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HONESTY

POLICY REPORT • FEBRUARY 2026

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PRUDENCE

Character education and teacher retention

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Character education and teacher retention

By Wyatt Eichholz

Executive summary

Multiple studies show that retaining good teachers is essential to school effectiveness and student achievement¹ — the reason Wisconsinites should be concerned that the state is facing a crisis of disappearing educators. It's also why Wisconsinites should be intrigued by the possibility we examine here of a potential remedy: character education.

We conducted two phases of research: a quantitative analysis of teacher loss before

and after the adoption of character education programs, which yielded mixed results, and a qualitative analysis — interviews with key participants — that laid out specific factors seen as contributing to success in schools.

From the interviews, it became clear that key factors in successful teacher retention at schools of character include a principal or superintendent who acts as a champion for the project, buy-in from parents and the community, an incremental mindset, and

¹ Based on data from fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in New York City, Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff (2013) show that higher teacher loss depresses achievement in English language arts and mathematics. The findings pertain to all students, including those taught by teachers who stay. The negative effects are largest in lower-performing schools and those serving higher proportions of black students. Sorensen and Ladd (2020) examined two decades of North Carolina data and concluded higher turnover is associated with decreased student test scores.

Using data from a large, urban district in Texas, Hanushek, Rivkin and Schiman (2016) concluded that teacher loss negatively affected achievement and that the effects were concentrated in lower-achievement schools. According to Henry and Redding (2020), the timing of exits also matters: Teacher departures during the school year are more detrimental to learning than end-of-year turnover.

Conversely, teacher retention yields academic dividends. Papay and Kraft (2015) demonstrate that schools benefit from retaining teachers as they continue to improve throughout their career. Similarly, in a review of dozens of U.S. studies, Kini and Podolsky (2016) conclude that teacher experience is positively associated with test-score growth, classroom practice, and broader school contributions, particularly when teachers have continued experience within the same grade, subject or district. Experienced teachers, it was found, can also have positive spillover effects on colleagues.

Because of the benefits of retention and the harms of high teacher loss, research into responses for high teacher loss is warranted, particularly for lower-achievement schools and districts.

commitment to adopting the character culture at all levels of staff.

We learned that that a successfully imple-

mented character program can reap benefits not only by retaining teachers but also by attracting high-quality teachers in the hiring process.

The problem

Teacher loss, sometimes called “teacher turnover,” has worsened in recent years. The average district turnover rate among 414 school districts was higher in the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years — when it peaked at 15 percent — than at any time since 1996, according to our previous research using data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.² The percentage of teachers exiting the profession altogether is roughly the same as it was 20 years ago — hovering around 10 percent — but far more teachers are transferring between districts.

Nine districts in the state have lost more than 20 percent of their teachers each year on average over a recent five-year span, and 35 others lost more than 15 percent.

The question: How to win the competition for top teachers

Competition is healthy and can help create a meritocracy, but it also prompts a key question for districts struggling to retain their best teachers: How, especially when money is short, can districts find and keep top staff?

In interviews with current and former public school teachers as part of a broader

project, we learned that teachers who left the profession early often felt burned out by poor student behavior and lack of support from school administrators. Successful character education programs address these challenges.

Character education cannot be assumed to bind teachers to schools. Our quantitative analysis reveals varying outcomes on teacher retention among character education schools.

Follow-up interviews with teachers and administrators in schools that implemented character education, however, reveal key elements that were present in schools that were more successful in retaining or attracting teachers, and teachers and administrators who have worked in those schools believe there is a solid connection.

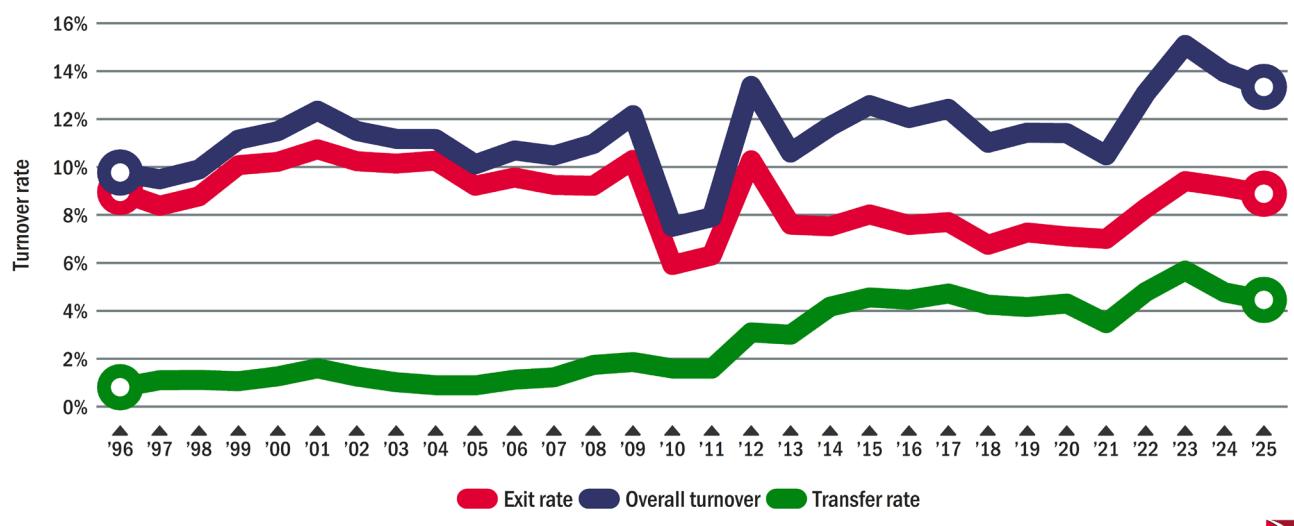
Character education

Character education is the practice of incorporating ethical values and moral formation into schools.

A “school of character” is one that has been recognized by a state or national organization for adhering to Character.org’s [11 principles of character education](#).

² Data on the rate of teacher loss comes from the Department of Public Instruction. Every year, the department releases a master file recording every teacher working in a public school in the state. This allows us at both the district and school level to determine teacher loss from one school year to the next — that is, the number of teachers employed by a particular district or school who leave by the following year, expressed as a percentage of the district’s or school’s overall teacher headcount. This loss rate includes teachers transferring from one school to teach in another, leaving to teach in a private school, or retiring from teaching entirely.

Turnover in the average school district each year, 1996 to 2025



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



According to Character.org, a national nonprofit promoting character education, schools individually determine specific character strengths that will serve as their particular anchors. These core values are meant to transcend religious and cultural differences and can vary. But the schools generally try to inspire students each to be his “best self,” and focus on values that develop “the habits of mind and heart to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reasons,” according to Character.org.³

The schools attempt to create a school com-

munity where everyone feels responsible for one another, where there is a “feeling of caring and belonging” that includes all students, where there is a “shared pride in what the school stands for.”

Many of the schools focus on service learning, leadership experiences, practicing academic integrity, or standing up to peer mistreatment. Character is supposed to be woven into all curriculum and there is recognition that “for their students to excel academically they will need to apply the character strengths of self-discipline, responsibility, and perseverance.”

³ Character.org is recognized as the largest character education non-profit in the world. In 2025, Character.org (formerly known as the Character Education Partnership) was acquired by CharacterPlus, another national character education advocacy organization. In the press release announcing the restructuring, Character.org was described as “one of the nation’s most respected and influential voices” in character development. CharacterPlus now operates the Character.org organization and its prestigious National Schools of Character recognition program. The Wisconsin Character Education Partnership, Character.org’s Wisconsin-based affiliate, co-sponsors the State School of Character award program alongside the University of Wisconsin’s School of Education.

The character education movement is not limited to the United States. Similar efforts to promote character education have sprung up around the globe. One notable example, the Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, is headquartered at the University of Birmingham and promotes character education reform in the United Kingdom. The Jubilee Centre’s character framework places emphasis on the neo-Aristotelian model of moral development. Like Character.org, the Jubilee Centre’s model emphasizes creating an environment of character where school leaders and staff weave elements of the school’s shared language of character into all aspects of the school.

“Teachers also know how important it is to develop a classroom culture that promotes the character strengths of curiosity, carefulness, intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and critical thinking,” according to Character.org.

Individual schools have latitude to tailor and implement the program as they see fit. But the schools should “celebrate students for being kind and caring without over-emphasizing extrinsic rewards for these positive behaviors.”

Ideally, the efforts include not just teachers and administrators but also counselors, paraprofessionals, resource teachers, school psychologists, social workers, nurses, secretaries, cafeteria workers, playground and classroom aides, bus drivers, custodians, and security personnel. School leaders are encouraged to also involve parents and caregivers.

As stated on the Character.org [website](#), becoming a school of character “isn’t just limited to a curriculum or a single aspect of school life” but is a comprehensive initiative that weaves character principles into

“all aspects of the school’s culture, teaching, and student learning.”

In Wisconsin, 12 individual schools and two full districts have been recognized as schools of character since 2009.⁴ We were able to secure data for nine of the 12 schools and for two districts that implemented character education programs:⁵

- Jefferson School District
- South Milwaukee School District
- Brown Deer Middle/High School, Brown Deer
- Columbus Elementary in Columbus
- Stormonth Elementary in Fox Point
- Edgewood Elementary in Greenfield
- Pleasant Prairie Elementary in Kenosha-Greenwood Elementary in River Falls
- Meyer Middle in River Falls
- Lake Bluff Elementary in Shorewood
- Prairie Elementary in Waunakee.

Quantitative analysis

The effect of character policies, as evi-

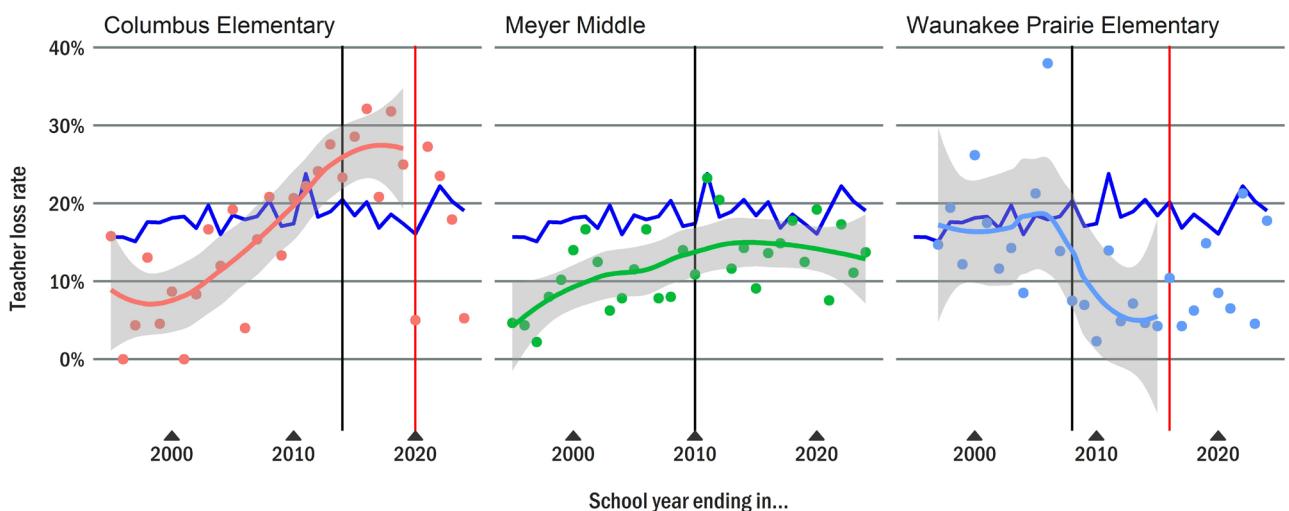
⁴ Information on character education initiatives comes from the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership. The partnership vets and publicly recognizes schools that have satisfactorily implemented character education principles, and it awards the distinction of “school of character.” The WCEP provided information about when each school began implementing character principles prior to official recognition.

⁵ When interpreting the graphs, the most immediately apparent feature is that each individual plot is extremely volatile. This is due to the small underlying sample sizes: Because many of these schools have only 30 to 50 teachers, loss rates can vary considerably from year to year. Pleasant Prairie Elementary, for example, dropped from about a 50 percent loss in 1999 to around 8.3 percent loss in 2000.

To make the trend more visible, we apply a smoothing function known as a locally estimated scatterplot smoothing, or LOESS. This function reduces the noise between one year and the next but remains sensitive to changes in the direction of the data.

It is important to note that not all character education initiatives are necessarily permanent. Schools must continually reapply to maintain recognition every five years, and many former schools of character have allowed their certification to lapse. This could indicate a change in the school’s prioritization of character principles. We mark the year that a school’s recognition lapsed with a solid red line and exclude data points from that year and afterward from the trend line, as any changes in the loss rate after the program’s expiration are not necessarily attributable to character education.

Character schools: Teacher loss trend reverses



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership



denced by the schools' teacher loss rates over time, varied from school to school and between districts. The scatterplots below show the percentage of a particular school's teachers from each school year who were not teaching at the school the following year. For example, a loss rate of 33 percent in the 2009-10 school year means that 33 percent of the teachers at a school in the 2009-10 school year had left that school by the 2010-11 school year. Colored dots show individual years' loss rates, while the similarly colored thick line shows a smoothed trend of those points.

The vertical black bar shows the point that each school is estimated to have begun character programs. The red vertical bar indicates the expiration of the school's designation as a school of character either because it was not recertified or did not reapply. The thin blue horizontal line indicates the average loss rate of all schools in the state.

Three individual schools — Columbus Elementary School in Columbus, Meyer Middle School in River Falls, and Prairie Elementary School in Waunakee (not to

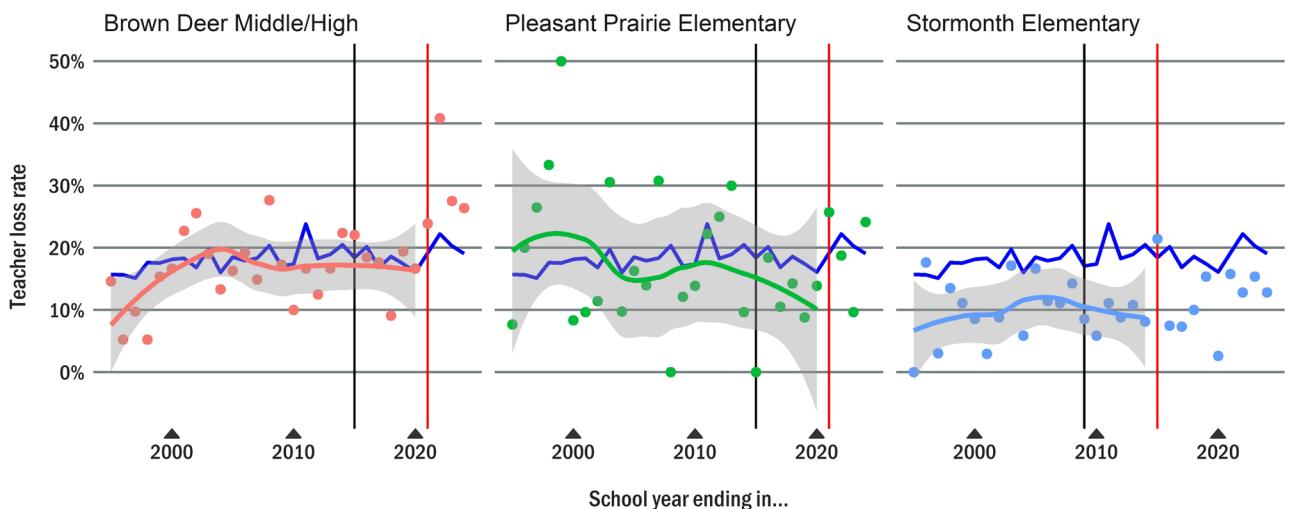
be confused with Prairie Elementary in Waukesha or *Pleasant Prairie Elementary* in Kenosha) — as well as the five schools of the Jefferson School District, discussed at length below, show the clearest correlation between character education programs and teacher retention.

In the case of Columbus, a clear upward climb in loss rates preceded adoption of character principles. After adoption, the trend reversed course and began to fall.

At Prairie, teacher loss dropped from around the statewide average to well below and held steady at the lower level. Since the program's end, turnover has remained generally low, with only a slight upward drift.

The correlation at Meyer appears more muted. Prior to the program, teacher loss was moving steadily upward. The upward trend reaches its peak in 2011, one year after the school began implementing character education and coinciding with a statewide spike observed around the implementation of Act 10. After that point, the upward trend in teacher loss appears to halt and starts to curve slowly but surely downward.

Character schools: Decreasing trend continues



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership



Other individual schools show a different pattern. At Brown Deer Middle/High School, Pleasant Prairie Elementary in Kenosha and Stormonth Elementary School in Fox Point, teacher loss rates were already trending downward before character was adopted. The adoption of character education does not appear to significantly affect the trend, as rates continued to fall after the adoption of character education. In the case of Brown Deer and Stormonth, after character initiatives expired, however, an uptick in loss rates was observed.

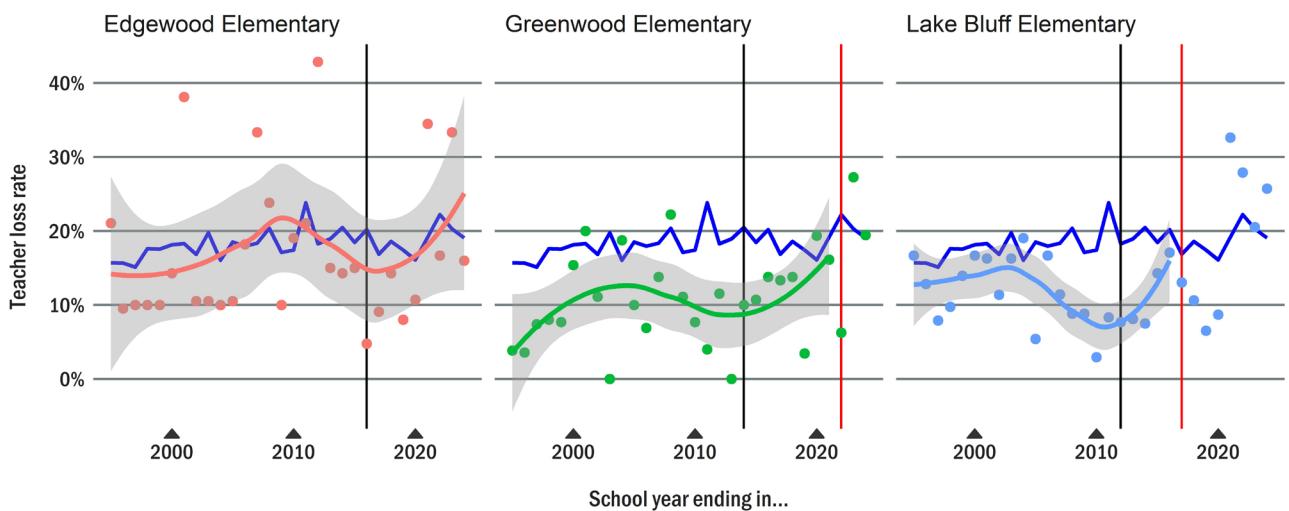
Finally, at some schools, teacher loss rates appear to trend upwards after adoption of character education. At Greenwood Elementary in River Falls, a noticeable uptick in teacher loss rates occurs around the time that character education was adopted. Similarly, at Lake Bluff Elementary School in Shorewood, there was a noticeable hinge point: For two years after the school received recognition for being a school of character, teacher loss remained low, but in the third year, it spiked. Teacher loss began once again to decrease until 2021, when it jumped drastically.

In the case of Edgewood Elementary School in Greenfield, the data show that turnover initially continued to decrease after the adoption of character education, but reversed course and increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. For most of the period up until 2020, the scatterplot shows largely flat levels of teacher loss. Values usually fluctuate between 10 and 20 percent, and while the rates did occasionally spike higher, those spikes occurred prior to character adoption. After a spike to nearly 43 percent, teacher loss once again trended downward. This downward trend continued during the adoption of character initiatives. The apparent uptick in the trend line only occurred because of two spikes after the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022 and 2024.

Districts of character

In addition to individual schools throughout the state, there are two districts that have infused character education into all their schools: the school districts of Jefferson and of South Milwaukee.

Character schools: Teacher loss trend increases



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership



School District of Jefferson

In the Jefferson district, character education was championed by superintendent Mike Swartz. From the beginning of his tenure in the district in 2003, Swartz made character education a priority and hosted Wisconsin's first ever Character Education Conference. The School District of Jefferson was recognized as a state and national district of character in 2010. While Wisconsin Character Education Partnership recognition is valid for a five-year period, interviews from current Jefferson administrators suggest that the program waned after Swartz's retirement in 2013. For this reason, the end date for character is indicated as 2013, correlating with Swartz's retirement.

Teacher loss rates remained low at Jefferson schools for most of Swartz's tenure. All schools saw an uptick — in some schools, a very dramatic increase — in teacher loss the year that Swartz retired. Post-Swartz, the trends diverge and apparently drift closer toward the statewide average turnover.

The data suggest anecdotally that Swartz's tenure, which was defined by an emphasis

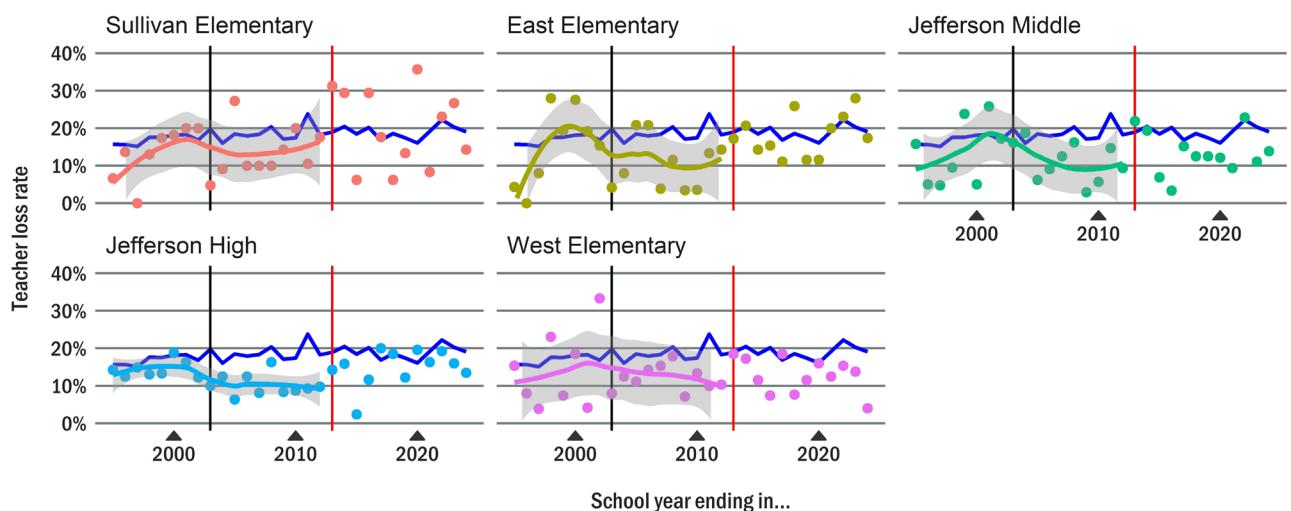
on character education, had a marked impact on the district's turnover rate.

The turnover trendlines across Jefferson schools show a universal pattern of declining teacher loss after Swartz's arrival and institution of character education. At East Elementary, the drop in the trend was most pronounced, while West Elementary and Jefferson High saw more gradual declines.

Each school in the district saw a noticeable spike in 2013, the same year that Swartz retired. After his departure, the turnover trends among the different schools diverged. At Sullivan, it grew much more varied, alternating between high and low rates from one year to the next. East Elementary and Jefferson High saw higher turnover rates after Swartz's departure while, West Elementary and Jefferson Middle remained relatively steady.

In total, the data show a correlation between Swartz's career, his advocacy for character education, and lower turnover rates. The case for a relationship between these factors is bolstered by the increase in turnover rates after Swartz retired and schools in the dis-

Teacher loss at Jefferson schools over time



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership



trict moved on from character education.

School District of South Milwaukee

In 2010, Rita Olson became the superintendent of the School District of South Milwaukee. Olson's key initiative, according to an [article](#) published by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, was to implement character education principles in the district's schools. According to Rawson Elementary principal Colin Jacobs, "Character education was woven into the school district's beliefs and foundational documents." In 2015, the district was recognized by the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership as a district of character.

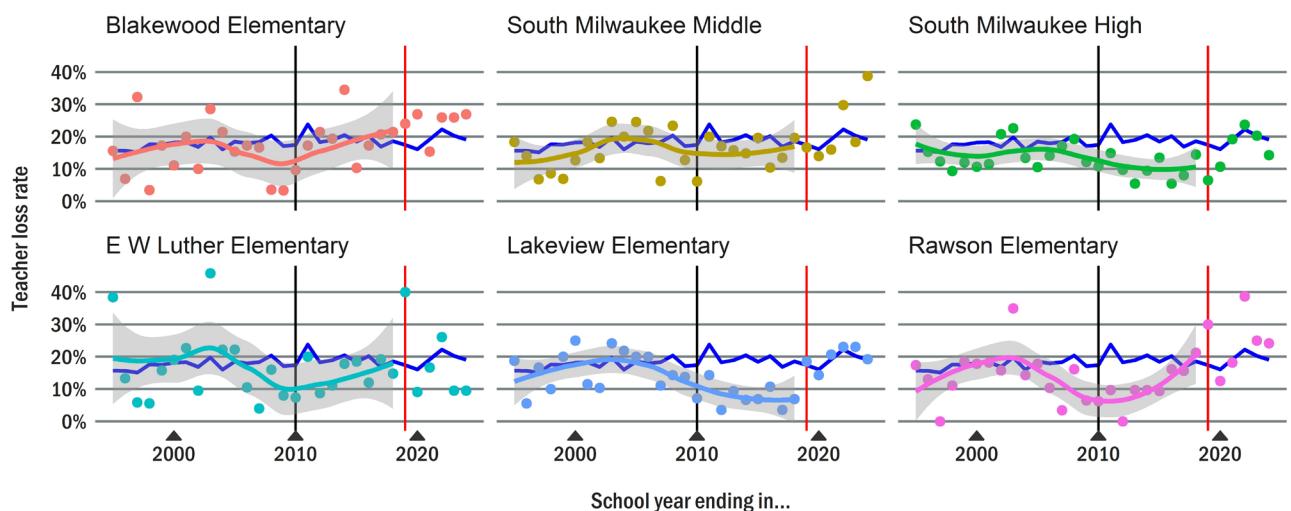
The district's character recognition expired in 2020, as the district was not recertified by WCEP. However, given that Olson was instrumental in the program's implementation, we mark her departure in 2019 as the effective end date of the character program. It's important to note that from this data alone, it is impossible to disaggregate the effect of character education policies themselves from the overall impact of Olson's leadership.

From a broad overview, there appears to be a dip in teacher loss across all schools in the district, beginning in the late 2000s in Blakewood and Luther elementary schools, and continuing through to the mid-2010s in the remainder of the district. There is also an uptick in teacher loss across several schools in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that the overall shape of the trend across most of the schools is due to external factors.

South Milwaukee High School and Lakeview Elementary both demonstrated declining teacher loss rates prior to adoption of character education but continued to build on that progress while the program was in place. In the years following Olson's departure, however, loss rates climbed to about the statewide average.

South Milwaukee Middle School initially appeared to follow the same trend as the high school, but it started from a higher average loss rate prior to adoption and did not see as significant a decrease during the program. This could indicate a structural difference between teaching conditions in middle schools and high schools.

Teacher loss at South Milwaukee schools over time



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership



The smoothed trendlines for Rawson, Luther and Blakewood elementary schools appear to show an upward trend during the character program, but upon closer inspection, they reveal key differences. At Rawson, after a trend of declining teacher loss for several years prior to 2010, the teacher loss rates steady at or below 10 percent for the first half of the program. It wasn't until the 2015-16 school year that teacher loss rates began to climb. The average loss rate prior to character education was 14.4 percent and decreased to a rate of 10.8 percent while character education was in place.

At Luther Elementary, teacher loss rates vary across a much wider range, an understandable result of its smaller headcount in the teens or twenties. Even still, the average loss rate during the program was lower than

the average beforehand: 14.4 percent, down from 17.3 percent.

Blakewood was the only school with clear evidence that teacher loss rates increased on average during adoption.

Summary of quantitative analysis

In summary, the scatterplots above tell a mixed story that is complicated by factors such as the pandemic and the Act 10 labor reforms, making it difficult to isolate character education as a solitary determinant of teachers' actions.⁶

Some schools with increasing turnover saw loss rates drop after character education was adopted. Jefferson demonstrated a dis-

⁶ We also estimated an event study difference in differences model developed by Liyang Sun and Sarah Abraham, which is designed for phenomena where a change happens to different cases at different times. The model examines within school changes in teacher loss before and after adoption, comparing it to changes in schools that have not yet adopted in the same year, accounting for individual schools' pre-existing characteristics and for outside events affecting all schools (for example, policy changes in 2011 under Act 10). Time is measured relative to each school's adoption year to trace effects in the years before and after implementation. This identifies the average change in teacher loss that can be attributed to adopting character principles. Across different combinations of variables, the estimated effects are not statistically different from zero, meaning that we found no evidence that adopting character education changed teacher loss.

trict-wide improvement in turnover during its character initiative.

Other schools demonstrated a prior decreasing trend that continued during the character program. In the case of Brown Deer and Stormonth, after character initiatives expired, however, an uptick in loss rates was observed. Others saw teacher loss rates increase after character principles were adopted.

Implementation of character education can vary from school to school — as can the values schools choose to focus upon. Bearing that in mind, we followed up our quantitative analysis with interviews of teachers and administrators to try to determine which approaches led to highest rates of teachers' attraction and retention.

Qualitative review

To conduct the qualitative review, the Badger Institute attempted to interview current and former administrators at every school of character. The primary goal was to obtain specific information about the nature of each school's character initiative from the administrators who orchestrated them and to determine whether some approaches correlate more closely with teacher retention.

We also tried to determine whether the initiatives have continued. The Badger Institute conducted interviews of seven current or former principals and one teacher, representing seven schools from four districts. Additionally, the Badger Institute collected written feedback from two additional teachers and one additional principal in two schools.

Besides the schools mentioned above, there were several other schools that received official recognition as schools or districts of character but that did not respond to the

Badger Institute's requests for an interview.

There were commonalities. We learned that most schools had a regular school-wide assembly dedicated to character wherein a particular trait or value would be brought into focus. Schools used daily repetition of values to reinforce the culture of character. Many schools provided opportunities for students to collaborate and mentor one another across grade levels. Many emphasized peer recognition of actions that exemplified desired character traits. Students were given opportunities to take responsibility for aspects of their classrooms and routines, and they were provided with age-appropriate service-learning opportunities.

From the interviews, it became clear that key factors in teacher retention at schools of character include a principal or superintendent who acted as a champion for the project, buy-in from parents and the community, an incremental mindset, and commitment to adopting the character culture at all levels of staff. We learned that a successfully implemented character program can reap benefits not only by retaining teachers, but also by attracting high-quality teachers in the hiring process.

Impact on hiring

Several principals of recognized [schools of character](#), as designated by the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership, said their schools' character initiatives, as well as official recognition of them, helped in hiring.

"There are teachers that have applied in our district because of our character education," said Mark Chapin, principal at Meyer Middle School in River Falls. "They see the value in it. It piques their interest because not a lot of schools are doing what we're doing. I think that helps draw in some really good teachers."

At Meyer Middle School, a trend of increasing turnover reversed in 2011, one year after character initiatives were put into place.

The River Falls school district first added character education in 2009 as part of a new strategic plan, developing its character curriculum in-house.

Chapin said that the district's first character initiatives began in 2010. By 2016, Meyer Middle School received the district's first state and national school of character awards, followed a year later by the district's Greenwood Elementary School. Meyer was recertified as a state school of character in 2023, and two other River Falls schools received honorable mentions that year from the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership.

"I think people wanted to be here. It was a recruitment tool for us," said Greenwood's principal, Nate Schurman, a leader in the planning process that first added character education in the district.

Similarly, Pleasant Prairie Elementary School in Kenosha began working on character education in 2015 and was recognized as a school of character in 2016, according to WCEP. Teacher candidates began highlighting character education when applying at the school, said Shane Gayle, a former principal at the school.

"What shifted afterwards is that people would come here applying and saying, 'We hear your school is really good at character. Let me highlight on my resume where character fits and why I think I'd be a good fit here,'" Gayle told the Badger Institute.

"So now you're bringing in people with that mindset and those qualities into the teaching ranks," Gayle said. "And to me, that was going to be more for teacher retention

and attraction: It was going to bring the right pool of people into the work."

Impact on retention

Many of the administrators, current and former, who responded to the Badger Institute spoke positively of character education's impact on teacher retention.

Speaking of Greenwood Elementary, Schurman said, "We had, and still have very, very low turnover among our certified staff."

His school lies 30 miles from downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. Schurman said that the school's culture and environment made it competitive with school districts in the Twin Cities area.

"Our data suggests that more teachers join us from Minnesota than leave to go to Minnesota," Schurman said. "I've had teachers who've lived across the river for 15 years, 20 years, and they still drive 45 minutes to come and teach at Greenwood when they could easily put in an application and, I think, easily find a job that would pay them 10 to 15 grand more a year. But they choose to come here or stay here."

That said, the DPI data on Greenwood Elementary was mixed, with turnover stepping down significantly right after character education was first implemented in the early 2010s, but with higher levels of teacher departure after the pandemic.

In suburban Milwaukee, Meg Boyd, principal at Edgewood Elementary in Greenfield, told the Badger Institute that character education was a factor in both attracting and maintaining talent.

"We don't have a lot of turnover," Boyd said. "Sometimes that's luck with no retirements. But our staff is proud of the commu-

nity we build. There's a sense of pride that we do something special."

Turnover data gleaned from the DPI show that the teacher loss rate at Edgewood declined for several years after its designation as a school of character, the only break occurring after the outbreak of the pandemic, when many schools across the state saw elevated turnover.

Pleasant Prairie's Gayle said that by addressing students' behavioral issues, character education ameliorated a significant cause of teacher turnover.

"When kids are showing good character, that is such an intrinsic reward for teachers to stay," Gayle told the Badger Institute. "Because one of the reasons why teachers would leave a school is because of bad behavior."

Data on Pleasant Prairie show that turnover, high in the late 1990s and early 2000s, began to trend downward even before character education was introduced to the school. That downward trend continued after character's adoption.

Former Jefferson School District East Elementary principal Connie Pellman told the Badger Institute that character education "absolutely" had a positive impact on teacher retention in Jefferson.

The DPI data appear to back that up. From the beginning of Mike Swartz's tenure as superintendent in that district, which marked the effective beginning of character education in Jefferson, every school in the district saw its turnover rates trend downward and remain low.

"Here's a testament to that," said Pellman, who began with the district in 2009. "My first hire was a kindergarten teacher. She's still there."

Jake Wichman, who was a teacher at East Elementary in Jefferson and now is its principal, said that while the impact of character education could not be quantified, its impact on the school climate "does play a role" in teacher retention.

"When teachers do leave," Wichman told the Badger Institute, "it's due to a move far away, or they're going on to a different promotion, like administrator, or going back to school to be a guidance counselor, things like that. But typically, they would like to be here, and they always make comments like, 'It's a different place.'"

When the Badger Institute pressed administrators on what made successful programs work, common themes emerged across the interviews.

Defining leadership

According to principals and teachers the Badger Institute spoke to, motivated leadership is essential: Successful character education initiatives had a champion, whether a superintendent or building principal, who rallied teachers behind the effort.

Boyd said principals should envision themselves as standard-bearers for the character traits they want their staff and students to emulate. "It's about how you're modeling interactions, what you prioritize, and the tone you set. If your tone is constantly running around, you have to create space, build teams, and do this work so other work can happen."

Likewise, Chapin, the River Falls principal, said that succession matters: "It's really important to me that our district finds somebody now that is in-house, that is passionate about this work, that's going to carry the baton."

Each successful program was driven primarily by one committed individual. The role of this leader was to maintain focus on the program so that the countless other demands of the school day would not press it into irrelevance.

Character education in the Jefferson School District was championed by Swartz. In the words of Pellman, the former principal, character education “was just one of his babies.”

Jefferson administrators recounted story after story of how Swartz led by example. John Orcutt of Sullivan Elementary, another Jefferson school, told of Swartz’s “random acts of kindness” — he would round up a handful of school leaders early in the morning, equip them up with hot coffee and doughnuts, and the group would wave down passing motorists to offer them some refreshment.

In 2013, the year that Swartz retired, every school in the district saw a higher-than-normal jump in teacher loss, and since then, turnover rates have diverged, with some remaining low while others have climbed.

Following Swartz’s retirement, the district has not received a state or national award for character. Administrators say that the district’s focus has shifted to “social-emotional learning” and “positive behavioral interventions and supports.”

Michelle Van Matre-Keis is an art teacher at Jefferson Middle School who has been employed at the district since the early days of its character education journey. “We have a lot of veteran teachers here,” she told the Badger Institute. “When I look at the turnover at my son’s school in Stoughton, and one elementary school in particular, it’s 20, 30 teachers leaving a year. We don’t have that here.”

The South Milwaukee School District was recognized as a district of character in 2010. While some schools in the district saw their turnover rates decrease during the character education initiative, others saw the opposite trend. The Badger Institute was not able to determine an explanation for the diverging trends.

Community involvement

Another key ingredient to a thriving character education program, according to several school leaders, is buy-in from parents and the community.

In River Falls, character education was not the vision of one administrator but of a broad strategic advisory committee. “It wasn’t just educators,” Schurman said. “It had parents and people that were members of the community.” When developing the character initiative, hundreds of community members gathered to settle on the nine character traits that would be taught at all levels across the district.

The community was also integral at Pleasant Prairie. Gayle said, “When we did the strategic planning, we brought parents and a few other people, PTA and all that kind of stuff into it.”

The persistent pattern was that while a single school leader could spearhead the reform, the community support was needed to reinforce the changes and sustain robust improvement.

Incremental progress

For schools that are just beginning, Chapin emphasized the importance of incremental improvements. “Our goal when we started this was to get a little bit better every year,” he told the Badger Institute. He advised

administrators considering character education, “Pick one area you want to work on every year and just keep at it.”

Boyd said that the key to a successful program is “gradual building over time.”

“I built a coalition,” Boyd told the Badger Institute. “I started sharing articles, having small conversations. We had staff meetings about it. Later that spring, we rolled out a different way of doing things.”

Similarly, Gayle said, “It’s about adding layers ... and each layer that you embed into your school, it starts to really take off.”

Across the character education programs we investigated, every single one had numerous elements, aspects, and procedures. None began them all at once nor continued without modification.

Creating a culture

A critical part of making a character program work is incorporating it into the school’s culture at all levels.

Schurman, the Greenwood principal, said that he viewed character education as “being the plate, not another thing to put on the plate.”

“I think you have to have strong character to have strong culture,” Schurman said. “And then when you have a strong culture, you can have rigorous and engaging academic programs.”

“You’ve got to bring on staff members that are into it, that are willing to live that culture,” Pellman said. “It’s establishing a school culture. It’s not starting a program. You just have to live it.”

Pellman described how at East Elementary,

she would have a daily character quote in morning announcements. Teachers would follow up on school-wide character lessons in their own instruction. “It was just part of the everyday instruction,” she said.

East Elementary’s motto became a daily mantra, called the “three Rs”: be respectful, be responsible, and be ready. “It just became the norm,” Pellman said. “Kids knew that that’s what was expected.”

The effect of the Swartz’s character initiatives on school culture in Jefferson was tangible. “Staff morale got so much better after these initiatives were put in place,” Pellman said.

Boyd encouraged school leaders to “remember the why of education.”

“Many principals get caught downstream putting out fires,” Boyd said. “If you want your reality to be different, you have to think upstream about the culture you’re creating.”

Boyd explained that culture is not created only from the top down but also from the bottom up. “Really it comes down to soft skills and micro-interactions you have with children — how you respond empathetically but also don’t allow misbehavior that interrupts learning,” Boyd said.

At Edgewood, the culture changes downstream of character have been palpable. “When I started, a lot of my lunch and recess time and afternoons were handling playground disputes. I very rarely have recess issues now. I can’t remember the last time I had a real fight,” Boyd said.

Not a panacea

While most of the administrators spoke highly of character education, they made

it clear that the initiative was not a single silver bullet.

The driver behind teacher retention, said Chapin, is “not just character. I think it’s a lot of things. I think it’s our school board and it’s our superintendent and our principals.”

Many factors can influence a teacher’s employment decision, said Gayle. “Some people apply for certain jobs because it’s close to their house. … People stay or leave for many reasons.”

Karen Staegge is a second-grade teacher at Prairie Elementary School in Waunakee, which was recognized as a school of character in 2012. Staegge, who has taught there since that time, told the Badger Institute that “character education likely had a positive effect on teacher retention at Prairie.”

“There are so many factors that influence a teacher’s decision to stay or leave,” Staegge wrote. “The school’s emphasis on character education created a strong sense of purpose and community among staff. Many teachers found the character education conferences we attended to be very inspiring, and the focus on developing students’ character contributed to a positive and supportive school culture. Overall, I believe this emphasis helped teachers feel more connected to the school’s mission and values, which encouraged them to remain at Prairie.”

Amie Zellner, who teaches first grade at Prairie, told Badger that while the school has moved on from character education, “it was a very positive time for students, staff and families.”

However, administrator opinion was not unanimous on the topic. Dean Kaminski, principal of Prairie Elementary, told the Badger Institute, “My staff has changed so much since those days we focused on char-

acter education, I’m not sure I could even postulate if there’s a connection to teacher retention.”

DPI data on Prairie Elementary show that turnover rates dropped precipitously during the duration of the character program. Since its expiration, turnover has remained generally low, but there is a slight upward drift.

Duration

Despite the benefits and improvements due to character education that school leaders reported, not every school has maintained its character initiatives.

Wichman, the current principal of East Elementary in Jefferson, was a teacher during its period as a school of character. Today, the district’s focus has shifted to other initiatives, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports, or PBIS.

“We’ve kept some of those same [character] ideas in, but we’ve kind of shifted to a PBIS model,” he said. “They do harmonize a little bit. They are a little separate, but I think when you have the character ed background — and we still have quite a bit of teachers that came from doing those monthly lessons and daily lessons in our curriculum — whenever you get another curriculum, you start stealing from parts and intertwining it yourself.”

For some, the lessened focus on character education is regrettable. Van Matre-Keis of Jefferson Middle School wants to see a return to character education. “I think everyone should do character ed. I wish we could have it back here like we did before.” A social emotional learning program “does kind of help replace some of that, but not to the extreme that we had before.”

Kaminski told the Badger Institute that Prai-

rie Elementary was told by the Waunakee district to shift to a focus on social-emotional learning and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

As mentioned above, teacher retention patterns began to worsen in a handful of the schools which shifted their focus away from character initiatives.

Entangled effects

A recurring theme emerged over the course of the interviews: The periods where retention saw the most dramatic and sustained improvements often overlapped with the tenure of an impactful, influential school leader, whether a building principal or in some cases a district superintendent. Indeed, in several cases, the effective end of a character initiative at a school was marked by the departure of the principal or superintendent who animated it. This makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of character initiatives themselves from the effects of the school leaders who championed them.

Perhaps turnover would have improved under the same leadership without the character initiative. On the other hand, perhaps the character framework amplified the principals' efforts, rallying teachers around a cohesive set of values and translating those efforts into tangible improvements among the student body and school culture. At the very least, a correlation between motivating leadership, effective character education, and reduced teacher turnover appears present in both the quantitative and qualitative data analyzed in this study. If enterprising leadership, not character education, was the causal factor, it's worth noting how many effective principals chose character education as an integral part of their school system.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence available thus far, there is not a quantitative case that character education necessarily reduces teacher loss. But there is evidence from the experience of school leaders that character education is a means of improving teacher attraction and retention, factors essential to successful schools.

The variations in the quantitative outcomes can be attributed to the fact that there is currently no “one size fits all” model for character education and the possible influence of other factors.

Many teachers and superintendents state that it had a positive impact. Interviews with principals and administrators reveal key elements they say help determine success: leadership qualities of the principals and superintendents who championed character education in the first place, and extension of the program into all facets of the school and the community among them.

The data and testimony summarized in this report provide good reason to believe that character education holds promise for schools and districts struggling to attract and retain teaching talent — the essential element in successful schools that help students flourish.



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