

# REVOLVING CLASSROOM DOORS

## Recent Trends in Wisconsin's Teacher Turnover

*After initially low rates during the first full school year impacted by the pandemic, teacher turnover began inching upward in 2022 and surged in 2023 when record numbers of teachers shifted between districts, and the most teachers since 2012 left public school classrooms altogether. Overall, turnover was most prevalent within districts serving vulnerable student populations and among teachers of color and was largely due to exits from public school classrooms in the state rather than moves between districts.*

Concerns over the teaching workforce have been rising across Wisconsin in recent years, particularly since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of Forum reports have raised warning flags about [declining graduates from schools of education](#), [record turnover among state and local government employees](#), and the [rising use of emergency K-12 licenses](#). Likewise, newspapers are rife with articles about individual districts' difficulties hiring and retaining teachers.

These leading indicators and anecdotes have strongly suggested that turnover has risen among educators. In this report, we seek to verify whether that is the case, examining teacher turnover rates in an extensive new analysis.

We used [public school staffing data](#) from the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) going back to 2009 to determine teacher turnover rates for individual districts and the state as a whole. Our analysis examined nearly 116,000 teachers at roughly 450 school districts and other K-12 entities over the 15 years (see Methodology box on the next page and a full description of our approach [here](#)).

Overall, we found that from 2009 to 2023, an average of 11.5% of the state's teachers turned over each year. In the 2022-23 school year (referred to as 2023 in this report), turnover rose to 15.8% - the highest percentage during the years studied, on the heels of 2022's uptick to 12.4%. The 2023 rate included both the highest levels on record of teachers moving between districts and the second-highest levels of teachers leaving Wisconsin public school classrooms for some other pursuit.

This report was made possible by the family of Norman N. Gill, who served as the director of the Milwaukee-based Citizens Governmental Research Bureau (now the Wisconsin Policy Forum) for 39 years. The Gill family's generous contribution has provided for the creation of the Norman N. Gill Civic Engagement Fellowship, under which the Wisconsin Policy Forum annually hires a graduate student fellow to conduct research under the supervision of its staff.

The 2022-23 Norman N. Gill Fellow, Maria Hamidu, was the lead author of this report.

Our analysis further found that turnover has been highest in rural and city districts, in districts with large proportions of low-income students and students of color, in districts with very small student bodies, and for teachers of color.

The recent increase in turnover matters because of the cost to districts and because research suggests that it can affect outcomes for students and schools. Teacher turnover is not always a negative occurrence, since it can result in better professional fits for staff, but elevated levels can be harmful. This effect is especially concerning given our findings that turnover is highest in precisely those schools where students face the biggest challenges and might benefit the most from a stable environment in which to learn. As students recover from the worst of pandemic disruption, that stability may be even more important.

### THE BIG PICTURE

The state's average rate of annual teacher turnover for the entire period from 2009 to 2023 was 11.5%. Put

### Methodology and Terminology

WPF analyzed teacher turnover using the DPI [Public All Staff Report](#), which includes staffing information for all traditional public and charter schools. This file is compiled using data reported by districts from the third Friday of September and therefore represents a point-in-time snapshot rather than a full and complete picture of district staffing throughout the year. We defined “teacher” as any individual holding at least one of these assignment positions in the file: Department Head, Teacher in Charge, or Teacher. We defined “turnover” as any instance in which a teacher within a given district appears in the DPI dataset for one year and does not appear as a teacher in that same district for the next year. The teacher may have moved into a public school role that is not designated as a “teacher,” moved into another school system, or left the profession altogether. The turnover may have happened during the summer or during the school year. Turnovers are listed by the school year in which they took effect – e.g., a teacher who transitioned in between the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years will be captured in the 2010 data. (Here, 2010 refers to the 2009-10 school year; this notation is used throughout the report.) The student demographic data used to characterize district communities are from 2022. Teacher demographic data and district locale codes are from 2023.

For our analysis of overall turnover, we excluded districts that closed or merged during the time period studied (2009 to 2023) and entities other than school districts (e.g., independent charter schools, Cooperative Educational Service Agencies, etc.). For our analysis breaking down turnover into “moves” and “leaves,” teachers at these entities were included. (Teachers in district-authorized charter schools were included in all analyses within their authorizing districts.) Similarly, our analysis of overall turnover included teachers serving in multiple districts, counting each time they left any one of their districts as a turnover for that district, but these teachers were excluded from our analysis of moves and leaves. As a result, statewide totals can differ slightly between these different sections of our analysis. See textbox on page 7 for more details.

The DPI Public All Staff Report contains the best available statewide staffing data. These data and our definition of turnover are aimed at a statewide analysis and may differ from an individual district’s understanding of its teacher turnover. We encourage districts to report their staffing data to DPI in as precise and consistent a format as possible in order to minimize any difference between district experience and public reporting.

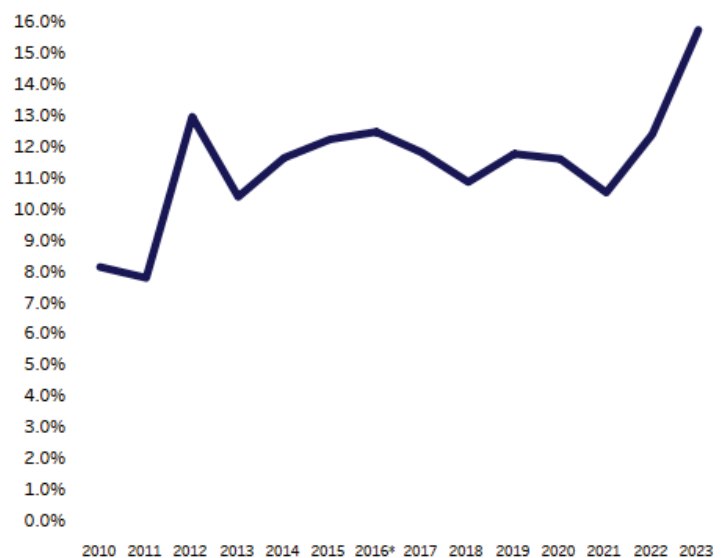
school districts or leaving teaching in the Wisconsin public school system altogether. This rate provides a baseline of sorts for comparing years, demographics, and geographies to understand how districts and teachers are doing.

Over the 14 years of turnover examined, the statewide turnover rate varied by as many as eight percentage points. The lowest average turnover rates came in 2010 and 2011 with rates of 8.1% and 7.8% respectively (see Figure 1). These numbers may reflect the impact of the Great Recession, which incentivized workers with steady incomes to remain in their jobs.

In contrast, turnover jumped the following year to 13.0%, the second-highest statewide turnover rate in the years we analyzed. The 5.2 percentage-point increase from 2011 to 2012 was the largest single-year change in the time period studied.

As previous Forum analysis has shown, 2012 was also a high point for [principal turnover](#) and [public sector workforce departures](#). This spike was related to the 2011 passage of Act 10, the state law that eliminated most public employee collective bargaining and triggered broad changes within the public education system, including a wave of staff retirements. Since that time, annual teacher turnover rates have never dipped back down to the 2010 and 2011 levels but have

**Fig 1: Teacher Turnover Jumps Following Act 10, Pandemic**  
Statewide average rate of teachers turning over from their districts



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. \*2016 turnovers are likely overstated due to an apparent reporting error of Milwaukee Public Schools staffing data.

another way, each year on average the state saw more than one out of every 10 teachers moving to other



remained above 10%. It is tempting to interpret these elevated rates as reflecting the sustained impact of Act 10, but they may equally reflect that the 2010 and 2011 rates were particularly low given the severe impacts of the recession, and that somewhat higher turnover is more typical in the state.

When examining teacher turnover rates on a year-by-year basis, one might expect the years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to stand out. Various sectors saw elevated worker turnover during the pandemic years, and many policy observers and practitioners expected teachers to follow suit, particularly given the pressures associated with the shift to remote learning and the subsequent return to school buildings.

At first, however, these expectations did not come to fruition. Between the 2020 and 2021 academic years, which was the first pandemic-impacted transition, the state's teacher turnover rate was 10.5%, below the 14-year average by a full percentage point. (As the Methodology box notes, the teacher data for these two academic years come from fall 2019 and fall 2020 collections.) This stability was possibly attributable to the uncertainty of the job market during the height of the pandemic. [Available national reporting](#) shows some other states' turnover rates similarly dipping.

Starting in 2022, however, the state's teacher turnover began rising, hitting 12.4% in 2022 and then reaching a 14-year high in 2023 at 15.8%. The total increase over the two years from 2021 to 2023 was 5.2 percentage points, the same as the single-year increase in 2012.

The 2023 peak included the highest rate of teachers moving between districts and the second-highest rate of teachers leaving Wisconsin public school classrooms altogether in the time period studied. The highest rate of teachers leaving occurred in 2012, following Act 10. The differences between teachers moving and leaving will be discussed further in a later section.

This dual escalation in 2023 may potentially reflect a variety of factors, including high demand for workers in other occupations caused by historically low rates of unemployment, relatively high retirement rates, and the impacts of high inflation, which could have prompted greater numbers of teachers to seek higher wages elsewhere. Another factor may be the accumulated stress in the face of the health, political, and logistical burdens associated with teaching during the pandemic.

Little data are available from other states to offer any comparison, although [those reports that are emerging](#) suggest elevated turnover rates elsewhere as well.

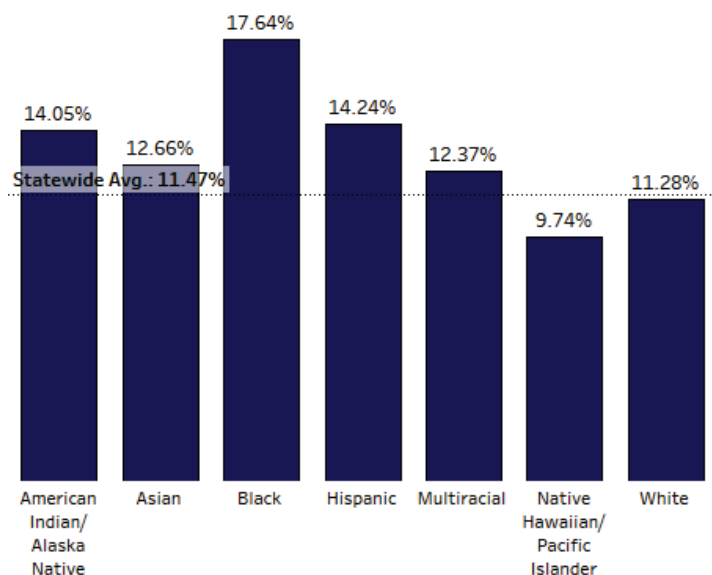
It remains to be seen whether teacher turnover will decrease in future years or continue at this heightened level. More up-to-date national [data for workers of all types](#) across the economy suggest that turnover rates have dropped in recent months but remain high compared to most of the past two decades. Even if teacher turnover rates stabilize or fall somewhat, the high 2022 and 2023 turnover rates remain concerning. For example, the staffing challenges may have affected efforts by schools to help students recover from pandemic learning loss, and at least some districts appear to have elevated levels of vacancies that may take time to fill or else reconfigure.

## TURNOVER GREATER FOR TEACHERS OF COLOR

Teacher turnover did not impact all teachers equally. White teachers make up the vast majority of the state's educator workforce and, statewide, they turned over at an average rate of 11.28% over the period we studied, slightly below the overall state average (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, teachers of color as a group, who constituted 4.8% of the statewide teacher workforce during the years studied, turned over at rates substantially above the state average. Specifically, an

**Figure 2: Teachers of Color Turn Over at Higher Rates**

Statewide average teacher turnover rate by race/ethnicity, 2009-2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis



average of 17.64% of Black teachers, 14.05% of American Indian/Alaska Native teachers, 14.24% of Hispanic teachers, 12.66% of Asian teachers, and 12.37% of teachers identifying as multiracial turned over each year during the time period studied. Only Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander teachers turned over at a lower average rate than white teachers; their rates should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size of 30 or fewer teachers in the statewide workforce in each year studied.

Turnover among teachers of color is of particular concern due to the [documented benefits](#) for all students and especially for students of color from the presence of these educators, including gains in academic achievement, more access to challenging coursework, higher student expectations, and favorable assessment of student work. As our recent series of reports on teacher workforce diversity showed, the state already faces a shortage of teachers of color in its public schools; when those individuals currently in the profession leave public schools, it makes this problem even harder to solve.

Beyond different overall rates of turnover, teachers of different races and ethnicities also varied in their year-over-year changes. For example, the substantial 5.2-percentage-point increase in turnover from 2011 to 2012 was primarily driven by an identical rise in turnover among white teachers. Given the preponderance of white teachers in the workforce, it is not surprising that they closely reflect the statewide average.

In later years, turnover among white teachers never increased by more than 5 percentage points from one year to the next. Instead, the most dramatic single-year spikes occurred among teachers of color. Perhaps most strikingly, roughly one-fifth of Black teachers turned over in a number of recent years: 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2022, and their turnover rate hit 23.4% in 2023. No other racial or ethnic group saw such high turnover rates for so many years. The high turnover rates reflect, at least in part, the fact that the state's Black teachers tend to be concentrated in districts with high turnover rates for teachers of all races and ethnicities.

In addition to Black teachers, nearly every group crossed the 19% threshold in 2023, including Asian teachers (19.7%), Hispanic teachers (19.3%), American Indian/Alaska Native teachers (19.4%), and multiracial

teachers (19.0%). The remaining demographic groups also experienced elevated levels of turnover: Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander teachers turned over at a rate of 16.0%, while 15.5% of white teachers turned over in 2023. Those respective rates were the second-highest for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander teachers and the highest for white teachers in the period studied.

[Our previous research](#) has suggested several steps that local and state decision-makers might take to increase retention of teachers of color. For example, district and school leaders might do more to foster organizational cultures and climates that affirm teachers' identities, re-examine compensation structures, and invest in intensive professional development for new teachers. Some of these conditions, like supportive school leadership and intensive early career services, are also associated with lower turnover overall for new teachers and may be particularly helpful for the districts in which both the majority of educators of color are found and teachers of all races and ethnicities experience high turnover.

### **TURNOVER FELT MOST IN DISTRICTS SERVING FEW STUDENTS, STUDENTS OF COLOR, AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS**

Digging further into the statewide data on teacher turnover, we also found some differences in turnover rates based on the characteristics of districts. All district types studied, however, experienced at least 10% turnover on average over the years studied, indicating the widespread nature of the issue.

It is worth remembering that Wisconsin has 421 school districts plus independent charters – a larger number of public entities [than most states](#). That may provide more opportunity for turnover in Wisconsin even in a relatively small geographic region of the state. However, most of the turnover detailed in this report represents individuals leaving the pool of public school teachers in the state rather than moving between districts, making this a smaller factor than it otherwise might be.

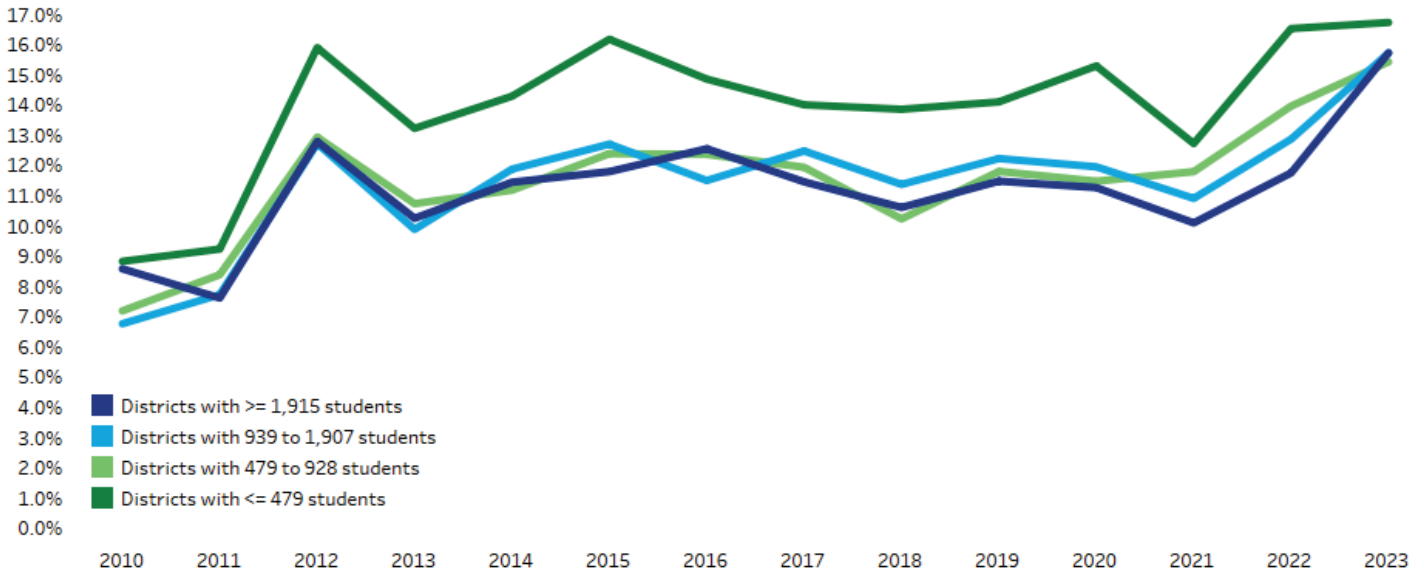
Small but notable variations in turnover rates existed between district locale types as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. Of the four district locales (city, suburban, town, and rural), city and rural school districts experienced slightly above average teacher turnover: 12.0% for city districts and 11.9% for rural districts. In contrast, suburban (10.9%) and town





**Figure 3: Districts with Fewest Students Experience Most Turnover**

Statewide annual average teacher turnover rate by student enrollment



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics, and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. \*District size bins correspond with 25th percentiles for district size, meaning the same amount of districts are in each bin.

(11.0%) districts were slightly below the statewide average of 11.5%.

City districts may struggle to retain teachers due to challenging teaching conditions. [Rural communities](#) may struggle to attract teachers in the first place and also have difficulty retaining them. Suburban and town districts may attract and retain more teachers than their urban and rural counterparts but are also not immune to turnover concerns.

A somewhat wider spread emerged when examining district size. We separated the state’s districts into four roughly equal groups according to student enrollment, with 104 to 105 districts in each group. The smallest districts, serving 479 and fewer students, had the highest average teacher turnover rate of 14.0%, which is considerably higher than not only the state average but also every other district size group. The middle two quartiles of districts, with student populations between 479 and 1,907, hovered right around the state average of 11.5%. The largest districts, with a student enrollment of and above 1,915, had the lowest average teacher turnover rate of 11.3%.

Figure 3 shows the degrees of these differences across the time period studied. The smallest districts experienced the highest levels of turnover in every year. They also saw the greatest increases in 2012 and 2022, jumping 6.7 and 3.8 points respectively. The

largest districts saw the greatest increase in 2023, going up by 4.0 points.

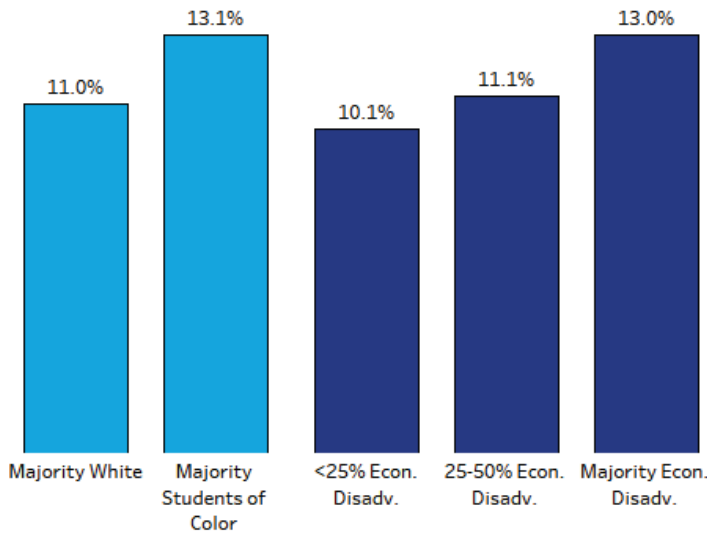
Nearly all of the school districts in both of the two smallest groups – those with 928 or fewer students – are rural. However, only the districts with fewer than 479 students have notably higher turnover rates than other districts in most years. In other words, the smallest rural school districts face some of the biggest challenges with turnover, at least when considered along lines of geography and school size.

Finally, we categorized districts by the student populations they serve. Districts serving a majority of students of color and those serving a majority of students from low-income households had similar teacher turnover rates that were higher than the statewide average: 13.1% for the former, 13.0% for the latter (see Figure 4 on the next page). This similarity is unsurprising given that 17 of the state’s 19 districts serving a majority of students of color also serve a majority of economically disadvantaged students. Districts with majority white student populations had an average turnover rate of 11.0% – slightly lower than the state average and appreciably lower than districts with majority students of color. Districts serving fewer than 25% students from low-income households had the lowest turnover rate of any district type studied, at 10.1%.



**Figure 4: Majority Student of Color, Low-Income Districts See Higher Turnover**

Turnover rate by type of district, 2009-2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis.

The data thus show that, in districts where there are high percentages of students of color and high levels of economic disadvantage, teachers are more likely to turn over. Such districts serve the very student groups with the most to gain from lower turnover, especially among teachers of color.

Some of these turnover associations, like the detrimental relationship between disadvantaged students and turnover, are well-documented nationally. Others, like the higher rates of turnover for very small rural districts, are less thoroughly studied.

Not examined in this analysis but also relevant to a precise understanding of workforce needs would be differences in turnover by subject area, grade level, and years of experience. Wisconsin regularly struggles with [teacher shortages in areas like special education, world languages, and career and technical education](#), which may spill over into turnover issues. The experiences of turnover at middle schools, high schools, and elementary schools may diverge as well, and historically teachers with fewer than three years of experience have been [at particular risk](#) of leaving the profession. Schools with high proportions of early career teachers may find their turnover issues compounded without experienced staff available to stabilize and support the new teachers.

Overall, though, the relatively tight range of turnover rates across district types speaks to the large number of districts that see at least one in 10 teachers turning over on average every year. To a certain extent, therefore, some policies may be applied in a blanket manner to address the issue across the state. On the other hand, small but meaningful differences in districts' experiences indicate that policy proposals could still benefit from targeting solutions toward specific areas of need, acknowledging and addressing disparities present in communities.

### TURNOVER DRIVEN BY LEAVES RATHER THAN BY MOVES

“Turnover” can refer to any number of events, including a teacher moving from one school district to another; or a teacher leaving a public school classroom for a variety of reasons including retirement, extended illness, the birth of a child, a switch to a private school or a non-teaching role in a public school, a move to a school in another state, or a shift to a new profession entirely. To further understand statewide teacher turnover, we broke it down into two categories – “moves” and “leaves” – and included more entities in the analysis (see sidebar on next page). Understanding where most of the state’s turnover is concentrated allows for consideration of more targeted solutions to address the issue.

We defined “leaves” as teachers who are present in the state data one year but do not show up as teachers in the data at all the next year, and “moves” as teachers who move from one Wisconsin district in one year to teach in another Wisconsin district in the next year.

In every year studied, more teachers *left* the public school teaching workforce in Wisconsin than *moved* to a different district to teach. That was true in all district analyses conducted, including by locale, the racial and ethnic composition of a district’s students, students’ socioeconomic status, and the number of students in the district. Over the period studied, the average statewide move rate was 2.9%, while the average statewide leave rate was 8.0%. (The percentages do not add up exactly to the statewide 11.5% average due to slight differences in calculation methodology; again, see sidebar on next page.)

Possible explanations for leaves outnumbering moves may include Baby Boomer retirements and younger



generations' greater propensity for shifting jobs. Our research into the [declining number of education school graduates](#) also raised other possibilities: perceptions of increasing demands and pressure on education professionals; a [perceived decrease in public respect for educators](#); increasing politicization and de-professionalization of the field; ripple effects from the 2007 to 2009 recession; and the level of pay compared to professionals with similar education levels in other fields. Experts we interviewed cited culture wars and hot button issues and the rise of remote work in other fields as further potential causes for departures from the field.

The rising number of educators leaving public school teaching should be considered in the context of [declining K-12 enrollment](#) in Wisconsin. Falling enrollment may add to districts' financial challenges and limit teacher compensation, which could contribute to educators leaving the profession. At the same time, it also means the state needs fewer teachers overall, making it at least somewhat easier to manage this challenge. It is unlikely that declining enrollment is a substantial direct contributor to the state's leave rate, since any district job cuts are more likely to occur by eliminating vacant positions rather than laying off teachers.

Wisconsin's leave rate ranged from a low of 6.4% in 2011 to a high of 10.4% in 2012. As previously mentioned, this 2012 high was tied to Act 10 and was likely driven by a one-time sharp increase in retirements, as seen in [data from the Wisconsin Retirement System](#) (WRS) in which teachers participate. The leave rate in 2023 was nearly as high at 10.1%. WRS data from 2023 are not yet available, but 2021 and 2022 data show a gradual rise in retirements alongside an acute rise in "other separations," suggesting that the 2023 peak was likely due to teachers leaving the profession more than retirements.

Although it never surpassed the state's average rate of teachers leaving, Wisconsin's average rate of teachers moving climbed over the time period studied, from 1.1% in 2010 to 4.7% in 2023. In that 14-year span, only three years saw a decline in the move rate from the previous year. This overall rise is likely also related to Act 10, which diminished the role of seniority in teachers' work arrangements and compensation. In 2012 and thereafter, teachers who may otherwise have

### Methodology and Terminology

To further our analysis of turnover, WPF broke down the overall turnover data into "moves" and "leaves." Whereas the overall turnover analysis focuses on turnover from the perspective of a *district* (i.e., how many teachers transitioned away from a district over a given time period), the moves and leaves analysis centers the perspective of a *teacher* (i.e., how many transitions did a teacher experience over a given time period). To facilitate the latter analysis, we made minor methodological changes, namely:

- We included not only public school districts but also any other entity represented in the DPI dataset, including independent charter schools and Cooperative Educational Service Agencies.
- We included transitions away from public school districts that closed during the time period studied (2009 to 2023).
- We removed teachers who served at multiple school districts at the same time.

All other methodological choices remained the same.

"Moves" refer to transitions in which a teacher moved from one district or other entity in the dataset to another entity in the dataset. "Leaves" refer to transitions in which an individual no longer appears as a teacher at all in the state public dataset.

In cases where we distinguish "moves out" of a district from "moves into" a district, "moves out" are essentially synonymous with "moves." That is, a district's move-out rate is the percentage of its teachers that moved to go teach in another district over a given time period. "Moves in" is a separate metric not used elsewhere in our analysis. A district's move-in rate is the percentage of its teachers that entered the district from another district over the time period studied. It does not count new teachers arriving for their first teaching job.

remained in the same district for years could instead switch districts without sacrificing as many advantages associated with the length of their tenure. The 2023 peak could mean that teachers took particular advantage of this option in the tight labor market, when many districts were hiring. The increased shuffling exacerbated existing challenges for the districts already struggling with elevated move rates, as described further below.

Among the district types studied, the gap between moves and leaves was greatest for districts serving a majority of students of color. These districts saw an



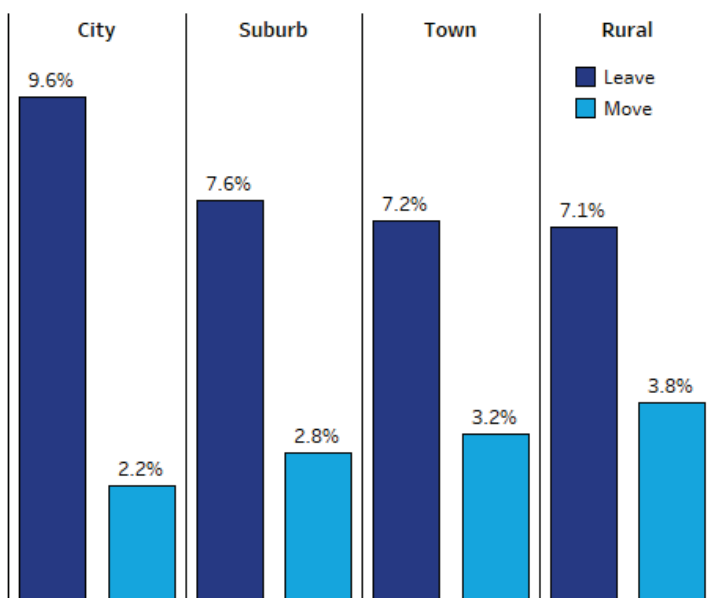
average annual leave rate of 10.4%, compared to a move rate of 2.5%. Districts serving fewer students of color had progressively lower leave rates and higher move rates, with the smallest gap occurring in districts serving less than 10% students of color: a 7.0% leave rate compared to a 3.3% move rate.

A different pattern emerged for districts according to the percentage of economically disadvantaged students served. The districts serving a majority of students from low-income households had both the highest leave rate (9.5%) and the highest move rate (3.1%). Districts with fewer students from low-income households had progressively lower rates of both moves and leaves, down to a 7.0% leave rate and 2.7% move rate for districts with less than 25% students from low-income households.

City districts experienced similar turnover patterns as districts serving majority students of color: They saw the highest leave rate (9.6%) but the lowest move rate (2.2%) compared to districts in other locales (see Figure 5). Teachers in these districts or other districts with challenging work conditions may be more at risk of burning out of teaching entirely rather than remaining in the profession but seeking work elsewhere. Alternatively, these higher leave rates may indicate that districts in urban areas face stiffer competition for labor from other employers including private schools (which are not included in the dataset analyzed). It is also

**Figure 5: Specific Turnover Challenges Vary by Locale**

Statewide average teacher turnover rate, 2009-2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis.

possible that teachers in city districts may satisfy any desire to teach elsewhere by moving to another school within the same district, which would be a move not captured by our analysis.

Rural districts, on the other hand, stood out not because of their average leave rate of 7.1% - the lowest among the locales - but rather because they had the highest move rate at 3.8%. This breakdown illustrates the different apparent challenges facing city and rural school districts. Although both had somewhat high overall turnover rates, city districts' primary concern may be teachers leaving the public school classroom or the state entirely. Rural districts are not spared from this concern but must also contend with simultaneously having a greater risk of losing their teachers to other Wisconsin districts.

A recent [national study](#) of the topic found that rural teachers were especially likely to cite "job dissatisfaction" as a turnover cause, with their disaffection most linked to school administration, accountability and testing, and lack of classroom autonomy or input into decision-making. In interviews, rural district administrators pointed to the limited availability of healthcare and housing in rural areas and the rise of remote work in other sectors as additional possible contributors to rural turnover.

As might be expected given the overlap between city districts and large districts, the quartile of districts serving the most students had the highest leave rate (8.4%) and lowest move rate (2.6%) compared to districts of other sizes. The quartile of districts serving the fewest students - which is largely comprised of rural districts - had the second-highest leave rate (7.9%) and the highest move rate (4.7%). Districts in the middle two quartiles saw similar rates of turnover: the second-smallest districts lost 6.9% of teachers to leaves on average each year and 3.7% to moves, while the second-largest districts lost 7.1% of teachers to leaves on average each year and 3.5% to moves.

Potential policy solutions should consider both the shared and the distinct experiences of turnover among districts. Retaining teachers in the profession altogether appears to be a challenge for all district types. That challenge is heightened for city districts, districts serving majority students of color, and districts serving majority students from low-income households. Meanwhile, rural districts and the quartile of districts





serving the fewest students (which overlap substantially) face additional concerns of retaining their teachers, who appear more apt to move to teaching jobs in other districts.

Not all of this turnover is necessarily a problem. Some districts may take advantage of educator attrition to adjust their staffing in response to declining student enrollment. Teachers may also move from district to district or exit the profession entirely as part of finding a good career fit. Still, this instability can hurt students in the short term, particularly vulnerable students, and the loss of effective, experienced educators can continue to affect schools for much longer.

### SOME DISTRICTS LOSE MORE TEACHERS THAN THEY GAIN

We dug deeper into the “move” rates of teachers to better understand these transitions between districts. In particular, we wanted to examine a frequent claim of district leaders: that there are “donor” districts where starting teachers gain experience in the profession for a few years before moving to more desirable “recipient” districts.

To review whether certain types of districts appear to be donors or recipients, we calculated district move-out and move-in rates. A district’s move-out rate is the percentage of its teachers who moved to teach in another district over the time period studied. A district’s move-in rate is the percentage of its teachers who entered the district from another district over the time period studied. (The move-in rate does not count new teachers coming into the district for their first teaching job.)

A district with a higher move-out rate than move-in rate could be considered a donor district, i.e., it loses more teachers from moves than it takes in. Conversely, a district with a higher move-in rate than move-out rate is a recipient district and serves as a destination for moving teachers.

Out of the four district locale types, suburban districts as a whole emerged as recipient districts, with the move-in rate exceeding the move-out rate by 0.75 percentage points (3.60% compared to 2.85%) on average. Put another way, for every 1 teacher that moved away from a suburban district to teach in another district in a given year, on average 1.27

teachers moved into the district from another district for the following year (see Table 1).

Rural districts on average were donor districts. They saw the highest net losses of teachers among locales, with a 0.47-point difference between their 3.33% move-in rate and 3.80% move-out rate. That equated to only 0.88 teachers moving into a district for every 1 teacher who moved away from the district in the previous year.

To a slightly lesser extent, city districts also lost more teachers to other districts than they received, with 0.26 points separating their 1.97% move-in rate and 2.23% move-out rate. Like rural districts, this difference amounted to 0.88 teachers moving into a district for every 1 teacher who moved away from the district in the previous year.

Town districts had the greatest equilibrium, with only 0.04 points between the 3.25% move-in rate and 3.21% move-out rate. For every 1 teacher who moved away, town districts on average gained 1.01 teachers in the following year.

Figure 6 on the next page highlights the wide range of district move-in and move-out rates contained within these averages and also some overarching stories. Suburban school districts have a reputation of being the most desirable types of district to teach in, and the data appear to bear out that perception. City districts have

**Table 1: Wealthier, Suburban Districts Benefit from Moves**  
Move-in rate, move-out rate, and ratio of moves in to moves out by district type, 2009-2023

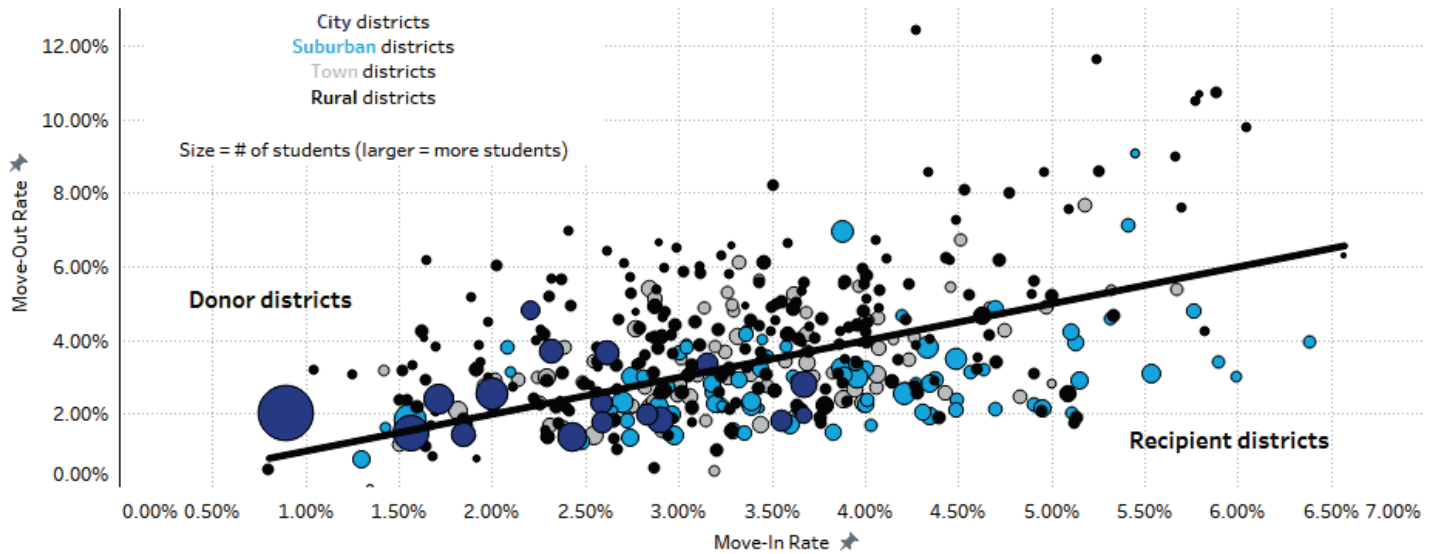
District Type	Move-In Rate	Move-Out Rate	Ratio: Moves In to Moves Out
City	1.97%	2.23%	0.88
Suburb	3.60%	2.85%	1.27
Town	3.25%	3.21%	1.01
Rural	3.33%	3.80%	0.88
Districts with <= 479 students	3.27%	4.70%	0.69
Districts with 479 to 928 students	3.42%	3.69%	0.93
Districts with 939 to 1,907 students	3.42%	3.52%	0.97
Districts with >= 1,915 students	2.80%	2.57%	1.09
<10% Students of Color	3.24%	3.32%	0.98
10-25% Students of Color	3.40%	3.07%	1.11
25-50% Students of Color	3.38%	2.97%	1.14
Majority Students of Color	1.71%	2.51%	0.68
0-25% Economically Disadvantaged	3.76%	2.65%	1.43
25-50% Economically Disadvantaged	3.13%	2.98%	1.05
Majority Economically Disadvantaged	2.19%	3.10%	0.70

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics, and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis



**Figure 6: Rural, Urban Districts Most Likely to Be "Donor"**

Move-in (x) vs. move-out (y) rates by district, averaged 2009-2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. \*Note: Districts above line are "donor" districts; districts below line are "recipient" districts.

the opposite reputation, and the data also appear to validate that impression to some degree. However, it is important to remember from the previous section that urban turnover is primarily caused by high rates of staff leaving public school teaching in Wisconsin altogether rather than moving to other districts.

Rural districts present perhaps the most striking story: their workforce issues have historically been less well studied, but their average losses as donor districts were in fact the largest found among the locales.

It is possible that rural and other donor districts may have faced additional difficulties beyond what these move data depict, since new teachers were not included in this particular "moves" analysis. If donor districts struggled not only to attract existing teachers but also new teachers, the gaps shown here would be further exacerbated. For example, rural districts could be left with both high move rates and a high number of vacant positions – a question that we were not able to explore directly with this dataset.

Move rates by a district's student population add an additional layer to the migration patterns of public school teachers in the state and provide further information on which districts are donors and which ones are recipients.

Three district types had even lower ratios of moves in to moves out than city and rural districts: districts serving

a majority of students of color (0.68 teachers moving in for every 1 teacher who moved out), districts in the quartile with the lowest student enrollment (0.69 teachers moving in for every 1 teacher who moved out), and districts serving a majority of students from low-income households (0.70 teachers moving in for every 1 teacher who moved out). These donor districts are all already contending with challenging working conditions; the data reveal that they may also be forced to invest resources into recruiting and developing teachers only to see them take their skills to other districts.

On the other side of the spectrum, the districts that most benefited from inter-district teacher moves were districts serving fewer than 25% students from low-income backgrounds. These recipient districts on average gained 1.43 teachers for every teacher lost to another district.

Besides the consequences of attrition already discussed, high levels of teacher mobility out of certain types of districts may also stigmatize them, decreasing the likelihood of those districts to attract new teachers or teachers looking to relocate. Because the state leave rate makes up a significant portion of the statewide average turnover rate, state and local officials may justifiably place much of their focus on retaining educators in the state's teaching workforce overall, especially early career teachers at particular risk of turnover. Yet policymakers may also wish to consider



how to account for the concerning differences in teacher mobility across districts.

## SPOTLIGHT: TEACHER TURNOVER IN MILWAUKEE

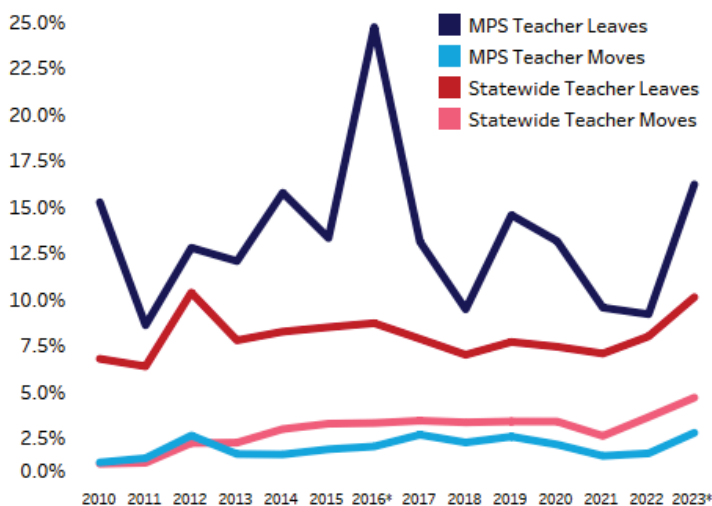
As the largest school district in the state, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) can influence statewide teacher turnover rates, thus making it critical to understand the turnover dynamics in that district. Understanding teacher turnover in MPS, a district in which the majority of students are from low-income households and are students of color, also may yield insights into how to reduce turnover among the teachers serving the state’s most vulnerable students.

The average teacher turnover rate for MPS was 15.4% for the time period studied, substantially higher than the state average. Between 2009 and 2023, in only one year (2022) was MPS’ turnover rate below the statewide average.

The high turnover rate in MPS is driven largely by “leaves” of teachers from the district. The leave rate of teachers in MPS over the period studied was 13.4%, compared to a move rate of only 2.0%. In fact, the MPS move rate is below the statewide average move rate of 2.9%, despite the district’s overall turnover rate being above the state’s (see Figure 7). The MPS move rate was also quite stable; in any given year, it did not

**Figure 7: MPS Outpaces Statewide Turnover Due to High Rate of Leaves**

MPS vs. statewide average teacher move and leave rates, 2009-2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. \*Note: 2016 leaves are likely overstated due to an apparent reporting error of Milwaukee Public Schools staffing data. 2023 leaves also appear somewhat overstated.

### Methodology and Background

The Forum recognizes that our definition of both “teacher” and “turnover” may differ from a district’s own characterization and understanding of its educator workforce issues. For example, a district may justifiably look solely at teacher retirements and resignations when considering turnover, whereas we also included individuals who leave the classroom but remain employed by the district in another capacity. Another notable example affecting MPS and other Wisconsin districts is the treatment of teachers at charter schools authorized by a district. Our analysis includes any moves or leaves of those charter school teachers from the district within that district’s total count of turnovers. This approach is consistent with DPI’s own data collection and reflects the charter school students’ inclusion in the district’s enrollment count and the schools’ ultimate accountability to the district school board.

Notably, however, charter schools are managed and staffed by organizations external to the district, and their teachers are not subject to the district’s collective bargaining agreement, including its salary schedule or benefits package. Furthermore, there is some national evidence that charter schools may be more likely to see elevated levels of turnover.

deviate by more than one percentage point from the district’s average rate.

The MPS leave rate was not only higher than its move rate in every year but also more volatile. In particular, 2016 stands out, with the district hitting an apparent 14-year high leave rate of 24.7%. Upon further examination, however, this data point as reported to DPI by MPS could not be reconciled with the district’s own internal data and is likely overstated; it should therefore be treated with great caution.

MPS leaves hit another high point in 2023, following its second-lowest leave rate of 9.2% in 2022 - although the exact degree of the increase is unclear due to similar though more modest questions about the data as 2016. Notably, not only did 2023 feature a higher-than-average leave rate, it also saw the district’s highest move rate on record (2.8%).

As stated before, “leaves” may be caused by a number of reasons such as retirement, moving to another state to teach, switching to a public school job other than teaching, or leaving the education field or public schools entirely. It is possible that MPS teachers are at particular risk of leaving the classroom or state



altogether because of challenging working conditions. The district is home to students from some of the most historically disadvantaged communities in the state, including a relatively high proportion of students with special needs, and it has struggled to equip all schools with the appropriate resources to serve them well. Teachers must contend with the negative effects of poverty and trauma in their classrooms while also being stretched thin due to MPS' high vacancy rates and while working in buildings in need of long-deferred maintenance. Inexperienced teachers may feel unsupported in facing these and other challenges, while more experienced teachers may not see opportunities to grow without leaving the classroom. One district administrator noted that COVID has exacerbated many of these difficulties, including via a related increase in staff absences and shortage of substitute teachers, which strains available staff even further.

Shortages or shifts elsewhere in the district could also contribute to teacher leaves, since an individual who remains employed by the district – as, for example, a school or district administrator – but is no longer logged with DPI as a teacher, department head, or teacher in charge would be represented in the state data as a “leave.” The prevalence of private schools in the area may be a further factor, since a move to teach in a private school would also be registered in the public dataset as a “leave.” Any increased turnover at district-authorized charter schools may play into the leave rate

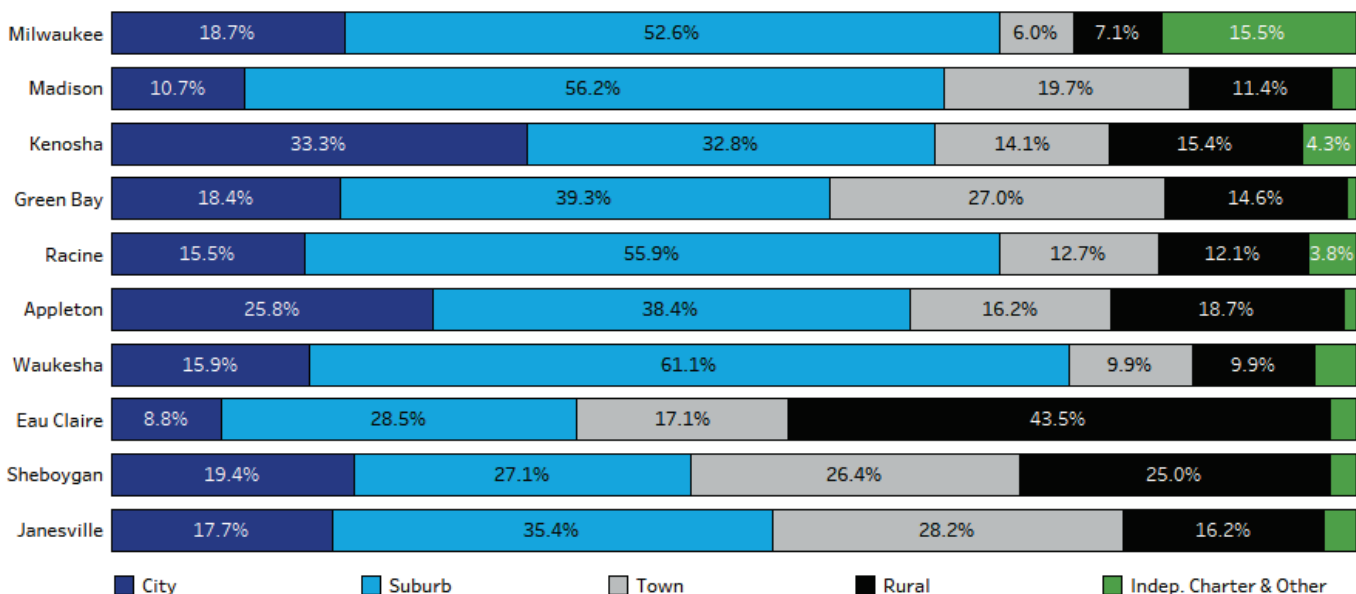
as well, although only if a teacher did not turn over into another Wisconsin public school classroom.

Targeted efforts by district administrators to understand which of these or other reasons are most in play in MPS would be helpful in effectively addressing the issue. MPS also faces declining enrollment due to lower birth rates, lackluster migration, and competition from private schools and independent charters. The loss of students has added to its financial challenges, which likely in turn make it more difficult to retain teachers.

Given that teacher move rates away from MPS are substantially lower than the district's leave rates, information related to those moves may be of limited value in stemming overall turnover. Still, move-in and move-out data may help regional administrators and policymakers better understand staffing patterns and competition.

Of all the teachers who moved out of MPS to other districts and schools over the period studied, 52.6% of them, or 694 teachers in 14 years of transitions, moved to teach in suburban districts; 18.7% or 247 moved to teach in other city districts; 15.5% or 205 moved to teach in independent charter or other non-private school entities (e.g., the state Department of Corrections, Cooperative Educational Service Agencies, and Children with Disabilities Education Boards), and 13.1% or 173 moved to teach in rural or town districts (see Figure 8). Many of the state's top 10 largest

**Figure 8: Teachers in WI's 10 Largest Districts Most Often Move to Suburban Districts**  
 % of teachers moving from the district listed to another WI district, by locale, 2009-2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics, and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis.





districts share MPS' pattern of losing a preponderance of teachers to suburban districts: all but two districts – Kenosha Unified School District and Eau Claire Public Schools – had a plurality of their moving teachers go to suburban school districts. (Note that the National Center for Education Statistics, whose locale codes we used, classifies Kenosha as a suburb of Chicago.)

This pattern may reflect the perceived desirability of suburban school districts, but it is also at least in part due to geographic convenience: A teacher looking to move from an urban district without relocating a great distance would naturally consider surrounding suburbs.

MPS most notably differs from the state's other largest districts in the percentage of teachers who moved to teach in independent charter schools. This is only half of the MPS-charter story, however; when we also considered moves *into* MPS, we saw that nearly equivalent numbers of teachers moved from independent charter schools to teach in MPS (195) over the years studied as moved from MPS to teach in independent charter schools (197 teachers) (see Figure 9). Again, this back-and-forth motion likely reflects the fact that MPS shares territory with many of the state's charter schools, facilitating easy geographic mobility between the two systems for teachers.

Our analysis does not include data on teachers at private schools in Milwaukee. The data on teachers at

independent charter schools, however, suggest that teachers moving to work at private schools may also be a more significant factor for MPS than for most other districts around the state.

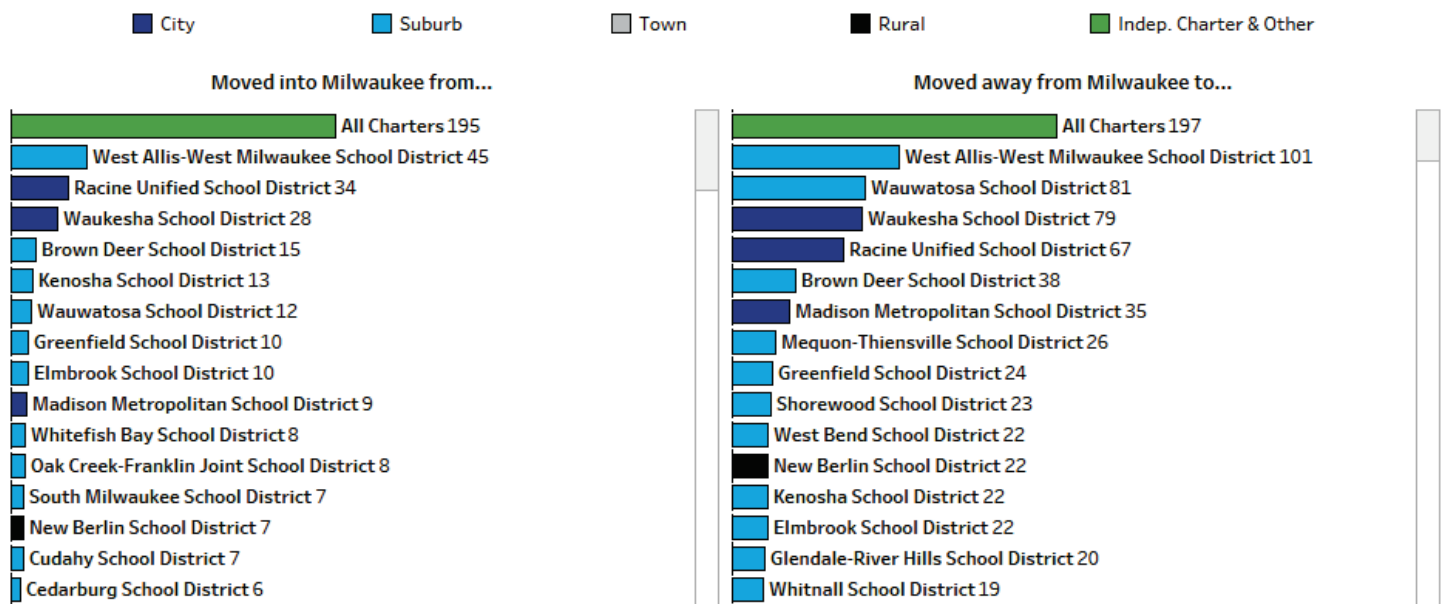
On the whole, MPS lost more teachers to other school districts than it gained. However small the move rate from MPS to other districts, district leaders in Milwaukee may still wish to consider how to keep MPS teachers from moving to other districts, in addition to stemming the high leave rate.

Teacher pay is cited frequently as a potential rationale for teachers moving from MPS to other districts. At least in recent years, however, the available data do not wholly support this hypothesis. Drawing from the same DPI All Staff File underpinning our turnover analysis, we found that the median teacher salary for MPS in 2022 was \$67,956. That was higher than most of the top 13 districts to which teachers from MPS move, with the sole exception of Elmbrook. The median salary of all teachers working in those 13 districts was \$60,893.

In 2023, the distance between MPS and its competitors grew. MPS paid teachers a median salary of \$72,876, with the raise primarily due to the 4.7% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) approved in the 2023 district budget. The median teachers' salary for the other 13 districts was \$62,494. None of them paid teachers a higher median salary in 2023 than MPS.

**Figure 9: MPS Teachers Most Frequently Move to and from Suburban and Charter Schools**

# of teachers moving to & from Milwaukee Public Schools, 2009-2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis



A similar story emerges when comparing MPS to independent charter schools. Due to historical differences with traditional public schools, charter schools typically do not pay their teachers higher salaries. Indeed, no independent charter school operating in Milwaukee County offered a median teacher salary higher than MPS' in 2022 or 2023. The median teacher salary at these schools was \$51,437 in 2023.

Data on turnover and median pay for teachers in private schools are not available, but they are in a similar position as independent charters. Going forward, however, [newly approved legislation](#) increasing funding for both voucher and independent charter schools could help them catch up with compensation in districts like MPS. That, in turn, could affect turnover rates.

Yet for now at least, comparably low pay does not appear to be a primary reason behind teachers' moves from MPS to other districts and schools. It may still be a factor, however, in teachers' "leaves" from the profession or the state altogether. Salary is therefore likely to remain an important part of the district's teacher recruitment and retention strategy, especially as compensation for working in challenging environments.

Accurately diagnosing the reasons behind the high levels of teacher turnover in the state's largest district, which serves predominantly low-income students of color, will be a critical step toward lowering turnover rates. Decreasing the district's leave rate in particular will not only reduce the immediate negative effects of staffing churn for students, but also will better support other district priorities like recruiting and retaining new teachers and implementing educational reforms more likely to succeed with a stable workforce.

## **TAILORING SOLUTIONS TO STATE AND LOCAL PROBLEMS**

In the final accounting, the data do not show a linear increase in teacher turnover over time in Wisconsin. They do, however, show a workforce that is responsive to external stimuli. Most notably, 2023 represented a large jump in teacher turnover, both for educators changing districts and leaving the public school teaching workforce altogether.

The departure of teachers does not appear to be unique to Wisconsin. National data also show teachers leaving

the classroom at high rates, although information is limited.

Concern is therefore warranted about the instability of the profession and the impact on students. When seeking explanations for the increased turnover, however, policymakers and district officials should recognize that these higher turnover rates extend beyond the world of education. As economic data and previous Forum research has shown, turnover is currently heightened for many jobs, including those in the private sector as well as in [state government](#) and Wisconsin's overall [public sector workforce](#) (which includes both state and local government employees and public school employees). Teacher pay, state and local education funding levels, public attitudes toward the profession, working conditions, and COVID recovery are all possible factors contributing to both the problem and potential solutions – but so too is a historically tight labor market and the ongoing wave of Baby Boomer retirements affecting businesses and school districts alike.

To a certain degree, then, the present moment may be unavoidably tied to the current economy and simply a time to be navigated as best as possible. This "solution" may be cold comfort to districts and students buffeted by the high level of teacher transitions and their accompanying disruptions. Strategic use of expiring federal pandemic relief funds may help ward off the worst impacts, as state and local leaders can consider using their remaining dollars to invest in community partnerships and technology to provide mentors, tutors, out-of-school learning, family outreach and engagement, evidence-based curriculum, and other mechanisms to support student learning and well-being.

Beyond the present moment, leaders at the state and local level can also take action to address the historical issue that shows no sign of abating – namely, that over one in 10 teachers are turning over nearly every year in the state. Of greatest concern should be the higher-than-average turnover occurring for rural and city school districts, the smallest school districts, districts serving a majority of students of color, and districts serving a majority of students from low-income households, and the high turnover rates among teachers of color. Certain subject areas and grade levels may also merit further examination. There are many steps that district leaders can take on their own, but they will also need



partnership with state leaders and their local communities to effectively address this issue.

Our analysis indicates that leaves, rather than moves, are the element of the turnover challenge that most merits attention, especially as the state grapples with its aging workforce. Some number of leaves, however, may actually help districts in right-sizing as statewide student enrollment continues to decline.

Meanwhile, moves still warrant consideration and awareness, since otherwise blanket solutions to address teacher turnover may result in even more educators going to teach in recipient districts or greater stability for recipient districts. Without a similar positive effect for donor districts, this result would further increase the disproportionate impact of the issue for students in donor districts.

As the state and districts consider possible remedies, existing efforts may provide inspiration. DPI's special education department has begun [cataloguing](#) available state programs to address workforce issues including special educator retention. Nationally and locally, "grow your own" teacher programs have become a popular way for districts to build and hopefully retain their workforce. Teachers who enter the profession through these programs may be less likely to turn over due to their already-established ties to the community. Some school districts in [Arizona](#) and [California](#) are looking to affordable housing to attract and retain educators, although critics caution that programs such as these may only treat the symptoms of teacher turnover without addressing its root causes. Illinois is piloting a "[vacancy grant program](#)" that sends flexible funds to districts at particular risk of experiencing educator workforce issues.

Attaching financial incentives to hard-to-staff classrooms, schools, and districts can be another lever to increase stability, especially when paired with stipulations that recipients remain in their jobs for a minimum number of years. Finally, supportive working conditions that engage teachers in decision-making, recognize their contributions, provide relevant and valued professional development and opportunities to grow as leaders, foster a positive work culture, and encourage new teachers through mentorship and training can be critical to retention.

Creative solutions like these are most likely to be effective when tailored to the specific needs of the individual districts and the state as a whole. They also highlight the imperative to not only recruit new teachers into the profession but also retain them once they arrive.

We hope this analysis provides insights to guide such problem-solving. As the federal pandemic relief funds approach their expiration date and new school funding allocated through the state's 2023-25 budget negotiations begins to flow, both state and local officials will need to assess what resources are available to support their efforts to retain as many teachers as possible and to assist those districts and students disproportionately impacted by turnover.

