the Rural Electric Youth Tour to Washington, D.C.

"It gave me a taste of democracy in action and the beauty and historic value of Washington and at the same time it gave me an introduction to what cooperatives stand for. It showed me the power of the influence of the individual," wrote Kevin Loker of his experience on the tour. Loker, of Mitchell, S.D., was sponsored by Central Electric Cooperative, Mitchell, S.D., and was selected as South Dakota's delegate to the national Youth Leadership Council.

The mission of the youth programs sponsored by local electric cooperatives is built on the belief that textbooks and lectures alone are not enough to help students understand the democratic process and gain the skills necessary to become tomorrow's leaders. Rather, today's teenagers also need an opportunity to experience government firsthand by visiting the nation's capitol, meeting their representative and senators and engaging in interactive workshops and discussion.



**Above:** Combining Discovery Channel School's Get Charged! curriculum kits with Touchstone Energy co-ops' branding efforts, local electric co-ops have provided the tools educators need to teach middle/junior high school (grades 5-9) students about electricity.

By educating students and enhancing their self-worth, America's electric cooperatives hope to promote and inspire responsible and informed participation in the democratic process – in essence, ensuring a stronger future for everyone.

"We all have the desire to make a difference, to go far in life and to succeed in helping others. This was amazing," Loker said of his fellow Youth Tour participants. "And it's all thanks to you and cooperatives like yourself. A cooperative is an amazing, amazing thing."

### Scholarships

Each year, electric cooperatives in South Dakota and western Minnesota collectively award approximately \$50,000 in scholarships to students to further their educations at college or technical schools. Each cooperative offers a \$1,000 scholarship through the Basin Electric Power Cooperative Scholarship Program. Some cooperatives offer additional scholarships, some of which are memorial scholarships for former directors or employees. The deadline for most scholarships is each February.

Additionally, South Dakota's line superintendents – those co-op employees who head each cooperative's operations side of the cooperative – award scholarships to students studying to be power line workers at a technical school.

So, from a kindergartner's first foray into the classroom to the high school graduate's final promenade across the stage, electric cooperatives play a role in ensuring that many schools have access to creative resources to further the students' education.