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In talent squeeze, independent schools respond — and seek relief

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BADGER INSTITUTE

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Drawn by mission, kept by coaching

Part of an ongoing Badger Institute series about teacher loss in Wisconsin schools and what policy makers and administrators can do about it.

Facing an increasingly difficult market for hiring teaching talent, leaders of Wisconsin independent schools are developing useful strategies even as they look to the state for some fundamental policy and financial reforms.

"I think a teacher's job is to be a lifelong learner themselves," said one of those leaders, Kimberly Desotell, president of the GRACE Catholic schools system in Green Bay. "You can't do the same thing you did today in teaching tomorrow. … We always have to be improving."

One key response: Retain the talent a school has through deliberate and sustained coaching to help educators grow better at the work they chose. Others: changes in the timing of student teaching, alteration of certification requirements, and closing the funding gap with traditional public schools.

Harder to hire

Independent-sector schools are — like Wisconsin schools more broadly — finding fewer applicants for teaching posts.

"I don't think there's any doubt that there's a teacher shortage," said Shaun Luehring, president and CEO of the LUMIN network of Lutheran schools in Milwaukee and Racine. That's especially so, he said, for harder-to-fill positions — he singled out middle school posts — and it has been a problem that's building. "It wasn't the same 10 years ago," he said.

"You still had to work at it to find the right people," he said, but then, "you were looking more at multiple candidates."

"We have fewer applicants than we used to," especially in the past two years, said Brenda Daming, head of human resources for the GRACE schools. Colleges report fewer students wanting to enter teacher preparation programs in the first place. Some specific areas are tighter, too, said Desotell — Spanish, sometimes math and science. "Teachers in middle school are really hard to find."

"There is a teacher shortage," said Kristi Cole, chief education officer of The Lincoln Academy, an independent charter school in Beloit. She recalls 20 years ago, when she was a principal in the Milwaukee Public Schools, "you would get hundreds of applicants for a social studies position."

"Now, we have a social studies opening: We might get a dozen, tops, if that."

This comports with what public school district superintendents and business managers told the Badger Institute at an early 2025 focus group in Wausau and with findings in recent years' workforce reports from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction that there had been a decline in graduation from teacher preparation programs (with some rebound in the most recent report).

Nowadays, "I think it's just harder to teach," said Desotell. "It's harder to know how to properly manage a classroom."

Retention

The other side of the staffing equation is keeping the teachers already at a school.

Analyzing the DPI's publicly available database of every district schoolteacher over the past three decades, the Badger Institute last year found that while the agency was off the mark in some of its claims — the number of public school teachers is down only slightly statewide since 2010 while the number of students in traditional district-run public schools is down much more, and teachers are generally not more apt nowadays to leave the profession altogether than they have been historically — there were some wrinkles that made staffing more difficult.

> "There are only a few things that the state needs to do for us. And one of them is proper fair funding."

Teachers are more mobile than they used to be, especially the newest and the most senior ones, leaving their districts but not the state or necessarily teaching. Such teacher "transfer" rates have been rising since 2010, even as the teacher "exit" rates have settled at 8 percent to 9.5 percent.

The combination of the two components has raised the overall teacher "turnover" rate on a statewide basis across the range of subject areas. That rate ran about 10 percent to 12.5 percent for the period from 2013 to 2021 before rising to 15 percent in 2023.

The state doesn't collect data for public independent charter schools not run by a school district or private schools that accept children attending via Wisconsin's parental choice programs. Nor does the state data permit us to identify teachers who'd left independent schools, meaning there is no practical way to interview teachers leaving such schools — as the Badger Institute was able to do with teachers leaving six particularly high-turnover public school districts in Wisconsin.

But interviewing the leaders of diverse high-profile schools or networks in the sector yields some insights.

Limits on the pool

While private schools and independent public charter schools are seeking and employing teachers performing the same basic work as educators in any other sort of school, they operate in particular ways that, leaders say, limit the labor pool but can also serve to attract teachers.

Such schools usually have a mission beyond the three R's. For many private schools accepting choice students, that mission is intentionally religious.

When seeking teachers, said LUMIN's Luehring, "we talk about 'Christ-centered.' There's a Christian component and we're looking for the subset of people who are open to it."

The network — "LUMIN" stands for "Lutheran Urban Mission Initiative" — began as Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod donors and educators stabilizing and upgrading some fading Lutheran parochial schools that already existed in Milwaukee. Like other parochial schools, they were founded on the premise that teaching children the meaning of life is central to education.

That makes alignment with that mission a key criterion in would-be teachers.

"It's so critical because it is our culture. Without the Christ-centered piece, our culture falls apart," said Luehring. But even more, he said, "The

gospel that we hold dear to us really does matter and is a matter of life and death. And if all things come to an end, that's the most important thing that we do. But if you don't have that mentality, then coming into our schools is a mismatch, and you're not going to be able to absorb and understand the rest of the culture and the how and the why, and the *why* of relationships matters so much."

"It's a whole different perspective to say, 'I generate joy because Christ has already won the victory, and we already believe all that stuff together,' than it is to say, 'I have to somehow figure out how to be happy.'"

"The religious mission becomes an organic source of unity, of mission, of why we do this. It's the foundation. It's the value that supersedes all other values."

The GRACE school network doesn't require teachers to be Catholic, but when advertising teaching posts, it does ask that teachers "agree to not contradict Church teachings," and to "respect and support" Catholic beliefs.

This doesn't seem to make teachers harder to find, said Daming. "I think people seek it out for the mission."

"We've had public school teachers that come to us and say to us, 'I really struggled there because of the secular nature of that school, and I would secretly pray over my students when I knew I couldn't do that out loud,'" said Desotell.

"And then they get here and they pray out loud. They're supported in prayer by their colleagues."

"I think our teachers grow in faith by being here."

For a believer, that's an attractive benefit.

The specific duty of charitable behavior that's an ideal in many religions can make a school more attractive, said Charles Moore. He's executive director of Impact Christian Schools, an administrative services network supporting more than 20 schools of varying denominational backgrounds across the state, from Cumberland to Kenosha.

Moore recounted one school in cramped quarters where a family without children of their own anonymously gave $5 million to build a new 11-room building. "I don't think anybody ever goes without a lunch," he said, though the school isn't in the federal free lunch program. At one of the network's schools, two children, whose single mother died and whose father couldn't care for them, were adopted by members, "so these kids are still part of the same community."

It kept the children's lives from being uprooted still further, but it helped others, too: "It makes it easier for the teachers to be in that environment," said Moore. "When the kids aren't being disruptively removed from your classroom because they have to go and be in foster care somewhere else, I think that does make a difference."

The mission of voucher-accepting schools to seek and serve low-income students can be a draw. "That's why people are with us," said Luehring: "They have got hooked by the need in places like Milwaukee and Racine." The schools are confident they can change the trajectory of children's lives: "That's highly motivating. It's fun, it's joyful, and it's challenging, but that's what draws people into this work."

Several of the leaders cited the specific mechanics of the parental choice program — open to low-income families but offering access to schools that also attract tuition-paying middle-income students — as something that can draw in would-be teachers.

"It's giving us a better, more complete experience for the students, because those students are meeting kids that are different from their families … possibly from a different socioeconomic background," said Desotell.

Moore noted that some of the original schools in the Impact network, in the Madison area, drew a higher percentage of well-off families — "I didn't even know Porsche did a minivan," he said, until one came through the pick-up line — but that

school choice broadened the school community.

"And when you have a community that recognizes that and works at engaging with the families that don't have the resources, you have a really glorious thing that happens. And it's great to be a teacher in a school like that."

"It tends to be pretty wonderful."

Other missions

Independent charter schools, being public schools, cannot have a religious mission, but by the nature of their charters — contracts with an overseeing body, such as university — they have a distinct character.

The Lincoln Academy in Beloit says it aims for rigorous academics and character but also "happy, choice-filled lives" for graduates. In practice, it means a lot of career-exploration classes from an early age and an expectation that teachers work as teams in adjusting what they do. For traditionally trained teachers, it may be less autonomy and more change than in other places.

"There's none of this 'close the door and it's your kingdom,'" said Cole, the CEO. The school, she said, has "a pretty structured curriculum," but it changes based on results.

"We pivot a lot. And we pivot based on data. We pivot based on observations. We pivot based on staff and scholar needs."

It isn't for everyone.

"We give that to people up front so that they know what they're stepping into. You have to wear a uniform. You have to hand in lesson plans every week. These are things that we expect, and oftentimes we'll hear from people who interview here who did their homework about the kind of school we are. Oftentimes they'll be relieved about that, and they'll be like, 'Man, I've been waiting to hear that.' You know, I love hearing that, or, 'Yes, I believe in that.'

"Because most people who go into education really want an opportunity to teach children. That's their passion, their mission, their focus in life. They don't do it for the money, clearly."

The school also faces challenges hiring for its offerings of technical subjects as part of its career exploration focus — it calls them "exploratories" — classes in, for instance, welding, carpentry or emergency medical services.

"When we lose those skilled individuals, then it makes it very hard to find people who have those skill sets," said Cole, who said the school's most recent turnover rate was less than 5 percent. "And sometimes we've developed classes around the people that we've hired based on their skill set. So we've had to adjust based on people we've hired."

Green Bay's GRACE system has a similar squeeze in staffing: One of its schools offers a classical curriculum — a deliberately older approach to schooling that includes the use of original texts. "Little Women," for instance, is one of the sixth-grade English texts. It makes the range of potential hires considerably narrower.

"It's growing. It's nichey," said Desotell. "It requires a pedagogical training that's different than, for example, how I was trained as an educator on classroom management, on how to prepare lesson plans, on those kinds of things."

Potential teachers "are not coming out of the Madisons or the typical pipeline. … They're coming from a classical higher education — Wyoming Catholic (College) or Benedictine (College)."

Private schools and independent charters differ legally in another restriction: Charter schools' teachers must be certified by the DPI, as other public schools' teachers are. The law doesn't require it of private schools, though by policy both LUMIN and GRACE do, as do many other private schools.

Sector leaders, however, saw certification as more of a hurdle than a help. Moore, who was certified as a teacher long ago and holds a UW-

Madison doctorate in administration — put it this way: "Every single teacher that serves in the Milwaukee Public School District has to be certified," and the district nonetheless performs poorly even among big-city districts. "I have to wonder sometimes how valuable teacher certification actually is."

Coaching

A thread running through the independent sector leaders' accounts: Once hired, a good teacher can be made better, and a lot of effort will be spent on making that happen.

Coaching the skills of teaching — as distinct from evaluation or judgment — is planned, routine and ongoing. It's especially important for young teachers.

> "There needs to be greater flexibility, especially when there is a teacher shortage."

"We coach people," said Desotell. "We don't just, you know, shut the door and say, 'You're on your own,' like I was when I was a first-grade teacher many moons ago. I didn't even have curriculum. I just got thrown in the classroom and (they) said, 'Here you go. Here's your children. Figure it out.'

"And that's how I started my career in education."

Teacher prep programs all include some segment of student teaching — classroom experience under the supervision of an established teacher. That isn't necessarily enough.

Moore, for instance, recalls his supervising teacher. "He was a great guy," said Moore, but he also was the union's negotiator, with a lot of paperwork as part of his duties.

"And I think what I did to earn a really great teacher recommendation from him was I collated 36,000 copies of his handouts, stapled them, and put them in the right order. I got really good at copying, collating, stapling. But I'm not certain that all that effort really taught me how to teach."

Moore pointed to a deeper issue: Colleges "usually reserve the final semester of a student's four-year career to be the time that they do their student teaching," meaning that, aside from shorter lab experiences, they join an experienced supervising teacher in January.

"The problem is, most teachers, on their first job experience, wind up with a class of kids in August and they don't have any idea how to make it into a class where the kids are able to learn. The (experienced) teacher did that in August when they weren't present. The teacher had the disciplinary rules, the teacher had to find the two or three times where somebody had to have trouble and the principal got involved, and it's kind of like they broke the bronco back in August. But the teacher coming in from college doesn't see any of that. What they see is a classroom that's well-ordered and laid out and kind of on autopilot on the discipline end in January."

"The number one area that our brand-new teachers struggle with is classroom management," said Desotell. "They don't have a deep toolbox of skills."

"Classroom management is a defining factor if a teacher is going to be successful in year one or not."

The GRACE schools use a mentor system, not just for first-year teachers but for more experienced ones new to the system, and the mentoring lasts the full school year. The system, said Desotell, has seen an average turnover rate among teachers of about 8 percent, well below the state average.

Luehring recalled a pair of sixth-grade classrooms at a school when he first began as a school leader in Milwaukee. In an English

class taught by a young but established teacher, students immediately sat, listened, took notes. "High relationships, high rigor, high expectations, and a whole lot of love," said Luehring. The same children then moved to a math class headed by a first-year teacher untrained in classroom management "and they went into chaos. Six or seven, I counted them, this is on the low end, six or seven students just started wandering the classroom."

"I'm not saying to blame teachers, but we know that kids will rise to the expectations when done clearly in a loving, skilled classroom. We can train that," he said. "We have agency as an organization over those pieces."

"You can learn to create that first classroom rather than the second."

The network aims to teach that with what Luehring describes as something "much different from traditional sit-and-get professional development." Such sessions revolve around practicing skills, "and then the coaches will go in as you're doing that in your room, look at see how effective you are, and then coach you sometimes right in the moment."

> "You've got really talented educators who are out there doing amazing things, and yet these roadblocks keep getting put up in their faces."

Luehring, who said LUMIN has a teacher retention rate of about 85 percent, sees continued skills improvement as important for keeping teachers — because teachers who feel more effective are more likely to stay: "It's people that are struggling that are leaving more than it is people that are hitting it out of the park in their in their classrooms. Because those are the people who would be somewhat dissatisfied."

Cole said that coaching isn't just for young teachers: She said she gets coaching on how to improve as a school leader.

The presumption is that even good and experienced teachers can be better.

"We had several teachers that are now here at The Lincoln Academy, and they had been teachers for 20-plus years. And they came here, and they're like, whoa. Some tears throughout the process, some challenges, tough conversations, but the reality is they grew. They grew, and they learned, and we helped them. We supported them."

"I think a teacher will not excel if they're not willing to learn themselves every single year," said Desotell. "There's always learning that has to happen. There's professional development. There's training. There's new curriculum. There's new methods. Always new technology that comes their way."

"And part of that is you have to be open to being coached as well, too."

Other tactics

The leaders mentioned other tactics and elements that they felt helped retain teachers.

Moore said keeping up relationships matters, and one pathway is the church that a school is affiliated with. He recalled one young teacher, "after two years of just stellar work, she had her first baby." Her husband's work meant she could become a full-time mother. The school arranged a child-friendly part-time role with flexible hours from home. "I fully expect that when her children are grown, that she's going to dive back into the classroom, and we're going to do everything we can to keep her engaged."

Desotell cited what she sees as a low-conflict tone set by her schools' governing board — one she contrasted with the more political tone of boards she worked under while in the Milwaukee Public Schools and as a principal in the Mequon-

Thiensville district. “It is something that drew me to work in Catholic education,” she said.

The subject of school board strife figured into criticisms the Badger Institute heard from teachers who had left some high-turnover school districts, particularly the one in Beloit.

School leaders had some suggestions for public policy changes that could help with staffing.

Cole thinks teacher licensing could use some repairs. “There needs to be greater flexibility, especially when there is a teacher shortage,” she said. The state makes it hard to gain certification without spending years in a teacher preparation program — limiting the ability of people with college degrees and expertise in other fields to find a second career teaching.

Charter schools have the flexibility of using a specific five-year charter license for such people — “We have several people on charter licenses right now,” said Cole, “and they’re amazing” — but those teachers never can achieve full licensure, giving them flexibility to work at a different school or serve as an administrator at their current school, without going back to college for another degree. “Then have to student teach after that,” said Cole. “Even though they’ve been teaching for five years, maybe even ten years.”

“You’ve got really talented educators who are out there doing amazing things, and yet these roadblocks keep getting put up in their faces.”

Luehring cited the size of the gap between the per-child vouchers available at the K-8 level — $10,877 this year — and that accompanying high-schoolers — $13,371. High schools are costlier to operate, but Luehring notes that middle schools have faculty demands more similar to high schools than to primary grades, with subject specialists such as math or English teachers. It means that high schools often can afford to offer an in-demand teacher more.

Pay isn’t everything — there is some economic value to a teacher, said Desotell, in “smaller class sizes, well-behaved students. You’re able to actually teach from the starting bell to the ending bell, and it doesn’t take us 20 minutes to take attendance.” But pay does figure into the thinking of teachers often in the age for raising children themselves. “Right now, we’re at about 75% to 80% in all of our positions of what a public educator would make,” she said. The system is trying to reduce that gap.

“There are only a few things that the state needs to do for us,” said Luehring. “And one of them is proper fair funding, which is maybe one of the most challenging.”

About the author

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A note about our series examining teacher loss and potential policy responses

This is the latest in a series of Badger Institute papers on teacher pipeline and retention issues in Wisconsin.

We first analyzed Wisconsin's publicly available database of every teacher in every school district over the past three decades, and issued three briefs in 2025:

• We compared enrollment trends to faculty counts.

• We found out which sort of teachers — by age, experience and geography, for instance — were leaving.

• We examined which subjects are experiencing the most loss.

Earlier this year, we looked at whether teaching good character can improve a school's culture and reduce teacher turnover.

And this month, we published the voices of teachers who left six high-turnover Wisconsin school districts to find out what drove them away. From their eye-opening accounts, some themes emerged: Teachers leave when schools are mismanaged, when disorder isn't properly handled and when poor school policies prevent them from doing the work they chose. Notably low on the list of factors: pay and the consequences of the Act 10 labor reforms. Strikingly common was a remaining affection for the districts and communities they left.

The final paper, recommendations for reform at both the state and school level, will follow.